

The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt

Lectures on the English Comic Writers

*Lectures on the Dramatic Literature of the Age of
Elizabeth*

A Letter to William Gifford, Esq.

Edited by
Duncan Wu



THE PICKERING MASTERS

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Volume 5

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Consulting Editors: David Bromwich

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Amyot	<i>Speeches in Parliament, of the Rt. Hon. William Windham</i> , ed. Thomas Amyot (3 vols., London, 1812)
Bate and Engell	S. T. Coleridge, <i>Biographia Literaria</i> , eds. Walter Jackson Bate and James Engell (2 vols., Princeton, NJ, 1983)
Battestin	Henry Fielding, <i>Joseph Andrews</i> , ed. Martin C. Battestin (Oxford, 1967)
Battestin and Bowers	Henry Fielding, <i>The History of Tom Jones A Foundling</i> , introduction and commentary by Martin C. Battestin, ed. Fredson Bowers (2 vols., Oxford, 1974)
Bond	<i>The Complete Works of John Lyly</i> , ed. R. Warwick Bond (3 vols., Oxford, 1902)
<i>Boswell's Life</i>	<i>Boswell's Life of Johnson</i> , ed. George Birkbeck Hill, rev. L. F. Powell (6 vols., Oxford, 1934-50)
Cannon	<i>The Letters of Junius</i> , ed. John Cannon (Oxford, 1978)
Cervantes	Miguel de Cervantes, <i>The History and Adventures of the Renowned Don Quixote</i> , tr. Tobias Smollett (5 vols., London, 1799) (Cooke's edition)
Conway	<i>The Writings of Thomas Paine</i> , ed. Moncure Daniel Conway (4 vols., New York, 1894-6)
Cowley, <i>Essays</i>	Abraham Cowley, <i>Essays, Plays and Sundry Verses</i> , ed. A. R. Waller (Cambridge, 1906)
Dodsley	Robert Dodsley, <i>A Select Collection of Old Plays</i> (2nd edn., 12 vols., London, 1780)
EHC	<i>The Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge</i> , ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge (2 vols., Oxford, 1912)
Foakes	Samuel Taylor Coleridge, <i>Lectures 1808-1819 On Literature</i> , ed. R. A. Foakes (2 vols., Princeton, NJ, 1987)
Friedman	<i>Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith</i> , ed. Arthur Friedman (5 vols., Oxford, 1966)
Hill	Samuel Johnson, <i>Lives of the English Poets</i> , ed. George Birkbeck Hill (3 vols., Oxford, 1895)
Howe	<i>The Works of William Hazlitt</i> , ed. P. P. Howe (21 vols., London, 1930-4)

SELECTED WRITINGS OF WILLIAM HAZLITT: VOLUME 5

- Jones Stanley Jones, *Hazlitt: A Life* (Oxford, 1989)
- Jones (1983) Stanley Jones, 'Three Notes on Howe's Edition of Hazlitt: Paine, Porson, and Campbell', *N&Q*, 30 (1983), pp. 230–2
- Jones (1993) Stanley Jones, 'Hazlitt, Coleridge, and Edward Young: Unidentified Quotations', *N&Q*, 42 (1993), pp. 470–1
- Jones (1994) Stanley Jones, 'More Hazlitt Quotations: The Bible, Milton, Dryden, Rochester, Boileau/John Dennis', *N&Q*, 43 (1994), pp. 343–4
- Jones (1996) Stanley Jones, 'Further Quotations and Reminiscences in Hazlitt: Daniel, The Bible, Milton, Paine, Dorset', *N&Q*, 45 (1996), pp. 37–8
- Ker John Dryden, *Essays of John Dryden*, ed. W. P. Ker (2 vols., Oxford, 1900)
- Keynes Geoffrey Keynes, Kt., *Bibliography of William Hazlitt* (2nd edn., Godalming, 1981)
- Lamb, *Specimens* Charles Lamb, *Specimens of English Dramatic Poets, who lived About the Time of Shakspear* (London, 1808)
- Lucas *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed. E. V. Lucas (7 vols., London, 1903–5)
- Marrs *The Letters of Charles and Mary Anne Lamb*, ed. Edwin W. Marrs, Jr (3 vols., Ithaca, NY, 1975–8)
- Mason *The Poems of Mr Gray*, ed. William Mason (York, 1775)
- McDowell *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke Volume 9: I: The Revolutionary War 1794–1797; II: Ireland*, ed. R. B. McDowell (Oxford, 1991)
- McGann George Gordon, 6th Baron Byron, *The Complete Poetical Works*, eds. Jerome J. McGann and Barry Weller (7 vols., Oxford, 1980–93)
- Milton, *Prose Works* *Complete Prose Works of John Milton* (8 vols., New Haven, 1953–82)
- Mitchell *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke Volume 8: The French Revolution 1790–1794*, ed. L. G. Mitchell (Oxford, 1989)
- Morley *Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and Their Writers*, ed. Edith J. Morley (3 vols., London, 1938)
- Munby *Sale Catalogues of Libraries of Eminent Persons*, ed. A. N. L. Munby (11 vols., London, 1971–5), vol. 1, pp. 99–151
- Price *The Dramatic Works of Richard Brinsley Sheridan*, ed. Cecil Price (2 vols., Oxford, 1973)
- Rollins *The Letters of John Keats, 1814–1821*, ed. Hyder E. Rollins (2 vols., Cambridge, Mass., 1958)

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Ross	Laurence Sterne, <i>The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman</i> , ed. Ian Campbell Ross (Oxford, 1983)
Sackville-West	<i>The Works of Thomas Sackville, Lord Buckhurst</i> , ed. Reginald W. Sackville-West (London, 1859)
Schlegel	A. W. Schlegel, <i>A Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature</i> (2 vols., London, 1815)
Sherbo	<i>Johnson on Shakespeare</i> , ed. Arthur Sherbo (2 vols., London, 1968)
Sherburn	<i>The Correspondence of Alexander Pope</i> , ed. George Sherburn (5 vols., Oxford, 1956)
Sheridan	<i>Speeches of the Late Rt. Hon. Richard Brinsley Sheridan</i> , ed. 'A Constitutional Friend' (5 vols., London, 1816)
Spectator	<i>The Spectator</i> , ed. Donald F. Bond (5 vols., Oxford, 1965)
Swain	<i>Sir John Vanbrugh</i> , ed. A. E. H. Swain (London, 1949)
Tatler	<i>The Tatler</i> , ed. Donald F. Bond (3 vols., Oxford, 1987)
Walton	Izaak Walton, <i>The Compleat Angler</i> (London, 1668)
WCH	William Hazlitt, <i>Lectures on the Literature of the Age of Elizabeth, and Characters of Shakespear's Plays</i> , ed. W. C. Hazlitt (London, 1870)
Wright	Sir Francis Bacon, <i>The Advancement of Learning</i> , ed. William Aldis Wright (5th edn., Oxford, 1926)



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INTRODUCTORY NOTES

Lectures on the English Comic Writers

This was Hazlitt's third course of public lectures, composed at Winterslow during the latter part of 1818. Work must have proceeded fairly rapidly, as he does not seem to have begun when he told Macvey Napier, 26 August, that

I have got to write between this and the end of October an octavo volume of a set of Lectures on the Comic Drama of this country for the Surrey Institution, which I am anxious not to slur over, and it will be as much as I can do to get it ready in time.¹

His rush would account in part for the fact that these lectures draw copiously on papers written, variously, for the *Round Table*, *A View of the English Stage*, and *Characters of Shakespear's Plays*.² At all events, the lectures were delivered at the Surrey Institution, Great Surrey Street, 3 November 1818 to 5 January 1819.

Since his last series (on the English poets) Hazlitt had been severely attacked in the *Quarterly* and, more specifically, *Blackwood's Magazine*, in the form of John Wilson's article, 'Hazlitt Cross-Questioned'. Purely on a financial level, this was an event of some significance for him: in September 1818 he had expected to sell the lectures on the English comic writers to Taylor and Hessey for £200,³ but by the second week of the month they had decided that they could not pay him that amount, as Wilson's article, and unfavourable reviews in the *Quarterly*, had reduced the value of his 'literary estate'.⁴ It was this fact that led him to take Blackwood to court. Shortly after the conclusion of these lectures he answered his principal critic in the *Letter to William Gifford*.

The other effect of the attack was to reduce his pulling power as a star performer. This is reflected in Henry Crabb Robinson's diary entries; on 8 December Robinson records that Hazlitt's 'audience grew thin'.⁵ Against this one must put the testimony of more enthusiastic (and regular) attenders, such as Talfourd, who left a vivid description of the audience:

Mr Hazlitt delivered three courses of lectures at the Surrey Institution, on *The English Poets*; on *The English Comic Writers*; and on *The Age of Elizabeth*; which Lamb (under protest against lectures in general) regularly attended, an earnest admirer, amidst crowds with whom the lecturer had 'an imperfect sympathy.' They consisted chiefly of Dissenters, who agreed with him in his hatred of Lord Castlereagh, and his love

of religious freedom, but who 'loved no plays;' of Quakers, who approved him as the earnest opponent of slavery and capital punishment, but who 'heard no music;' of citizens, devoted to the main chance, who had a hankering after 'the improvement of the mind;' but to whom his favourite doctrine of its natural disinterestedness was a riddle; of a few enemies who came to sneer; and a few friends, who were eager to learn, and to admire.⁶

The comic lectures certainly attracted the Godwinian, James Ogilvie,⁷ but Keats, who had been at the lectures on the English poets, was prevented from attending these,⁸ although he called on Hazlitt on 14 December 1818 and 'took away with him the Lectures, either in manuscript or in proof'.⁹ My guess is that Keats borrowed the manuscript, as that is the most likely explanation for the numerous variants between the two passages he copied in his letter to the George Keatses, 2 January 1819,¹⁰ and the text as published. The relevant passages appear on pp. 117–18, and 119, below; variants are given in my notes.

Hazlitt delivered the last lecture on Tuesday 5 January 1819, and three days later a report on it appeared in the *Morning Chronicle* entitled 'Mr Hazlitt':

Mr Hazlitt's reputation as a critic stood already high with the public; but we are mistaken if these Lectures will not add to it. He displayed the same boldness and originality of thinking; the same critical acuteness, eloquence, and felicity of expression for which his Lectures on the poets were so eminently distinguished. From the character which Mr Hazlitt has by universal assent acquired, of being one of the ablest and most eloquent critics of our nation, (we may say of any nation) much was of course expected from the employment of his talents on a branch of literature, in which the genius of our countrymen shines perhaps with more distinguished lustre than in any other; but the warm applause which he received throughout his course from his numerous and respectable audiences, sufficiently proved that their expectations were amply realized.¹¹

The file copy of the *Chronicle*, now at the Bodleian, offers no clues as to who wrote this, but it must have been a friend of Hazlitt, as the report then continues with a lengthy quotation from the lecture.¹² Besides this, favourable reports appeared in the *Edinburgh Magazine* written by John Hamilton Reynolds.¹³

Text

Lectures on the English Comic Writers was published 26 March 1819, by Taylor and Hessey.¹⁴ Sales were not particularly good, and it was not reprinted in its author's lifetime. A 'Third Edition' edited by William Hazlitt, Jr was published by Templeman in 1841; it was really the second edition, and the preface states that it 'contains some additions from other sources, collected by the author, apparently with a view to a reprint of the volume, which additions are distinguished by brackets. Some of these are taken from an article contributed by the author to the *Morning Chronicle* in, I think, 1813,¹⁵ and the rest are critical prefaces, written by my

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father for Mr Oxberry's Editions of various Plays remarked upon'.¹⁶ A further edition, edited by W. C. Hazlitt, was published by Bell in 1889. Editions in the present century comprise those by Oxford University Press in 1907 (with an introduction by R. Brimley Johnson); and by Dent in 1900 (with annotations and marginalia by Austin Dobson), 1910, 1940, and 1963.

