

# THE ENGLISH HUMORISTS OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

BY

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GINN AND COMPANY

BOSTON • NEW YORK • CHICAGO • LONDON  
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928.3

**The Athenæum Press**  

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GINN AND COMPANY • PRO-  
PRIETORS • BOSTON • U.S.A.

## PREFACE

AN attempt has been made to adapt this edition of the "Humorists" to the use of either college or preparatory school. To that end the notes are rather full in number but brief in the space given to each note, in order that the book may be satisfactorily complete for the uses of younger students, and yet at the same time be able to furnish the advanced student with sufficient references for further inquiry. The essays are exceptionally rich in allusions, very happy and suggestive allusions, and the purpose of the notes is to increase rather than to satisfy the student's curiosity regarding them. I know of no better book than the "Humorists" to afford a starting point for a more or less extensive reading.

For advice and timely criticism in the work, I wish to thank my friends, Professor W. P. Trent, of Columbia, Professor M. G. Callaway, Jr., and Professor Killis Campbell, of the University of Texas; and for help with the references and otherwise, Miss E. M. Pool of St. Agatha School, New York City, and Mr. Paul McDermott and Miss Katherine Searcy, of the University of Texas.

By the courtesy of Messrs. Harper and Brothers, the text here used, with the accompanying footnotes, is that of the Biographical Edition of Thackeray's works.

To the editions of the "Humorists" by Professor W. L. Phelps (1900) and Ernst Regel (Halle, 1885-1891, in six parts) I wish to express my sense of indebtedness for general suggestions and for several points as indicated in my notes.

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## INTRODUCTION

### A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF THACKERAY'S LIFE

Thackeray was born in Calcutta on the 18th of July, 1811. His father and both his grandfathers were in the Indian civil service. His mother, Anne Becher, married young: she was only nineteen when William Makepeace was born. Five years after his birth she was left a widow, and six years later married Major Henry Carmichael Smyth, who was all to Thackeray that a father could have been. For the better climate and educational advantages afforded, the child was sent, when he was five years old, to England. On the way his ship stopped at St. Helena, and the young Thackeray was taken to see Napoleon, whose second funeral he was to attend and record many years later. In England he was put in the care of his aunt, Mrs. Ritchie of Chiswick. We have yet the little letters of that year; in one of them — and quite out of his later style and attitude — he writes back to his mother that “my Aunt Ritchie is very good to me,” and “I like Chiswick, there are so many good boys to play with;” from this year, too, it is also recorded that his head was alarmingly big for his age, that he drew the house in India with his monkey in the window, and begged for pennies to spend, — all characteristic enough. He was sent to Charterhouse School at the age of eleven, where for six years he lived or rather endured the rough and Spartan life of the old time public school. His letters to his mother, who was now in England, tell that he works hard, forms plans, makes resolutions, fights his way to a broken nose to carry through life with

him, and from a heavy heart wishes there were 369 instead of 370 fellows in school.

At eighteen he entered Trinity College, Cambridge, but left the following year. He had not distinguished himself certainly; perhaps he had found the academic but a sorry trade. He seems, however, to have found one real interest in the launching of the humorous weekly, the *Snob*; for which, among other contributions, he wrote "Timbuctoo," a burlesque parallel of Tennyson's prize poem on the same subject. The *Snob* was doomed to a run of nine weeks, and was followed by the more fortunate *Gownsmen*, which achieved some seventeen numbers before its death. Along with these activities on the *Gownsmen* and the *Snob*, were wine suppers, teas, and a projected essay club. Otherwise at the University Thackeray seems to have read much, studied at his leisure, heaped up a mountain of good resolutions from his generous heart, and gotten himself put down as "somewhat lazy but pleasant and gentlemanlike."

From Cambridge young Thackeray went to the Continent. He began there a roving life: from place to place, Rome, Paris, Weimar, wherever his whims and purposes might send him; studying languages and art, observing, idling, storing up knowledge of men and memories of pleasant hours. He picked up a French accent to be proud of all his life, learned German and loved Schiller; and in Weimar, that little Athens of a day, was invited to Goethe's tea parties and had his drawings praised. Meantime in Weimar in the midst of the parties and the novel-reading on easy sofas, the grim future looked in upon him, and like a good youth he set himself as of old toward worthy plans and resolutions, which as of old he was never to keep. Among these resolutions was a solemn project of entering the law. He returned to England at length and took chambers in Hare Court, Temple. How he liked it is not hard to guess. He sketched himself seated on

his high stool, with his blue coat, his decrepit client, and his little clerk bringing five huge volumes up a ladder to him. "This lawyer's preparatory education," he writes, "is certainly one of the most cold-blooded, prejudiced pieces of invention that ever a man was slave to. . . . The sun won't shine into Tapprell's chambers, and the high stools don't blossom and bring forth buds." We find him taking trips to Paris now and then to relieve the tedium, making jaunts into the country, and once across to Cornwall to forward an election canvass.