The 1819 first edition has provided copy-text for this volume. The following emendations have been made: 'Rochefocault' is corrected to 'Rochefoucault' (p. 24); 'Alanson' to 'Allison' (p. 50); 'Thus' to 'This' (p. 59); 'Warrock' to 'Warroch' (p. 133); 'Bracefirdle' to 'Bracegirdle' (p. 146); and 'Dashwoud' to 'Dashwould' (p. 149). I have normalised the spelling of Ben Jonson's name throughout (Hazlitt is inconsistent).

Manuscripts

In the Hazlitt sale of 1893 lot 248 (sold to Pearson) was described as 'Original Autograph MSS. 118 pp. of portions of his "Lectures on the Comic Writers," etc. *half calf, binding broken*'.¹⁷ This is not now to be found. However, four fragments of the first lecture are now at the Folger Shakespeare Library, which comprise (a) two numbered leaves, watermarked 1813; (b) 13 pages numbered 6–18 (7 leaves, some watermarked 1815); (c) 6 leaves numbered 48–53; (d) one page. These have been collated with the present text, and show that the lecture was somewhat differently arranged when originally delivered. But there are no notable deleted passages, and no variants of critical interest. It is probably worth noting that 'Lecture VI. On the English Novelists', was derived partly from 'Standard Novels and Romances', *Edinburgh Review*, 24 (February 1815) (reprinted Howe, vol. xvi. pp. 5–24). Hazlitt wrote to Jeffrey on 19 February 1815 asking him to tone down the article; besides eliminating a note on Defoe and the Duke of Wellington (possibly the ancestor of the inoffensive note on p. 99, below), he asked him to remove specific mentions of Amelia Opie and Elizabeth Hamilton, for whose novels he did not care (*Letters*, p. 139).

Reception

This series of lectures were well aired at the time of delivery – not just by word of mouth, but also through Reynolds's reports of them in the *Edinburgh Magazine*. The first review of the published volume came in *The Scotsman*, edited by William Ritchie, on 17 April 1819. *The Scotsman* had already published a 'character of Godwin' from one of the lectures on 2 January, and in the same number reprinted the first of Reynolds's reports from the *Edinburgh*, beginning: 'Mr Hazlitt is, we believe, pretty generally allowed to be one of the most vigorous and spirited writers of the present age'. *The Scotsman* had also reprinted the report from the *Morning*

Chronicle of 5 January in its issue of 16 January. So that it can have come as no surprise that it greeted the publication of the lectures with enthusiasm:

If Mr Hazlitt is not the most popular writer of the day, he yields only to some of the great poets and novelists, and he is at the head of a class in which our most ambitious wits are anxious to be enrolled. His knowledge of the drama, the fine arts, works of fancy and fiction, and other departments of polite literature, taken severally, may not equal that of some other persons, but, taken altogether, is certainly unrivalled. His writings are full of spirit and vivacity; he has the ease and gaiety of a man of the world; and there is, at the same time, an intensity in his conceptions which embodies ideas that are so volatile and fugitive as to escape the grasp of a slower but profounder intellect.¹⁸

The reviewer (probably Ritchie) was not slavishly approving: the first lecture does not provide 'a full and comprehensive view of the subject'; Hazlitt does not do justice to Jonson; and 'the good things he scatters in his course by random hits and bye play as it were, are of more value than his formal judgments'. But overall the review is positive, and endorses the judgement that

The great fault of his works arises from a surcharge of excellence. He is too uniformly emphatic and dazzling, and fatigues us by placing all objects in the strongest lights, without any space for shade or repose. His love of effect betrays him into paradox and caricature; his thoughts are crowded together rather than grouped; and though they please individually by their poignancy, it often happens that we lay down the book with a sense of satiety and exhaustion.

The day after *The Scotsman* endorsed Hazlitt's new book, *The Examiner* published another good review, beginning: 'We take the opportunity of a favourite author and an attractive book to return to the original object of our Literary Notices, which was merely to give a general character of a work, and as occasion might allow, an extract or so.'¹⁹ The reviewer then gives a very extensive extract from Hazlitt's remarks on Congreve. The *Literary and Statistical Magazine for Scotland* was less generous, and began by saying that Hazlitt 'shines' in a newspaper but 'is not fit for any thing higher'.²⁰ It goes on to note that Hazlitt has 'a great many smart things to say even upon subjects of which he is ignorant', and that 'the circumstances in which he has been placed, were more than enough to pervert and destroy powers much better than we conceive his to be'.²¹ This sinister remark is followed by the observation that, as a drama critic, Hazlitt will have consorted with 'the sort of company that the hangers-on of a playhouse fall into'.²² This is amplified on the following page as the reviewer observes that Hazlitt's 'morals are debased to the level of the most profligate writers of the age of Charles II, – of Farquhar, Vanburgh, and Congreve'.²³ On the other hand, the reviewer concedes that Hazlitt 'seems to enter so much into the spirit of his author, points out the passages that struck him with so much enthusiasm, and now and then makes observations so much to the point, that reading one of his reviews, is like perusing

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the work itself with an ingenious friend'.²⁴ A number of lengthy quotations from the volume ensue, before the reviewer complains that 'no great principles are established; no valuable truth is evolved; and when we conclude, nothing is concluded'.²⁵ Hazlitt's reputation, the reviewer says, has been declining ever since he started publishing books,

And the reason of this obviously is, that they are all in the same style, and upon similar subjects; and what is worse, most of his recent publications have been chiefly made up of selections from his writings in periodical publications. This, more than any thing else perhaps, has lessened the public respect for Mr Hazlitt's talents.²⁶

The reviewer concludes by criticising the fact that in addition to their appearance in Hazlitt's periodical essays, the lectures had been reported in the *Edinburgh Magazine*, remarking: 'if he writes for money, then he has his reward, and if his publishers don't complain, will care little for what the critics can say against him'.²⁷

A month later the *British Stage* sent the volume to an unsympathetic reviewer who reached an unpredictable conclusion:

Our readers are well aware that we have no violent partiality for Mr Hazlitt; and, in fact, our palates regard the major part of his writings with 'hatefullest disrelish.' The tone of arrogance and o'erweening conceit, the false taste, and, worse than all, the detestable political principles which pervade them, are to us most disgusting; whilst, the occasional glimmerings of good sense and acuteness which they undoubtedly display, serve but to fill us with sorrow at seeing talents so misapplied and perverted. Thus much premised, we are bound to admit that the above volume, which we were perfectly prepared to find disfigured with the same leprous spots as its predecessors, has pleasantly disappointed us, if we may be allowed such an expression. A more delightful piece of light reading has rarely fallen in our way; the criticisms it contains are spirited, and, for the most part, just; the language they are clothed in is lively and correct, exhibiting few of those ridiculous phrases which Mr Hazlitt is so famous for; and his political taint is not suffered much to interfere with the satisfaction of the reader, though we confess it, once or twice, somewhat betrays itself.²⁸

The reviewer says that Congreve, Vanbrugh, and Farquhar 'never before had so satisfactory an expositor of their beauties',²⁹ and notes that the comparison of the *Tatler* and *Spectator*, and analysis of Radcliffe, Inchbald, and Godwin, 'are highly excellent'.³⁰

A portmanteau review of *Characters of Shakespear's Plays, Lectures on the English Poets* and the present work, by William Taylor, appeared in the *Monthly Review* in May 1820, fairly late in the day. It is overall favourable, and quotes at some length from the volume, without taking issue with Hazlitt's remarks.³¹

NOTES

- 1 *Letters*, p. 185.
- 2 Hazlitt himself acknowledges this in the final paragraph of the work.
- 3 See *Letters*, pp. 187–9. Hazlitt's letter of 19 September 1818 to Constable is best explained by Stanley Jones, who was the first person to edit it, in 'Nine New Hazlitt Letters and Some Others', *Études Anglaises*, 19 (1966), pp. 263–77, p. 276.
- 4 See Jones, p. 300.
- 5 Morley, vol. i, p. 225.
- 6 *Final Memorials of Charles Lamb* (2 vols., London, 1848), vol. ii, p. 174.
- 7 See Jones, p. 280 and n.
- 8 Keats to the George Keatses, 31 December 1818: 'I have not heard one of this last course of Hazlitt's lecture's – They were upon "Wit and Humour," the english comic writers' (Rollins, vol. ii, p. 19).
- 9 *Life*, p. 248.
- 10 Rollins, vol. ii, pp. 24–5.
- 11 *Morning Chronicle*, Friday 8 January 1819.
- 12 Beginning with the sentence 'Mr Sheridan has been justly called "a dramatic star of the first magnitude"' (see p. 149) to 'a poet, and an honest man' (p. 151).
- 13 *Edinburgh Magazine*, 3 (December 1818), pp. 540–8; 4 (January 1819), pp. 12–14; and 4 (February 1819), pp. 143–9.
- 14 The dating is by Stanley Jones, review of Keynes, *Analytical and Enumerative Bibliography*, 6 (1982), pp. 272–6, p. 276.
- 15 This is a reference to the article 'On Modern Comedy' (Howe, vol. xx, pp. 1–12).
- 16 *Lectures on the English Comic Writers*, ed. William Hazlitt, Jr (London, 1841), p. iii.
- 17 Munby, p. 24.
- 18 *The Scotsman*, 17 April 1819, p. 127.
- 19 *The Examiner*, 18 April 1819, pp. 250–1, p. 250.
- 20 *Literary and Statistical Magazine for Scotland*, 3 (May 1819), pp. 197–208, p. 197.
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 198.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 199.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 207.
- 26 *Ibid.*, pp. 207–8.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 208.
- 28 *British Stage*, 3 (June 1819), pp. 163–5, p. 163.
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 *Monthly Review*, 92 (May 1820), pp. 53–68.

Lectures on the Dramatic Literature of the Age of Elizabeth

Hazlitt's fourth (and last) course of public lectures was composed, as he noted, 'on Salisbury-plain'¹ – at Winterslow Hut, during July to September 1819. The series was informed, as Procter later recalled, by Lamb's *Specimens*:

When he was about to write his 'Lectures on the Age of Elizabeth,' he knew little or nothing of the dramatists of that time, with the exception of Shakespeare. He spoke to Charles Lamb, and to myself, who were supposed by many to be well acquainted with those ancient writers. I lent him about a dozen volumes, comprehending the finest of the old plays; and he then went down to Winterslow Hut, in Wiltshire, and after a stay of six weeks came back to London, fully impregnated with the subject, with his thoughts fully made up upon it, and with all his lectures written. And he then appeared to comprehend the character and merits of the old writers more thoroughly than any other person, although he had so lately entered upon the subject.²

The 'dozen volumes' which Procter lent Hazlitt can be identified with some certainty: they probably comprised all or part of Robert Dodsley's *A Select Collection of Old Plays* (12 vols., 1744; 2nd edn., 1780). Dodsley provided the source for Hazlitt's numerous quotations from many of the works he discusses. In addition, he must have had Lamb's *Specimens*, to the notes of which he frequently refers, either to amplify, agree, or disagree. Lectures two and three follow much the same order of writers as Lamb. And Hazlitt must have taken an edition of the works of Beaumont and Fletcher, who are not included in Dodsley.

The series was mapped out well before Hazlitt began writing, as its contents are described in a letter to Patmore of 3 February 1819.³ Several months later, on the back of a letter postmarked 9 July 1819, Hazlitt made a somewhat more detailed sketch, hitherto unpublished:

Course of Lectures on the Age and Literature of Q. Elizabeth

1. On the effects of the Reformation on intellect and moral energy. Effects of the Translation of the Bible, and of the Classics. – Progress of Letters throughout Europe. Voyages and travels to the new world.
2. General state of English Manners at this period. Consequences of the Insular situation of England.
3. Dramatic writers compared with Shakspeare. Beaumont & Fletcher, & Massinger.
4. The same general subject. Ford, Webster, Marlow &c &c Puritanism of the following Age. Otway, Dryden, Rowe. Imitation of the French – Decline of English Tragedy.

5. On the Comedy before and immediately after this period.
6. On the poetry (properly so called) of Q. Elizabeth's reign: Sir W. Raleigh, Fletcher's Purple Island, Drayton, Daniel &c.
7. On the Prose writers. S^r P. Sydney, Hooker &c. – Character of L^d. Bacon's works. Compared, as to style, with S^r T. Brown and Jeremy Taylor.
8. German Drama and its connection with modern Philosophical paradoxes, contrasted with the Drama of the Elizabethan Age. —⁴

Hazlitt had originally intended to deliver the course at the Surrey Institution, Great Surrey Street, during October 1819,⁵ but in the event it was not scheduled until November–December.⁶ Keats was aware of the lectures, mentioning them in a letter to Severn of 10 November 1819, but, having missed the first two, does not appear to have attended any of the others.⁷

Text

Hazlitt at first offered the *Lectures* to Archibald Constable, who had published *The Round Table*, but was turned down in a letter of 25 June 1819.⁸ Constable's only reason appeared to be existing commitments: 'engaged as we are in so many works at the present time, we regret we cannot meet your views'.⁹ Jones suggests that Constable's real reason for the rejection, other than the disfavour generated by the attacks on Hazlitt in *Blackwood's* and the *Quarterly Review*, was Constable's annoyance at Hazlitt's describing as 'quackery' his intention to preface a work of Godwin's with a portrait of its author.¹⁰ In the event, the publisher of the first edition was Robert Stodart,¹¹ who had been responsible for *A View of the English Stage*. It was published on 3 February 1820,¹² but appears not to have sold very well. In 1820 it was transferred, with *A View of the English Stage*, to John Warren, who reissued it with a new title-page describing it, inaccurately, as the 'second edition', in 1821. The so-called 'third edition', edited by William Hazlitt Jr, was published by Templeman in 1840, from the first edition text. As Keynes notes, the erratum in the first edition has not been corrected in Templeman's text. In 1869 a rather more useful edition was published by Bell and Daldy with Preface and notes by W. C. Hazlitt; it was reissued in 1870 and 1871. Thereafter, the work was published by Bell in 1875 and Bohn in 1890.

My copy-text is the first edition of 1820. The following emendations have been made: 'knowu' is corrected to 'known' (p. 182); 'consist' to 'co-exist' (p. 204);¹³ 'Dickon' to 'Diccon' (p. 266); 'aris' to 'arise' (p. 280); 'modern' to 'modern' (p. 299); 'quaintress' to 'quaintness' (p. 300); 'widom' to 'wisdom' (p. 316); 'Emperom' to 'Emperor' (p. 334). I have normalised the spelling of the names of Jonson and Marlowe throughout (Hazlitt is not consistent in either case). In annotating the present text I have taken dates of production and publication, and authorship attributions, of the plays referred to by Hazlitt from the standard

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reference work on the subject, Alfred Harbage, *Annals of English Drama 975–1700*, rev. S. Schoenbaum (3rd edn., London, 1989).

Manuscripts

Two manuscripts relating to this series of lectures have survived. A fragment of the first lecture, comprising 32 leaves (numbered 20–51), is at the Folger Shakespeare Library. Several are watermarked 1818. This draft is collated with the present text and variants recorded, where of critical interest, in my notes.

Hazlitt began drafting lecture VII in a copy of Sir Francis Bacon, *The Two Bookes of Sir Francis Bacon. Of the Proficiency and Advancement of Learning* (London, 1629), now at Keats House, Hampstead (KH 18). This volume has been severely damaged by the ravages of rats, water, and torn pages, and Hazlitt's draft is only partly retrievable. However, what survives of it is given on pp. 443–4, below.

Reception

The earliest review, by John Scott, appeared in the *London Magazine* for February 1820, and a very odd one it is. It begins with a lengthy, somewhat facetious meditation on Hazlitt and the *Quarterly Review*. Neither thing has 'one quality in common, but almost every quality in opposition'.¹⁴ Scott notes that Hazlitt introduces his politics into whatever subject he writes about; "'love me, love my dog," is his maxim'.¹⁵ Finally he turns to Hazlitt himself, and observes that 'what comes from his hand, is in general, neither complete nor exactly proportioned. . . . the whole piece fails to give general satisfaction, or produce conviction; the arguments being often left for the sake of a vehement sally, and the favourite points in the author's mind monopolizing much more than their due share of the discussion'.¹⁶ Specific comment on the volume at hand is deferred in favour of such generalised observation: 'He catches the mantles of those, whose celestial flights he regards with devout, but undazzled eye. He lives in their time, becomes animated with their feelings, and conveys to us their spirit, in its unsullied freshness, and unquenched fire'.¹⁷ After some lengthy quotations Scott concludes that the essays are 'amusing by their vivacity, and captivating by their energy and enthusiasm'.¹⁸

By the time it reviewed the volume in its issue of 19 March 1820, *The Examiner* had already devoted a good deal of space to the lectures. John Hunt reported on them as they were delivered,¹⁹ and a lengthy extract from the first lecture appeared in the issue for 21 November (pp. 747–8). All this coverage even stimulated a letter from 'J.M.' approving of Hazlitt's comments on Christ in the issue of 16 January 1820 (p. 46). It is no surprise, therefore, that Hunt's review of the volume is unambiguous in its praise:

Mr Hazlitt occasionally startles us with a criticism, which seems as if it would run counter to his own zeal for the improvement of the social condition; as where he values Shakspeare for not interfering with any of the received notions of his time. But he is sure to see fair play in some other part of his book, as he does on this very subject when he vindicates the applause given to such dramas as the *Stranger*. It is the same with his arguments for and against a devotion to classical learning. The whole work is sprinkled with his usual relish of pithy sentences, apposite similes, and sharp detections of poor sophisticated human nature, pleasantly relieved of their sourness by a sense of the sweetness of what is unsophisticate.²⁰

Gold's London Magazine published a review in its issue for March, which began by hailing Hazlitt as a 'man of genius':²¹ 'he feels as he thinks proper, and writes as he feels, without any very *mannerical* turn of phrase, or delicate rounding of period. He bolts out his opinions, and their dress is precisely that which he thinks best calculated to shew their strength and their propriety.'²² After noting that the *Lectures* are 'marked by the off-flowings of original thinking',²³ the reviewer summarises them, and provides a number of extensive quotations.

The *Monthly Magazine* for May 1820 carried a brief notice of the *Lectures* which commended them and their author:

There is a strength and freshness in his manner, with a singular power of illustration which impresses his observations upon the mind more strongly than the style of feeble and common place disquisition with which we are generally loaded. His remarks are evidently dictated by genius rather than by study and observation, and though this genius be not free from the faults of the age in which he lives (some affectation and mannerism) yet compared with that of other living commentators, we are of opinion, that if not the first, it stands boldly forward with a few of the choicest growth. While Campbell, Jeffrey, Coleridge and Lamb, have variously occupied the same ground which Mr H. has latterly assumed, they still left it unexhausted to those powers of mind, which united to an enthusiasm for their subject, render him as conspicuously eminent for a critic, as the authors he treats of were for genius and wit.²⁴

Thomas Noon Talfourd, who had attended the lectures when delivered, reviewed them in the *Edinburgh Review* for November 1820. He begins with a cogent and informed assessment of Hazlitt's faults and virtues. There is a 'want of proportion, of arrangement, and of harmony in his powers':

He has no lack of the deepest feelings, the profoundest sentiments of humanity, or the loftiest aspirations after ideal good. But there are no great leading principles of taste to give singleness to his aims, nor any central points in his mind, around which his feelings may revolve, and his imaginations cluster. There is no sufficient distinction between his intellectual and his imaginative faculties. He confounds the truths of imagination with those of fact – the processes of argument with those of feeling – the immunities of intellect with those of virtue. Hence the seeming inconsistency of many of his doctrines. Hence the want of all continuity in his style.

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Hence his failure in producing one single, harmonious, and lasting impression on the hearts of his hearers.²⁵

Talfourd was on the whole an admiring reader of the *Lectures*, and a friend of Hazlitt's. But he was also one of Hazlitt's most discerning readers, as his conclusion indicates:

While we sympathise in all Mr Hazlitt's sentiments of reverence for the mighty works of the older time, we must guard against that exclusive admiration of antiquity, rendered fashionable by some great critics, which would induce the belief that the age of genius is past, and the world grown too old to be romantic. We can observe in these Lectures, and in other works of their author, a jealousy of the advances of civilisation as lessening the dominion of fancy. But this is, we think, a dangerous error; tending to chill the earliest aspirations after excellence, and to roll its rising energies back on the kindling soul.²⁶

NOTES

- 1 See p. 227, below.
- 2 Bryan Waller Procter, *An Autobiographical Fragment and Biographical Notes* [ed. C. K. D. Patmore] (London, 1877), p. 173.
- 3 See *Letters*, pp. 193–4. Jones has observed that the correct date of this letter must be 3 February 1819 (not 4 February, as the editors of the *Letters* suggest), as it is postmarked for the following day.
- 4 Bodleian, MS. Dep. b. 215/6.
- 5 As he informed Francis Jeffrey in a letter of 25 September 1819 (*Letters*, p. 198).
- 6 There is some confusion about the dates of delivery; Keynes gives the date as being January 1820, but this is evidently not correct (see Keynes, p. 55). The exact dates were 5, 12, 19, 26 November, 3, 10, 17, 24 December – all Fridays.
- 7 See Rollins, vol. ii, pp. 227–8.
- 8 This is now at the National Library of Scotland, and is quoted by Stanley Jones, 'Hazlitt in Edinburgh: An Evening With Mr Ritchie of *The Scotsman*', *Études Anglaises*, 17 (1964), pp. 9–20, 113–27, p. 16n17.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 See Jones, p. 304. Hazlitt may have been recalling the vainglorious manner in which Gifford had prefaced his translation of Juvenal in 1802 with a frontispiece portrait of himself (engraved from Hoppner's portrait) and a lengthy autobiography.
- 11 Not Warren, as Howe says (*Life*, p. 263), who published the second edition. Jones notes that Stodart also published Burdett and Hobhouse, and his radical sympathies eventually led to his bankruptcy in 1821 (Jones, p. 306).
- 12 The dating is by Stanley Jones, review of Keynes, *Analytical and Enumerative Bibliography*, 6 (1982), pp. 272–6, p. 276.
- 13 This emendation arises from my collation of Hazlitt's text with Lamb's *Specimens*, which is his source. Although 'consist' makes sense, it nonetheless remains, I think, a transcription error, or an error of the press.
- 14 *London Magazine*, 1 (February 1820), pp. 185–91, p. 186.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid., pp. 186–7.
- 17 Ibid., pp. 187–8.
- 18 Ibid., p. 191.

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- 19 See issues for 7, 14, 21 November, and 5 December (pp. 714, 728, 745, 782).
- 20 *The Examiner*, 19 March 1820, p. 190.
- 21 *Gold's London Magazine*, 1 (March 1820), pp. 281–8, p. 281.
- 22 *Ibid.*, pp. 281–2.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 283.
- 24 *Monthly Magazine*, 49 (May 1820), p. 356.
- 25 *Edinburgh Review*, 34 (November 1820), pp. 438–~~49~~, p. ~~4~~40.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 449.

A Letter to William Gifford, Esq. From William Hazlitt, Esq.

By February 1819, when he completed this masterpiece of invective, Hazlitt was able to look back on no less than three hostile reviews of his work that had appeared to date in the *Quarterly Review*: those for *The Round Table*, *Characters of Shakespear's Plays*, and *Lectures on the English Poets*.¹ Gifford is now thought to have been involved in an authorial capacity only in the last, but in the *Letter* Hazlitt attributes to him all three. Work on the *Letter* had been in progress for some time; the first draft had appeared in *The Examiner*, 15 June 1818, as 'The Editor of the Quarterly Review', at which point Hunt told Shelley that 'Hazlitt has written a masterly character of Gifford, much more coolly done than these things of his in general'.² Hazlitt had evidently decided, in the summer and autumn of 1818, that it was time to respond to his attackers; he took Blackwood to court in October, and won. In early 1819, he wrote this angry and conclusive answer to Gifford, and published it with funds from his own purse. As he wrote he was probably aware that the title of his pamphlet echoed that of Octavius Gilchrist's *A Letter to William Gifford, Esq. on the Late Edition of Ford's Plays; chiefly as relating to Ben Jonson*, published by John Murray in 1811.³ But Gilchrist was a crony of Gifford's, and his *Letter* was essentially part of an ongoing academic dispute over Ford's works. Hazlitt knew his *Letter* would be different.

Text

The *Letter* was published 1 March 1819,⁴ at its author's expense, Howe suggests.⁵ Howe is probably right, as John Miller of Burlington Arcade, credited with having printed the volume on the title-page, was not a publisher. Furthermore, few copies were produced, and Keynes notes the existence of only four.⁶ Of these, Jones notes that that formerly in Keynes's collection, and now at the Cambridge University Library, is inscribed by Hazlitt to Martin Burney. Jones finds that another inscribed to Hobhouse was advertised by Maggs in 1923.⁷ In 1998 a copy came up for sale at Jarndyce in London. As this is a relatively scarce volume it is worth my noting that there are also copies at SUNY at Buffalo in the Goodyear collection; Stanford University Library; the University of Manchester; University of California at Santa Barbara; University of Delaware; the Boston Athenaeum; Harvard University Library; and the University of Michigan. Stanley Jones has noted that a copy of the *Letter* was in the library of James Perry, Hazlitt's editor at the *Morning Chronicle*, at

the time of his death.⁸ And, as Procter was an admirer of the *Letter*, it must be assumed that he owned a copy.⁹

The work was apparently reissued in 1820 with a new title-page, bearing the legend: 'London: Printed for Robert Stodart, 81 Strand'.¹⁰ Keynes, however, did not know of a copy, and I have failed to find one. This was not the work's last appearance in print during Hazlitt's lifetime, as has often been thought. Substantial extracts appeared in Hunt's *Ultra-Crepidarius* (1823), pp. 25–40; as Hunt put it in his notes to the volume, Gifford 'has been well hacked in prose by Mr Hazlitt' (p. iv).

The copy-text for the present edition is the first edition of 1819; it contains a number of errors of the press, and the following emendations have been made: 'inuendo' to 'innuendo' (pp. 354, 362); 'riginal' is corrected to 'original' (p. 357); 'infirmty' to 'infirmity' (p. 359); 'distate' to 'distaste' (p. 359); 'lie' to 'life' (p. 360); 'shont' to 'shout' (p. 364); 'Vankyke's' to 'Vandyke's' (p. 365); 'pasage' to 'passage' (p. 374); 'phantons' to 'phantoms' (p. 376); 'we do perform' to 'we do not perform' (p. 379); 'apprehensoin' to 'apprehension' (p. 388); and 'shal' to 'shall' (p. 389). I have normalised the spelling of Ben Jonson's name throughout (Hazlitt is prone to spell it 'Johnson' and 'Jonson').

Reception

Keats did not review the volume, but wrote of it with tremendous enthusiasm to the George Keates in his journal-letter of 12 March 1819, quoting for their pleasure 'from the high seasond parts'.¹¹ The only formal review was by Hunt, in *The Examiner* for 7 and 14 March 1819 (pp. 156, 171–3), and highly enthusiastic it was. One can almost hear him smacking his lips as he begins:

We said a little while since, that if the creature yclept Gifford did not take care, he would be picked up by the fingers of some person indignant of his perpetual creeping malice, and held out to the loathing eyes of the community, sprawling and shrieking. Here he is. Mr Hazlitt has got him fast by the ribs, forcing him, with various ingenuity of grip, to display unwillingly all the deformities of his moral structure. They may now see 'the nature of the beast.'¹²

According to Hunt, Hazlitt's *Letter* 'proceeds to expose the wretched cavillings, wilful falsehoods and omissions, and servile malignity of the well-known articles in the *Quarterly Review* upon the *Round Table*, the *Characters of Shakspeare's Plays*, and the *Lectures on the English Poets*: – and such an exposure! Readers look at each other involuntarily in the midst of it: and at once wonder, and do not wonder, how it is, that they feel no more pity for the wretched object of it.'¹³ Hunt was clearly enjoying himself, and splits the review in half, so as to prolong Gifford's agony. At the beginning of the second instalment he amuses himself by describing the *Letter* as 'this quintessential salt of an epistle', and referring to its target as 'the Gifford'.¹⁴ He continues:

The conclusion of the pamphlet is taken up with explaining a favourite theory of Mr Hazlitt's respecting the *Natural Disinterestedness of Human Action*, – upon which subject he wrote a masterly treatise some time ago, entitled, *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action, being an Argument to show the Natural Disinterestedness of the Human Mind*. His ardour to establish such a position (the very mention of which will set all the conscious knaves and unconscious fools a laughing) alone shews of what good and sincere stuff his mind is made; and his insertion of a summary of the question at the end of the letter like the present is another, amounting to the romantic. Few will take the trouble, after the ready excitement afforded them by such an exposure, to explore such a deep metaphysical abstract, and discover how much more 'sorrow than anger,' is at the bottom of all his invectives. As to poor miserable Gifford, he will recoil from it, out of a double instinct, of inability to understand it, and impatience at the least notion of thinking well of the author. Yet we are far from wishing it not to be where it is. We would not have missed it for a great deal. The trenchant metaphysician, who cuts asunder the disguises of others, flimsy or coarse, is here 'fairly caught in the web of his own' simplicity. But how well can he afford to commit himself!

We rise from the perusal of this letter with great contempt for Mr Gifford, not unmixed with pity; and with increased regard for what we always believed uppermost in Mr Hazlitt's mind, – his zeal in behalf of his species.¹⁵

That was not all. Three years later, in 'The Three Asses. – Wm. Gifford', an anonymous author in *The Examiner* pointed out that the *Quarterly's* review of *Table Talk* attacked Hazlitt because Gifford was bruised by the *Letter*.¹⁶ Several months later, in a review of Shelley's *Adonais*, 7 July 1822, Hunt taunted Gifford with the observation that 'He dares not even allude to Mr Hazlitt's epistolary dissection of him' (p. 421). This was not correct. In his review of Hazlitt's *Political Essays*, which was published on 14 August 1819, Gifford had written that its author 'has manifested great wrath against us', and goes on to note 'the ludicrous egotism which has driven this forlorn drudge of the Examiner into a belief that it is his prerogative to abuse whom he will, and the privilege of all the world to submit in silence: he lays claim to an autocracy to malediction'.¹⁷ But that was the most, apparently, that Gifford had to say (at least in public) about Hazlitt's onslaught.

Hazlitt's *Letter* is alluded to in a number of the reviews of his other works. John Scott's review of the *Lectures on the Literature of the Age of Elizabeth* in the *London Magazine* began with an extended comparison of Hazlitt and Gifford:

To call them each the antipodes of the other, would not convey a just idea of their excessive dissimilarity and opposition, – for antipodes would certainly come in contact, if extraneous obstacles were removed. . . . They have not one quality in common, but almost every possible quality in opposition; and some day we may, perhaps, try our hand at a parallel between the two, in the style of Cardinal Retz.¹⁸

Not to be outdone, *Gold's London Magazine* carried a review of the same volume, also in the issue for March 1820, which also alludes to the *Letter*, and some of its arguments:

Gifford, who is his enemy allows him no merit, but he does not fairly view his works; he culls the objectionable, or he coins objectionable things — he erects a phantom to combat, or selects a conceit to render Hazlitt ridiculous; but those who think for themselves, and judge of men *bona fide* from their works, despise the little malignity of the Quarterly, and have only to regret that Mr Hazlitt should attack his adversary from Billingsgate, and fail; whereas he could more effectually do so, from his more humble home in the mastery of his talent.¹⁹

In reviewing the same volume in the *Edinburgh Review* for November 1820, Thomas Noon Talfourd noted that 'Some of the attacks of which he has been the object, have no doubt been purely brutal and malignant', presumably with Gifford in mind.²⁰

NOTES

- 1 *Quarterly Review*, 17 (April 1817), pp. 154–9 (actually published August 1817), by J. Russell; *Quarterly Review*, 18 (January 1818), pp. 458–66 (actually published June 1818), by J. Russell; *Quarterly Review*, 19 (July 1818), pp. 424–34 (actually published January 1819), by E. S. Barrett and William Gifford. In a surviving note to Whitmore and Fenn, proprietors of a circulating library, which Jones dates to 2–6 February 1819, Hazlitt requests the loan of the relevant volumes (*Letters*, p. 195).
- 2 Quoted, *Life*, p. 239.
- 3 Gilchrist alludes to Lamb's *Specimens*, and it seems likely that the Lamb circle would have seen his pamphlet.
- 4 The dating is by Stanley Jones, review of Keynes, *Analytical and Enumerative Bibliography*, 6 (1982), pp. 272–6, p. 276.
- 5 *Life*, p. 249.
- 6 Keynes, p. 45.
- 7 Stanley Jones, review of Keynes, *Analytical and Enumerative Bibliography*, 6 (1982), pp. 272–6, p. 273.
- 8 Stanley Jones, 'Some New Hazlitt Letters', *N&Q*, 24 (1977), pp. 336–42, p. 339.
- 9 See James T. Fields, "'Barry Cornwall" and Some of His Friends', *Harper's*, 51 (November 1875), pp. 777–95.
- 10 Keynes, p. 45.
- 11 Rollins, vol. ii, p. 71.
- 12 *The Examiner*, 7 March 1819, p. 156. As this quotation reveals, neither Hunt nor Hazlitt spared Gifford's disabilities when striking at him in print.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 *The Examiner*, 14 March 1819, 171–3, p. 171.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 173.
- 16 *The Examiner*, 6 January 1822, p. 4. The *Quarterly's* review of *Table Talk* was by J. Matthews; see vol. 6, p. xx.
- 17 *Quarterly Review*, 22 (July 1819), pp. 158–63, p. 159.
- 18 *London Magazine*, 1 (March 1820), pp. 185–91, p. 186.
- 19 *Gold's London Magazine*, 1 (March 1820), pp. 281–8, p. 282.
- 20 *Edinburgh Review*, 34 (November 1820), pp. 438–49, p. 438.

BRIEF BIOGRAPHICAL DIRECTORY OF
SELECTED PERSONAGES MENTIONED,
OR REFERRED TO, BY HAZLITT

GEORGE CANNING (1770–1827), Irish-born British statesman, chiefly remembered for his liberal policy as Foreign Secretary from 1822 to 1827. He started life as a Whig but in 1793 became a dedicated Pittite Tory. With Ellis and Hookham Frere he was principally responsible for the *Anti-Jacobin*, or *Weekly Examiner* (and composed for it the 'Needy Knife-Grinder' and the 'New Morality'), such a success that it continued after July 1798 as the *Anti-Jacobin Review* till 1821. Hazlitt had a low opinion of him; see his essay in *The Spirit of the Age* (vol. 7, pp. 239–46).

ROBERT STEWART, 2ND MARQUESS OF LONDONDERRY (1769–1822), better known as VISCOUNT CASTLEREAGH, statesman and diplomat responsible for British policy in the peace settlement at the close of the Napoleonic Wars. He was born in Dublin and educated at St John's College, Cambridge. In 1797 he was appointed Keeper of the Privy Seal (Ireland), then lord lieutenant of Ireland, and from March 1798 acting Chief Secretary. His tenure there coincided with the 1798 rebellion, which he took steps to quell, and the union with Great Britain, for which he was largely responsible, and which was achieved only with a messy combination of tact, persistence, and systematic bribery. Castlereagh was out of office between May 1801 and July 1805, when he became Secretary for War. He was Foreign Secretary 1812–22, when he was responsible for the treaty of Paris (1814), and the treaty of Vienna (1815). As leader of the House of Commons he was identified with the repressive policies of the years 1815–19, notably the Peterloo Massacre, the Six Acts, and the cabinet's unsuccessful introduction in 1820 of a bill to dissolve George IV's marriage with Queen Caroline. Increasingly paranoid, and suspecting that he was being blackmailed for homosexual acts, he committed suicide on 12 August 1822.

JOHN WILSON CROKER (1780–1857), Irish-born essayist and critic, he became a Tory MP and was Secretary of State for the Navy for twenty years. He was a founder and regular contributor to *The Quarterly Review* and in that capacity was responsible for vituperative attacks (often politically motivated) on various writers of the time, including Keats, Hemans, and Hazlitt. Memorably described

by Hazlitt as a 'talking potato' (see, most memorably, 'A Half-length', vol. 7, Appendix IV).

WILLIAM DOWTON (1764–1851) trained as an architect but ran away with a company of strolling players. He made his first London appearance at Drury Lane under Wroughton's management in 1796, and became one of the most versatile actors of the day. Not commended by Hazlitt as either Polonius or Shylock (see vol. 3, pp. 18, 80–1), he won measured approval for his performance in *The Hypocrite* (vol. 3, p. 77), and even praise for his part in *The Double Gallant* (vol. 3, p. 196). In October 1815 he played Shylock at Drury Lane at the behest of Byron.

WILLIAM GIFFORD (1756–1826), satirist and critic; he came to notice with two satires on fashionable Della Cruscanism, *The Baviad* (1791) and *The Maeviad* (1795). In 1809 he became editor of the Tory *Quarterly Review* and became known for a sour, conservative criticism. Hazlitt was a favourite target of the *Quarterly*, and he responded with his memorably lethal *Letter to William Gifford, Esq.* (1819), and, subsequently, the devastating portrait of Gifford in *The Spirit of the Age* (vol. 7, pp. 180–91).

HENRY GRATTAN (1746–1820), Irish statesman devoted to achieving independence for Ireland. For years after the union of 1801, he remained outside Parliament, but in 1805 was elected to the Commons as MP for Malton. He devoted himself completely to the fight for Catholic emancipation. His bill for Catholic relief in 1813 was narrowly defeated.

JOHN HOPPNER (1758–1810), portrait- and landscape-painter. In 1789 he was appointed portrait-painter to the Prince of Wales; in 1792 he was elected an associate of the Royal Academy; and in 1795 became a full academician.

ELIZABETH INCHBALD (1753–1821), novelist, dramatist, and actress, started her career as an actress in the 1770s, acting with her husband Joseph Inchbald in *King Lear*, *Henry VIII*, and other Shakespeare plays, largely in Scotland. She and her husband were close to John Philip Kemble, and after her husband's sudden death in 1779 Kemble contemplated marrying her. She went on, in the 1780s, to become a successful dramatist, and in 1791 published *A Simple Story*, the romance by which she was best known.

JOHN LISTON (1776–1846) was the favourite actor and good friend of Lamb. His early appearances in tragedies were not notable, but he gained success as a comedic actor, becoming the first to command a salary higher than a tragedian. His skill was such that he had only to appear on stage to set the audience laughing. He and his wife frequently visited the Lambs, sometimes at their Thursday evening parties, and it would be a fair guess (though one for which I have no evidence) that Hazlitt encountered them there.

ELIZA O'NEILL (1791–1872), afterwards Lady Becher. After much success in the provinces she came to London and made her debut at Covent Garden in the role

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of Juliet, August 1814 (reviewed by Hazlitt, vol. 3, pp. 29–31). Hazlitt praised her as Isabella and Belvidera; she was also good in comedy and played Lady Teazle. Her final appearance on stage was in 1819, prior to her marriage to William Becher, later created a baronet.

WILLIAM PITT (1759–1806), English politician, Prime Minister 1783–1801, 1804–6, second son of William Pitt, Earl of Chatham, by Lady Hester Grenville.

SAMUEL THOMAS RUSSELL (c. 1769–1845), actor. First trod the boards as a boy, and by 1795 was performing at Drury Lane, where he played Charles Surface. In 1812 he was stage manager at the Surrey Theatre under Elliston, later at the Olympic, and in 1819 at Drury Lane. His most celebrated character was Jerry Sneak in Foote's *Mayor of Garratt*. He was a close friend of William Dowton.

JOHN HORNE TOOKE (1736–1812) was elected MP for Old Sarum in 1801, after unsuccessfully contesting Westminster in 1790 and 1797. Hazlitt had met him in the late 1790s, and attended *soirées* at Tooke's fine house overlooking Rushmere Pond on Wimbledon Common in subsequent years. See Hazlitt's essay on him in *The Spirit of the Age* (vol. 7, pp. 114–23).



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LECTURES
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ENGLISH COMIC WRITERS.

Delivered at the Surrey Institution.

BY WILLIAM HAZLITT.

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

LONDON:
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1819.



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LECTURE I – INTRODUCTORY

On Wit and Humour

Man is the only animal that laughs and weeps; for he is the only animal that is struck with the difference between what things are, and what they ought to be. We weep at what thwarts or exceeds our desires in serious matters: we laugh at what only disappoints our expectations in trifles. We shed tears from sympathy with real and necessary distress; as we burst into laughter from want of sympathy with that which is unreasonable and unnecessary, the absurdity of which provokes our spleen or mirth, rather than any serious reflections on it. /

To explain the nature of laughter and tears, is to account for the condition of human life; for it is in a manner compounded of these two! It is a tragedy or a comedy – sad or merry, as it happens. The crimes and misfortunes that are inseparable from it, shock and wound the mind when they once seize upon it, and when the pressure can no longer be borne, seek relief in tears: the follies and absurdities that men commit, or the odd accidents that befall them, afford us amusement from the very rejection of these false claims upon our sympathy, and end in laughter. If every thing that went wrong, if every vanity or weakness in another gave us a sensible pang, it would be hard indeed: but as long as the disagreeableness of the consequences of a sudden disaster is kept out of sight by the immediate oddity of the circumstances, and the absurdity or unaccountableness of a foolish action is the most striking thing in it, the ludicrous prevails over the pathetic, and we receive pleasure instead of pain from the farce of life which is played before us, and which discomposes our gravity as often as it fails to move our anger or our pity!

Tears may be considered as the natural and involuntary resource of the mind overcome by some sudden and violent emotion, before it has had / time to reconcile its feelings to the change of circumstances: while laughter may be defined to be the same sort of convulsive and involuntary movement, occasioned by mere surprise or contrast (in the absence of any more serious emotion), before it has time to reconcile its belief to contradictory appearances. If we hold a mask before our face, and approach a child with this disguise on, it will at first, from the oddity and incongruity of the appearance, be inclined to laugh; if we go nearer to it, steadily, and without saying a word, it will begin to be alarmed, and be half inclined to cry:

if we suddenly take off the mask, it will recover from its fears, and burst out a-laughing; but if, instead of presenting the old well-known countenance, we have concealed a satyr's head or some frightful caricature behind the first mask, the suddenness of the change will not in this case be a source of merriment to it, but will convert its surprise into an agony of consternation, and will make it scream out for help, even though it may be convinced that the whole is a trick at bottom.

The alternation of tears and laughter, in this little episode in common life, depends almost entirely on the greater or less degree of interest attached to the different changes of appearance. / The mere suddenness of the transition, the mere baulking our expectations, and turning them abruptly into another channel, seems to give additional liveliness and gaiety to the animal spirits; but the instant the change is not only sudden, but threatens serious consequences, or calls up the shape of danger, terror supersedes our disposition to mirth, and laughter gives place to tears. It is usual to play with infants, and make them laugh by clapping your hands suddenly before them; but if you clap your hands too loud, or too near their sight, their countenances immediately change, and they hide them in the nurse's arms. Or suppose the same child, grown up a little older, comes to a place, expecting to meet a person it is particularly fond of, and does not find that person there, its countenance suddenly falls, its lips begin to quiver, its cheek turns pale, its eye glistens, and it vents its little sorrow (grown too big to be concealed) in a flood of tears. Again, if the child meets the same person unexpectedly after long absence, the same effect will be produced by an excess of joy, with different accompaniments; that is, the surprise and the emotion excited will make the blood come into his face, his eyes sparkle, his tongue falter or be mute, but in either case the tears will gush to his relief, and lighten the pressure about his heart. On the other hand, if a child / is playing at hide-and-seek, or blindman's-buff, with persons it is ever so fond of, and either misses them where it had made sure of finding them, or suddenly runs up against them where it had least expected it, the shock or additional impetus given to the imagination by the disappointment or the discovery, in a matter of this indifference, will only vent itself in a fit of laughter.* The transition here is not from one thing of importance to another, or from a state of indifference to a state of strong excitement; but merely from one impression to another that we did not at all expect, and when we had expected just the contrary. The mind having been led to form a certain conclusion, and the result producing an immediate solution of continuity in the chain of our ideas, this alternate excitement and relaxation of the imagination, the object also striking upon the mind more vividly in its loose unsettled state, and before it has had time to recover and collect itself, causes that

* A child that has hid itself out of the way in sport, is under a great temptation to laugh at the unconsciousness of others as to its situation. A person concealed from assassins, is in no danger of betraying his situation by laughing.

alternate excitement and relaxation, or irregular convulsive movement of the muscular and nervous system, which constitutes physical laughter. The *discontinuous* / in our sensations produces a correspondent jar and discord in the frame. The steadiness of our faith and of our features begins to give way at the same time. We turn with an incredulous smile from a story that staggers our belief: and we are ready to split our sides with laughing at an extravagance that sets all common sense and serious concern at defiance.

To understand or define the ludicrous, we must first know what the serious is. Now the serious is the habitual stress which the mind lays upon the expectation of a given order of events, following one another with a certain regularity and weight of interest attached to them. When this stress is increased beyond its usual pitch of intensity, so as to overstrain the feelings by the violent opposition of good to bad, or of objects to our desires, it becomes the pathetic or tragical. The ludicrous, or comic, is the unexpected loosening or relaxing this stress below its usual pitch of intensity, by such an abrupt transposition of the order of our ideas, as taking the mind unawares, throws it off its guard, startles it into a lively sense of pleasure, and leaves no time nor inclination for painful reflections.

The essence of the laughable then is the incongruous, / the disconnecting one idea from another, or the jostling of one feeling against another. The first and most obvious cause of laughter is to be found in the simple succession of events, as in the sudden shifting of a disguise, or some unlooked-for accident, without any absurdity of character or situation. The accidental contradiction between our expectations and the event can hardly be said, however, to amount to the ludicrous: it is merely laughable. The ludicrous is where there is the same contradiction between the object and our expectations, heightened by some deformity or inconvenience, that is, by its being contrary to what is customary or desirable; as the ridiculous, which is the highest degree of the laughable, is that which is contrary not only to custom but to sense and reason, or is a voluntary departure from what we have a right to expect from those who are conscious of absurdity and propriety in words, looks, and actions.

Of these different kinds or degrees of the laughable, the first is the most shallow and short-lived; for the instant the immediate surprise of a thing's merely happening one way or another is over, there is nothing to throw us back upon our former expectation, and renew our wonder at the event a second time. The second sort, that is, / the ludicrous arising out of the improbable or distressing, is more deep and lasting, either because the painful catastrophe excites a greater curiosity, or because the old impression, from its habitual hold on the imagination, still recurs mechanically, so that it is longer before we can seriously make up our minds to the unaccountable deviation from it. The third sort, or the ridiculous arising out of absurdity as well as improbability, that is, where the defect or weakness is of a man's own seeking, is the most refined of all, but not always so pleasant as the last, because

the same contempt and disapprobation which sharpens and subtilises our sense of the impropriety, adds a severity to it inconsistent with perfect ease and enjoyment. This last species is properly the province of satire. The principle of contrast is, however, the same in all the stages, in the simply laughable, the ludicrous, the ridiculous; and the effect is only the more complete, the more durably and pointedly this principle operates.

To give some examples in these different kinds. We laugh, when children, at the sudden removing of a pasteboard mask: we laugh, when grown up, more gravely at the tearing off the mask of deceit. We laugh at absurdity; we laugh at deformity. We laugh at a bottle-nose in a caricature; at a / stuffed figure of an alderman in a pantomime, and at the tale of Slaukenbergius.¹ A giant standing by a dwarf makes a contemptible figure enough. Rosinante and Dapple are laughable from contrast, as their masters from the same principle make two for a pair. We laugh at the dress of foreigners, and they at ours. Three chimney-sweepers meeting three Chinese in Lincoln's-inn Fields, they laughed at one other till they were ready to drop down. Country people laugh at a person because they never saw him before. Any one dressed in the height of the fashion, or quite out of it, is equally an object of ridicule. One rich source of the ludicrous is distress with which we cannot sympathise from its absurdity or insignificance. Women laugh at their lovers. We laugh at a damned author, in spite of our teeth, and though he may be our friend. 'There is something in the misfortunes of our best friends that pleases us.'² We laugh at people on the top of a stage-coach, or in it, if they seem in great extremity. It is hard to hinder children from laughing at a stammerer, at a negro, at a drunken man, or even at a madman. We laugh at mischief. We laugh at what we do not believe. We say that an argument or an assertion that is very absurd, is quite ludicrous. We laugh to shew our satisfaction with ourselves, or our contempt for those about us, or to conceal our / envy or our ignorance. We laugh at fools, and at those who pretend to be wise – at extreme simplicity, awkwardness, hypocrisy, and affectation. 'They were talking of me,' says Scrub, 'for they laughed *consumedly*.'³ Lord Foppington's insensibility to ridicule, and airs of ineffable self-conceit, are no less admirable;⁴ and Joseph Surface's cant maxims of morality,⁵ when once disarmed of their power to do hurt, become sufficiently ludicrous. – We laugh at that in others which is a serious matter to ourselves; because our self-love is stronger than our sympathy, sooner takes the alarm, and instantly turns our heedless mirth into gravity, which only enhances the jest to others. Some one is generally sure to be the sufferer by a joke. What is sport to one, is death to another. It is only very sensible or very honest people, who laugh as freely at their own absurdities as at those of their neighbours. In general the contrary rule holds, and we only laugh at those misfortunes in which we are spectators, not sharers. The injury, the disappointment, shame, and vexation that we feel, put a stop to our mirth; while the disasters that come home to us, and excite our repugnance and dismay, are an amusing spectacle to others. The greater

resistance we make, and the greater the perplexity into which we are thrown, the more lively and *piquant* is the intellectual display / of cross-purposes to the bystanders. Our humiliation is their triumph. We are occupied with the disagreeableness of the result instead of its oddity or unexpectedness. Others see only the conflict of motives, and the sudden alternation of events; we feel the pain as well, which more than counterbalances the speculative entertainment we might receive from the contemplation of our abstract situation.

You cannot force people to laugh: you cannot give a reason why they should laugh: they must laugh of themselves, or not at all. As we laugh from a spontaneous impulse, we laugh the more at any restraint upon this impulse. We laugh at a thing merely because we ought not. If we think we must not laugh, this perverse impediment makes our temptation to laugh the greater; for by endeavouring to keep the obnoxious image out of sight, it comes upon us more irresistibly and repeatedly; and the inclination to indulge our mirth, the longer it is held back, collects its force, and breaks out the more violently in peals of laughter. In like manner, any thing we must not think of makes us laugh, by its coming upon us by stealth and unawares, and from the very efforts we make to exclude it. A secret, a loose word, a wanton jest, make people laugh. Aretine laughed himself / to death at hearing a lascivious story.⁶ Wickedness is often made a substitute for wit; and in most of our good old comedies, the intrigue of the plot and the double meaning of the dialogue go hand-in-hand, and keep up the ball with wonderful spirit between them. The consciousness, however it may arise, that there is something that we ought to look grave at, is almost always a signal for laughing outright: we can hardly keep our countenance at a sermon, a funeral, or a wedding.⁷ What an excellent old custom was that of throwing the stocking!⁸ What a deal of innocent mirth has been spoiled by the disuse of it! – It is not an easy matter to preserve decorum in courts of justice. The smallest circumstance that interferes with the solemnity of the proceedings, throws the whole place into an uproar of laughter. People at the point of death often say smart things. Sir Thomas More jested with his executioner.⁹ Rabelais and Wycherley both died with a *bon-mot* in their mouths.¹⁰

Misunderstandings, (*malentendus*) where one person means one thing, and another is aiming at something else, are another great source of comic humour, on the same principle of ambiguity and contrast. There is a high-wrought instance of this in the dialogue between Aimwell and Gibbet, in / the Beaux' Stratagem, where Aimwell mistakes his companion for an officer in a marching regiment, and Gibbet takes it for granted that the gentleman is a highwayman.¹¹ The alarm and consternation occasioned by some one saying to him, in the course of common conversation, 'I apprehend you,' is the most ludicrous thing in that admirably natural and powerful performance, Mr Emery's Robert Tyke.¹² Again, unconsciousness in the person himself of what he is about, or of what others think of him, is also a great heightener of the sense of absurdity. It makes it come the fuller

home upon us from his insensibility to it. His simplicity sets off the satire, and gives it a finer edge. It is a more extreme case still where the person is aware of being the object of ridicule, and yet seems perfectly reconciled to it as a matter of course. So wit is often the more forcible and pointed for being dry and serious, for it then seems as if the speaker himself had no intention in it, and we were the first to find it out. Irony, as a species of wit, owes its force to the same principle. In such cases it is the contrast between the appearance and the reality, the suspense of belief, and the seeming incongruity, that gives point to the ridicule, and makes it enter the deeper when the first impression is overcome. Excessive impudence, as in the Liar;¹³ or excessive / modesty, as in the hero of *She Stoops to Conquer*; or a mixture of the two, as in the *Busy Body*,¹⁴ are equally amusing. Lying is a species of wit and humour. To lay any thing to a person's charge from which he is perfectly free, shews spirit and invention; and the more incredible the effrontery, the greater is the joke.

There is nothing more powerfully humorous than what is called *keeping* in comic character, as we see it very finely exemplified in Sancho Panza and Don Quixote. The proverbial phlegm and the romantic gravity of these two celebrated persons may be regarded as the height of this kind of excellence. The deep feeling of character strengthens the sense of the ludicrous. Keeping in comic character is consistency in absurdity; a determined and laudable attachment to the incongruous and singular. The regularity completes the contradiction; for the number of instances of deviation from the right line, branching out in all directions, shews the inveteracy of the original bias to any extravagance or folly, the natural improbability, as it were, increasing every time with the multiplication of chances for a return to common sense, and in the end mounting up to an incredible and unaccountably ridiculous height, when we find our expectations as invariably baffled. The most curious problem / of all, is this truth of absurdity to itself. That reason and good sense should be consistent, is not wonderful: but that caprice, and whim, and fantastical prejudice, should be uniform and infallible in their results, is the surprising thing. But while this characteristic clue to absurdity helps on the ridicule, it also softens and harmonises its excesses; and the ludicrous is here blended with a certain beauty and decorum, from this very truth of habit and sentiment, or from the principle of similitude in dissimilitude. The devotion to nonsense, and enthusiasm about trifles, is highly affecting as a moral lesson: it is one of the striking weaknesses and greatest happinesses of our nature. That which excites so lively and lasting an interest in itself, even though it should not be wisdom, is not despicable in the sight of reason and humanity. We cannot suppress the smile on the lip; but the tear should also stand ready to start from the eye. The history of hobby-horses¹⁵ is equally instructive and delightful; and after the pair I have just alluded to, *My Uncle Toby's* is one of the best and gentlest that 'ever lifted leg!'¹⁶ The inconveniences, odd accidents, falls, and bruises, to which they expose their riders,

contribute their share to the amusement of the spectators; and the blows and wounds that the Knight of the Sorrowful Countenance received in his many / perilous adventures, have applied their healing influence to many a hurt mind. – In what relates to the laughable, as it arises from unforeseen accidents or self-willed scrapes, the pain, the shame, the mortification, and utter helplessness of situation, add to the joke, provided they are momentary, or overwhelming only to the imagination of the sufferer. Malvolio's punishment and apprehensions¹⁷ are as comic, from our knowing that they are not real, as Christopher Sly's drunken transformation¹⁸ and short-lived dream of happiness are for the like reason. Parson Adams's fall into the tub at the 'Squire's, or his being discovered in bed with Mrs Slipslop, though pitiable, are laughable accidents: nor do we read with much gravity of the loss of his *Æschylus*, serious as it was to him at the time.¹⁹ – A Scotch clergyman, as he was going to church, seeing a spruce conceited mechanic who was walking before him, suddenly covered all over with dirt, either by falling into the kennel, or by some other calamity befalling him, smiled and passed on: but afterwards seeing the same person, who had stopped to refit, seated directly facing him in the gallery, with a look of perfect satisfaction and composure, as if nothing of the sort had happened to him, the idea of his late disaster and present self-complacency struck him so powerfully, that, unable to resist the impulse, / he flung himself back in the pulpit, and laughed till he could laugh no longer. I remember reading a story in an odd number of the *European Magazine*, of an old gentleman who used to walk out every afternoon, with a gold-headed cane, in the fields opposite Baltimore House, which were then open, only with foot-paths crossing them. He was frequently accosted by a beggar with a wooden leg, to whom he gave money, which only made him more importunate. One day, when he was more troublesome than usual, a well-dressed person happening to come up, and observing how saucy the fellow was, said to the gentleman, 'Sir, if you will lend me your cane for a moment, I'll give him a good threshing for his impertinence.' The old gentleman, smiling at the proposal, handed him his cane, which the other no sooner was going to apply to the shoulders of the culprit, than he immediately whipped off his wooden leg, and scampered off with great alacrity, and his chastiser after him as hard as he could go. The faster the one ran, the faster the other followed him, brandishing the cane, to the great astonishment of the gentleman who owned it, till having fairly crossed the fields, they suddenly turned a corner, and nothing more was seen of either of them.²⁰

In the way of mischievous adventure and a / wanton exhibition of ludicrous weakness in character, nothing is superior to the comic parts of the *Arabian Nights'* Entertainments. To take only the set of stories of the Little Hunchback, who was choked with a bone, and the Barber of Bagdad and his seven brothers, – there is that of the tailor who was persecuted by the miller's wife, and who, after toiling all night in the mill, got nothing for his pains: – of another who fell in love with a fine lady

who pretended to return his passion, and inviting him to her house, as the preliminary condition of her favour, had his eyebrows shaved, his clothes stripped off, and being turned loose into a winding gallery, he was to follow her, and by overtaking obtain all his wishes, but, after a turn or two, stumbled on a trap-door, and fell plump into the street, to the great astonishment of the spectators and his own, shorn of his eye-brows, naked, and without a ray of hope left: – that of the castle-building pedlar, who, in kicking his wife, the supposed daughter of an emperor, kicks down his basket of glass, the brittle foundation of his ideal wealth, his good fortune, and his arrogance: – that, again, of the beggar who dined with the Barmecide, and feasted with him on the names of wines and dishes: and, last and best of all, the inimitable story of the Impertinent Barber himself, one of the seven, and worthy to be so; his pertinacious, / incredible, teasing, deliberate, yet unmeaning folly, his wearing out the patience of the young gentleman whom he is sent for to shave, his preparations and his professions of speed, his taking out an astrolabe to measure the height of the sun while his razors are getting ready, his dancing the dance of Zimri and singing the song of Zamtout, his disappointing the young man of an assignation, following him to the place of rendezvous, and alarming the master of the house in his anxiety for his safety, by which his unfortunate patron loses his hand in the affray, and this is felt as an awkward accident. The danger which the same loquacious person is afterwards in, of losing his head for want of saying who he was, because he would not forfeit his character of being ‘justly called the Silent,’ is a consummation of the jest, though, if it had really taken place, it would have been carrying the joke too far. There are a thousand instances of the same sort in the *Thousand and One Nights*, which are an inexhaustible mine of comic humour and invention, and which, from the manners of the East which they describe, carry the principle of callous indifference in a jest as far as it can go. The serious and marvellous stories in that work, which have been so much admired and so greedily read, appear to me monstrous and abortive fictions, like disjointed dreams, dictated by preternatural / dread of arbitrary and despotic power, as the comic and familiar stories are rendered proportionably amusing and interesting from the same principle operating in a different direction, and producing endless uncertainty and vicissitude, and an heroic contempt for the untoward accidents and petty vexations of human life. It is the gaiety of despair, the mirth and laughter of a respite during pleasure from death. The strongest instances of effectual and harrowing imagination, are in the story of Amine and her three sisters, whom she led by her side as a leash of hounds, and of the *goul* who nibbled grains of rice for her dinner, and preyed on human carcasses. In this condemnation of the serious parts of the *Arabian Nights*, I have nearly all the world, and in particular the author of the *Ancient Mariner*, against me, who must be allowed to be a judge of such matters, and who said, with a subtlety of philosophical conjecture which he alone possesses, ‘That if I did not like them, it was because I did not

dream.' On the other hand, I have Bishop Atterbury on my side, who, in a letter to Pope, fairly confesses that 'he could not read them in his old age.'²¹

There is another source of comic humour which has been but little touched on or attended to by the critics – not the infliction of casual pain, / but the pursuit of uncertain pleasure and idle gallantry. Half the business and gaiety of comedy turns upon this. Most of the adventures, difficulties, demurs, hair-breadth 'scapes, disguises, deceptions, blunders, disappointments, successes, excuses, all the dextrous manœuvres, artful inuendos, assignations, billets-doux, *double entendres*, sly allusions, and elegant flattery, have an eye to this – to the obtaining of those 'favours secret, sweet, and precious,'²² in which love and pleasure consist, and which when attained, and the *equivoque* is at an end, the curtain drops, and the play is over. All the attractions of a subject that can only be glanced at indirectly, that is a sort of forbidden ground to the imagination, except under severe restrictions, which are constantly broken through; all the resources it supplies for intrigue and invention; the bashfulness of the clownish lover, his looks of alarm and petrified astonishment; the foppish affectation and easy confidence of the happy man; the dress, the airs, the languor, the scorn, and indifference of the fine lady; the bustle, pertness, loquaciousness, and tricks of the chambermaid; the impudence, lies, and roguery of the valet; the match-making and unmaking; the wisdom of the wise; the sayings of the witty, the folly of the fool; 'the soldier's, scholar's, courtier's eye, tongue, sword, the glass of fashion and the mould / of form,'²³ have all a view to this. It is the closet in Blue-Beard.²⁴ It is the life and soul of Wycherley, Congreve, Vanbrugh, and Farquhar's plays. It is the salt of comedy, without which it would be worthless and insipid. It makes Horner decent and Millamant divine. It is the jest between Tattle and Miss Prue. It is the bait with which Olivia, in the Plain Dealer, plays with honest Manly. It lurks at the bottom of the catechism which Archer teaches Cherry, and which she learns by heart. It gives the finishing grace to Mrs Amlet's confession – 'Though I'm old, I'm chaste.' Valentine and his Angelica would be nothing without it; Miss Peggy would not be worth a gallant; and Slender's 'sweet Anne Page'²⁵ would be no more!²⁶ 'The age of comedy would be gone, and the glory of our play-houses extinguished for ever.'²⁷ Our old comedies would be invaluable, were it only for this, that they keep alive this sentiment, which still survives in all its fluttering grace and breathless palpitations on the stage.

Humour is the describing the ludicrous as it is in itself; wit is the exposing it, by comparing or contrasting it with something else. Humour is, as it were, the growth of nature and accident; wit is the product of art and fancy. Humour, as / it is shewn in books, is an imitation of the natural or acquired absurdities of mankind, or of the ludicrous in accident, situation, and character: wit is the illustrating and heightening the sense of that absurdity by some sudden and unexpected likeness or opposition of one thing to another, which sets off the quality we laugh at or despise in a still more contemptible or striking point of view. Wit, as distinguished from

poetry, is the imagination or fancy inverted, and so applied to given objects, as to make the little look less, the mean more light and worthless; or to divert our admiration or wean our affections from that which is lofty and impressive, instead of producing a more intense admiration and exalted passion, as poetry does. Wit may sometimes, indeed, be shewn in compliments as well as satire; as in the common epigram –

Accept a miracle, instead of wit:
See two dull lines with Stanhope's pencil writ.²⁸

But then the mode of paying it is playful and ironical, and contradicts itself in the very act of making its own performance an humble foil to another's. Wit hovers round the borders of the light and trifling, whether in matters of pleasure or pain; for as soon as it describes the serious seriously, it ceases to be wit, and passes into a different form. Wit is, in fact, the eloquence of / indifference, or an ingenious and striking exposition of those evanescent and glancing impressions of objects which affect us more from surprise or contrast to the train of our ordinary and literal preconceptions, than from any thing in the objects themselves exciting our necessary sympathy or lasting hatred. The favourite employment of wit is to add littleness to littleness, and heap contempt on insignificance by all the arts of petty and incessant warfare; or if it ever affects to aggrandise, and use the language of hyperbole, it is only to betray into derision by a fatal comparison, as in the mock-heroic; or if it treats of serious passion, it must do it so as to lower the tone of intense and high-wrought sentiment, by the introduction of burlesque and familiar circumstances. To give an instance or two. Butler, in his *Hudibras*, compares the change of night into day, to the change of colour in a boiled lobster.

The sun had long since, in the lap
Of Thetis, taken out his nap;
And, like a lobster boil'd, the morn
From black to red, began to turn:
When Hudibras, whom thoughts and aching
'Twixt sleeping kept all night, and waking,
Began to rub his drowsy eyes,
And from his couch prepared to rise,
Resolving to dispatch the deed
He vow'd to do with trusty speed.²⁹ /

Compare this with the following stanzas in Spenser, treating of the same subject:

By this the Northern Waggoner had set
His seven-fold team behind the stedfast star,
That was in Ocean waves yet never wet,
But firm is fix'd and sendeth light from far
To all that in the wide deep wand'ring are:

And cheerful chanticleer with his note shrill,
 Had warned once that Phœbus' fiery car
 In haste was climbing up the eastern hill,
 Full envious that night so long his room did fill.

At last the golden oriental gate
 Of greatest heaven 'gan to open fair,
 And Phœbus, fresh as bridegroom to his mate,
 Came dancing forth, shaking his dewy hair,
 And hurl'd his glist'ring beams through gloomy air:
 Which when the wakeful elf perceiv'd, straitway
 He started up and did himself prepare
 In sun-bright arms and battailous array,
 For with that pagan proud he combat will that day.³⁰

In this last passage, every image is brought forward that can give effect to our natural impression of the beauty, the splendour, and solemn grandeur of the rising sun; pleasure and power wait on every line and word: whereas, in the other, the only memorable thing is a grotesque and ludicrous illustration of the alteration which takes place from darkness to gorgeous light, and that brought from the lowest instance, and with / associations that can only disturb and perplex the imagination in its conception of the real object it describes. There cannot be a more witty, and at the same time degrading comparison, than that in the same author, of the Bear turning round the pole-star to a bear tied to a stake:—

But now a sport more formidable
 Had raked together village rabble;
 'Twas an old way of recreating
 Which learned butchers call bear-baiting,
 A bold adventurous exercise
 With ancient heroes in high prize,
 For authors do affirm it came
 From Isthmian or Nemæan game;
 Others derive it from the Bear
 That's fixed in Northern hemisphere,
 And round about his pole does make
 A circle like a bear at stake,
 That at the chain's end wheels about
 And overturns the rabble rout.³¹

I need not multiply examples of this sort. — Wit or ludicrous invention produces its effect oftenest by comparison, but not always. It frequently effects its purposes by unexpected and subtle distinctions. For instance, in the first kind, Mr Sheridan's description of Mr Addington's administration as the fag-end of Mr Pitt's, who had remained so long on the treasury bench that, like / Nicias in the fable, 'he left the sitting part of the man behind him,'³² is as fine an example of metaphorical wit as

any on record. The same idea seems, however, to have been included in the old well-known nickname of the *Rump* Parliament. Almost as happy an instance of the other kind of wit, which consists in sudden retorts, in turns upon an idea, and diverting the train of your adversary's argument abruptly and adroitly into another channel, may be seen in the sarcastic reply of Porson, who hearing some one observe, that 'certain modern poets would be read and admired when Homer and Virgil were forgotten,' made answer – 'And not till then!'³³ Sir Robert Walpole's definition of the gratitude of place-expectants, 'That it is a lively sense of *future* favours,'³⁴ is no doubt wit, but it does not consist in the finding out any coincidence or likeness, but in suddenly transposing the order of time in the common account of this feeling, so as to make the professions of those who pretend to it correspond more with their practice. It is filling up a blank in the human heart with a word that explains its hollowness at once. Voltaire's saying, in answer to a stranger who was observing how tall his trees grew – 'That they had nothing else to do' – was a quaint mixture of wit and humour, making it out as if they really led a lazy, laborious life: but / there was here neither allusion or metaphor. Again, that master-stroke in *Hudibras* is sterling wit and profound satire, where speaking of certain religious hypocrites he says, that they

Compound for sins they are inclin'd to,
By damning those they have no mind to;³⁵

but the wit consists in the truth of the character, and in the happy exposure of the ludicrous contradiction between the pretext and the practice; between their lenity towards their own vices, and their severity to those of others. The same principle of nice distinction must be allowed to prevail in those lines of the same author, where he is professing to expound the dreams of judicial astrology.

There's but the twinkling of a star
Betwixt a man of peace and war,
A thief and justice, fool and knave,
A huffing officer and a slave;
A crafty lawyer and pickpocket;
A great philosopher and a blockhead;
A formal preacher and a player;
A learn'd physician and man slayer.³⁶

The finest piece of wit I know of, is in the lines of Pope on the Lord Mayor's show –

Now night descending, the proud scene is o'er,
But lives in Settle's numbers one day more.³⁷ /

This is certainly as mortifying an inversion of the idea of poetical immortality as could be thought of; it fixes the *maximum* of littleness and insignificance: but it is not by likeness to any thing else that it does this, but by literally taking the lowest possible duration of ephemeral reputation, marking it (as with a slider) on the scale of endless renown, and giving a rival credit for it as his loftiest praise. In a word, the shrewd separation or disentangling of ideas that seem the same, or where the secret contradiction is not sufficiently suspected, and is of a ludicrous and whimsical nature, is wit just as much as the bringing together those that appear at first sight totally different. There is then no sufficient ground for admitting Mr Locke's celebrated definition of wit, which he makes to consist in the finding out striking and unexpected resemblances in things so as to make pleasant pictures in the fancy, while judgment and reason, according to him, lie the clean contrary way, in separating and nicely distinguishing those wherein the smallest difference is to be found.*³⁸ /

On this definition Harris, the author of *Hermes*,³⁹ has very well observed that the demonstrating the / equality of the three angles of a right-angled triangle to two right ones, would, upon the principle here stated, be a piece of wit instead of an act of the judgment or understanding, and Euclid's *Elements* a collection of epigrams. On the contrary it has appeared, that the detection and exposure of difference, particularly where this implies nice and subtle observation, as in discriminating

* His words are – 'If in having our ideas in the memory ready at hand consists quickness of parts, in this of having them unconfused, and being able nicely to distinguish one thing from another, where there is but the least difference, consists in a great measure the exactness of judgment and / clearness of reason, which is to be observed in one man above another. And hence, perhaps, may be given some reason of that common observation, that men who have a great deal of wit and prompt memories, have not always the clearest judgment or deepest reason. For wit lying mostly in the assemblage of ideas, and putting them together with quickness and variety, wherein can be found any resemblance or congruity, thereby to make up pleasant pictures and agreeable visions in the fancy; judgment, on the contrary, lies quite on the other side, in separating carefully one from another, ideas wherein can be found the least difference, thereby to avoid being misled by similitude, and by affinity to take one thing for another.' (*Essay*, vol. i. p. 143.) This definition, such as it is, Mr Locke took without acknowledgment from Hobbes, who says in his *Leviathan*, 'This difference of quickness in imagining is caused by the difference of men's passions, that love and dislike some one thing, some another, and therefore some men's thoughts run one way, some another, and are held to and observe differently the things that pass through their imagination. And whereas in this succession of thoughts there is nothing to observe in the things they think on, but either in what they be like one another, or in what they be unlike, those that observe their similitudes, in case they be such as are but rarely observed by others, are said to have a good wit, by which is meant on this occasion a good fancy. But they that observe their differences and dissimilitudes, which is called distinguishing and discerning and judging between thing and thing; in case such discerning be not easy, are said to have a good judgement; and particularly / in matter of conversation and business, wherein times, places, and persons are to be discerned, this virtue is called discretion. The former, that is, fancy, without the help of judgment, is not commended for a virtue; but the latter, which is judgment or discretion, is commended for itself, without the help of fancy. *Leviathan*, p. 32.

between pretence and practice, between appearance and reality, is common to wit and satire with judgment and reasoning, and certainly the comparing and connecting our ideas together is an essential part of reason and judgment, as well as of wit and fancy. — Mere wit, as opposed to reason or argument, consists in striking out some casual and partial coincidence which has nothing to do, or at least implies no necessary connection with the nature of the things, which are forced into a seeming analogy by a play upon words, or some irrelevant conceit, as in puns, riddles, alliteration, &c. The jest, in all such cases, lies in the sort of mock-identity, or nominal resemblance, established by the intervention of / the same words expressing different ideas, and countenancing as it were, by a fatality of language, the mischievous insinuation which the person who has the wit to take advantage of it wishes to convey. So when the disaffected French wits applied to the new order of the *Fleur du lys* the *double entendre* of *Compagnons d'Ulysse*, or companions of Ulysses, meaning the animal into which the fellow-travellers of the hero of the Odyssey were transformed, this was a shrewd and biting intimation of a galling truth (if truth it were) by a fortuitous concourse of letters of the alphabet, jumping in 'a foregone conclusion,'⁴⁰ but there was no proof of the thing, unless it was self-evident. And, indeed, this may be considered as the best defence of the contested maxim — That *ridicule is the test of truth*; viz. that it does not contain or attempt a formal proof of it, but owes its power of conviction to the bare suggestion of it, so that if the thing when once hinted is not clear in itself, the satire fails of its effect and falls to the ground. The sarcasm here glanced at the character of the new or old French noblesse may not be well founded; but it is so like truth, and 'comes in such a questionable shape,'⁴¹ backed with the appearance of an identical proposition, that it would require a long train of facts and laboured arguments to do away the impression, even if we were / sure of the honesty and wisdom of the person who undertook to refute it. A flippant jest is as good a test of truth as a solid bribe; and there are serious sophistries,

Soul-killing lies, and truths that work small good,⁴²

as well as idle pleasantries. Of this we may be sure, that ridicule fastens on the vulnerable points of a cause, and finds out the weak sides of an argument; if those who resort to it sometimes rely too much on its success, those who are chiefly annoyed by it almost always are so with reason, and cannot be too much on their guard against deserving it. Before we can laugh at a thing, its absurdity must at least be open and palpable to common apprehension. Ridicule is necessarily built on certain supposed facts, whether true or false, and on their inconsistency with certain acknowledged maxims, whether right or wrong. It is, therefore, a fair test, if not of philosophical or abstract truth, at least of what is truth according to public opinion and common sense; for it can only expose to instantaneous contempt that which is

condemned by public opinion, and is hostile to the common sense of mankind. Or to put it differently, it is the test of the quantity of truth that there is in our favourite prejudices.— To shew how / nearly allied wit is thought to be to truth, it is not unusual to say of any person — ‘Such a one is a man of sense, for though he said nothing, he laughed in the right place.’ — Alliteration comes in here under the head of a certain sort of verbal wit; or, by pointing the expression, sometimes points the sense. Mr Grattan’s wit or eloquence (I don’t know by what name to call it) would be nothing without this accompaniment. Speaking of some ministers whom he did not like, he said, ‘Their only means of government are the guinea and the gallows.’ There can scarcely, it must be confessed, be a more effectual mode of political conversion than one of these applied to a man’s friends, and the other to himself. The fine sarcasm of Junius on the effect of the supposed ingratitude of the Duke of Grafton at court — ‘The instance might be painful, but the principle would please’⁴³ — notwithstanding the profound insight into human nature it implies, would hardly pass for wit without the alliteration, as some poetry would hardly be acknowledged as such without the rhyme to clench it. A quotation or a hackneyed phrase dextrously turned or wrested to another purpose, has often the effect of the liveliest wit. An idle fellow who had only fourpence left in the world, which had been put by to pay for the baking some meat for his dinner, went and laid it out to / buy a new string for a guitar. An old acquaintance on hearing this story, repeated those lines out of the Allegro —

And ever against *eating* cares
Lap me in soft *Lydian* airs.⁴⁴

The reply of the author of the periodical paper called the World to a lady at church, who seeing him look thoughtful, asked what he was thinking of — ‘The next World,’⁴⁵ — is a perversion of an established formula of language, something of the same kind. — Rhymes are sometimes a species of wit, where there is an alternate combination and resolution or decomposition of the elements of sound, contrary to our usual division and classification of them in ordinary speech, not unlike the sudden separation and re-union of the component parts of the machinery in a pantomime. The author who excels infinitely the most in this way is the writer of *Hudibras*. He also excels in the invention of single words and names which have the effect of wit by sounding big, and meaning nothing: — ‘full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.’⁴⁶ But of the artifices of this author’s burlesque style I shall have occasion to speak hereafter. — It is not always easy to distinguish between the wit of words and that of things. ‘For thin partitions do their bounds divide.’⁴⁷ Some of the late Mr / Curran’s *bon mots* or *jeux d’esprit*, might be said to owe their birth to this sort of equivocal generation; or were a happy mixture of verbal wit and a lively and picturesque fancy, of legal acuteness in detecting the variable applications of words, and of a mind apt at perceiving the ludicrous in external objects. ‘Do you

see any thing ridiculous in this wig?' said one of his brother judges to him. 'Nothing but the head,' was the answer. Now here instantaneous advantage was taken of the slight technical ambiguity in the construction of language, and the matter-of-fact is flung into the scale as a thumping makeweight. After all, verbal and accidental strokes of wit, though the most surprising and laughable, are not the best and most lasting. That wit is the most refined and effectual, which is founded on the detection of unexpected likeness or distinction in things, rather than in words. It is more severe and galling, that is, it is more unpardonable though less surprising, in proportion as the thought suggested is more complete and satisfactory, from its being inherent in the nature of the things themselves. *Hæret lateri lethalis arundo*.⁴⁸ Truth makes the greatest libel; and it is that which bars the darts of wit. The Duke of Buckingham's saying, 'Laws are not, like women, the worse for being old,'⁴⁹ is an instance of a harmless truism and the utmost malice / of wit united. This is, perhaps, what has been meant by the distinction between true and false wit. Mr Addison, indeed, goes so far as to make it the exclusive test of true wit that it will bear translation into another language, that is to say, that it does not depend at all on the form of expression.⁵⁰ But this is by no means the case. Swift would hardly have allowed of such a strait-laced theory, to make havoc with his darling conundrums; though there is no one whose serious wit is more that of things, as opposed to a mere play either of words or fancy. I ought, I believe, to have noticed before, in speaking of the difference between wit and humour, that wit is often pretended absurdity, where the person overacts or exaggerates a certain part with a conscious design to expose it as if it were another person, as when Mandrake in the *Twin Rivals* says, 'This glass is too big, carry it away, I'll drink out of the bottle.'⁵¹ On the contrary, when Sir Hugh Evans says very innocently, 'Od's plessed will, I will not be absence at the grace,'⁵² though there is here a great deal of humour, there is no wit. This kind of wit of the humorist, where the person makes a butt of himself, and exhibits his own absurdities or foibles purposely in the most pointed and glaring lights, runs through the whole of the character of Falstaff, and is, in truth, / the principle on which it is founded. It is an irony directed against one's-self. Wit is, in fact, a voluntary act of the mind, or exercise of the invention, shewing the absurd and ludicrous consciously, whether in ourselves or another. Cross-readings, where the blunders are designed, are wit: but if any one were to light upon them through ignorance or accident, they would be merely ludicrous.

It might be made an argument of the intrinsic superiority of poetry or imagination to wit, that the former does not admit of mere verbal combinations. Whenever they do occur, they are uniformly blemishes. It requires something more solid and substantial to raise admiration or passion. The general forms and aggregate masses of our ideas must be brought more into play, to give weight and magnitude. Imagination may be said to be the finding out something similar in things generally alike, or with like feelings attached to them; while wit principally

aims at finding out something that seems the same, or amounts to a momentary deception where you least expected it, viz. in things totally opposite. The reason why more slight and partial, or merely accidental and nominal resemblances serve the purposes of wit, and indeed characterise its essence as a distinct / operation and faculty of the mind, is, that the object of ludicrous poetry is naturally to let down and lessen; and it is easier to let down than to raise up, to weaken than to strengthen, to disconnect our sympathy from passion and power, than to attach and rivet it to any object of grandeur or interest, to startle and shock our preconceptions by incongruous and equivocal combinations, than to confirm, enforce, and expand them by powerful and lasting associations of ideas, or striking and true analogies. A slight cause is sufficient to produce a slight effect. To be indifferent or sceptical, requires no effort; to be enthusiastic and in earnest, requires a strong impulse, and collective power. Wit and humour (comparatively speaking, or taking the extremes to judge of the gradations by) appeal to our indolence, our vanity, our weakness, and insensibility; serious and impassioned poetry appeals to our strength, our magnanimity, our virtue, and humanity. Any thing is sufficient to heap contempt upon an object; even the bare suggestion of a mischievous allusion to what is improper, dissolves the whole charm, and puts an end to our admiration of the sublime or beautiful. Reading the finest passage in Milton's *Paradise Lost* in a false tone, will make it seem insipid and absurd. The cavilling at, or invidiously pointing / out, a few slips of the pen, will embitter the pleasure, or alter our opinion of a whole work, and make us throw it down in disgust. The critics are aware of this vice and infirmity in our nature, and play upon it with periodical success. The meanest weapons are strong enough for this kind of warfare, and the meanest hands can wield them. Spleen can subsist on any kind of food. The shadow of a doubt, the hint of an inconsistency, a word, a look, a syllable, will destroy our best-formed convictions. What puts this argument in as striking a point of view as any thing, is the nature of parody or burlesque, the secret of which lies merely in transposing or applying at a venture to any thing, or to the lowest objects, that which is applicable only to certain given things, or to the highest matters. 'From the sublime to the ridiculous, there is but one step.'⁵³ The slightest want of unity of impression destroys the sublime; the detection of the smallest incongruity is an infallible ground to rest the ludicrous upon. But in serious poetry, which aims at rivetting our affections, every blow must tell home. The missing a single time is fatal, and undoes the spell. We see how difficult it is to sustain a continued flight of impressive sentiment: how easy it must be then to travestie or burlesque it, to flounder into nonsense, and be witty by playing the / fool. It is a common mistake, however, to suppose that parodies degrade, or imply a stigma on the subject: on the contrary, they in general imply something serious or sacred in the originals. Without this, they would be good for nothing; for the immediate contrast would be wanting, and with this they are sure to tell. The best parodies are, accordingly, the best and most