In 1832 he came of age and inherited a fortune of something like £500 a year. The failure of an Indian investment, however, together with gambling and two unhappy newspaper ventures with his stepfather, caused him to lose it all, and left him after a year or two reduced to the necessity of earning his bread. But "if thou hast never been a fool," as he wrote in after years, "be sure thou wilt never be a wise man;" and the experience gained, of life and doings of every sort, stayed with him on into the years and entered into his books. Indeed the extent to which Thackeray embodies his experience in his writings is one of the most notable things about his work. Memories of these early years appear in "Pendennis," "Lovel the Widower," "The Newcomes," and elsewhere.

It was generally thought by his friends that Thackeray's final intention was to turn to his drawing as a profession and support; but he seems to have meant all along to continue his writing, to try his fortune in literature. He continued his work for the *Constitutional*, — one of the papers that had lost him his money, — serving as the Paris correspondent; and he began the connection with *Fraser's Magazine* that was to end so happily for him. In 1836 appeared his first book, a folio of lithographs, *Flore et Zephyr*, published in Paris and London at the same time. The sale of this was next to nothing. In the same year he married, at the residence of the

British ambassador in Paris, Isabella Shawe, the daughter of an Irish gentleman. During the next six years he wrote steadily for a living, stories, book reviews, art criticisms, poems and ballads, whatever the editors wished, his work appearing in *Fraser's*, the *New Monthly Magazine*, *Ainsworth's*, the *Times*, and the *Westminster Review*, over various pen-names, Michael Angelo Titmarsh, Charles Yellowplush, George Fitz Boodle, and others, according to his fancy. Perhaps his best story of this period is "The Great Hoggarty Diamond." Thackeray's critical work, while not great criticism, was marked by charity, appreciation, and good sense, an easy insight and judgment, with a saving air of humor around it all. His attitude, however, is usually personal, surprisingly so in his reviews of French literature, considering his familiarity with the Continental mind and taste. His serious poetry, though it lacks high charm and genius, and in its workmanship the stamp of high art, has nevertheless a certain touch of real feeling, and succeeds at times in making the sentiment effective, — as, for instance, in the "Cane-Bottomed Chair."

Thackeray's married life was for a time of the happiest. But from the illness attending the birth of the third child, Mrs. Thackeray passed into the disease that never left her; she fell into a great mental depression which finally called for constant oversight, and Thackeray's home was broken up. Years after, in that beautiful spirit of his, he wrote: "Though my marriage was a wreck, as you know, I would do it over again, for behold Love is the crown and completion of all earthly good." Still young, for he was under thirty, Thackeray found himself with the woman he loved lost to him, his home life gone, and his children taken away. He took up his old life again, and lived for a while among his Bohemian friends, at the clubs and eating-houses, working for *Fraser's* and for *Punch*, and publishing in 1842 his "Irish

Sketchbook." In 1844 he went with a party of friends — The Peninsular and Oriental Company furnishing the ticket — to the East. We have the record of his trip in "From Cornhill to Grand Cairo."

Meantime his contributions to *Punch* were going on,—poems, ballads, burlesques, mock histories,—whatever sprang from the almost animal spirits of that humor and wit of his. Many of these Thackeray himself illustrated. He could never have been a great artist, perhaps; that is not the question. But his drawing, though not artistic, not even correct always, does succeed in its primary purpose: it is interpretative, and characteristic of the subject matter, and full of life. It was almost wholly the gift of the illustrator rather than of the larger artist. "Barry Lyndon" appeared in 1844 in *Fraser's* with moderate success, and in *Punch* two years later the first of the famous *Snob* papers. These were busy years with Thackeray; but in spite of the fact that he worked steadily and unremittingly, and was well enough known among editors and authors, he met with a persistent failure to hit the public taste.

Then at last, in January, 1847, when he was thirty-six, came the first installment of the book that was to establish him in the popular applause, "Vanity Fair." "Vanity Fair" triumphed in spite of the public taste rather than because of it. Here was a novel without a hero; with a comfortable, devoted little heroine, too truly feminine in some respects to be palatable, and after all scarcely so much the heroine as her wicked little friend, Becky Sharp. The satire, the power, the truth of the book, told in the end, however, as must have happened sooner or later, and stamped it as one of the greatest novels in the language. "Vanity Fair" appeared in twenty-four numbers, and long before the last it was evident that Thackeray might assume his place as one of the great writers of the day. Society took him up, and his life, already so busy



and varied, became fuller than ever. "Pendennis" began in the autumn of 1848, four months after the last number of "Vanity Fair," and continued the author's success. The field in "Pendennis" is more of youth and illusion than that in "Vanity Fair," but the method and class of the work is the same.

Thackeray was now in fairly easy circumstances, but was far too generous with his money not to need more of it than he had. He decided, therefore, in 1851 to improve his fortunes by coming forward as a lecturer, and to that end began to read for his "English Humorists of the Eighteenth Century." The lectures were in due time delivered in London at Willis's Rooms, to "innumerable noteworthy people," and met with great success. During that year, they were given at Oxford, Cambridge, Edinburgh, and elsewhere. The next year "Henry Esmond" appeared. Thackeray had received £1000 for the book before it was printed; but, strangely enough, it met with ill success. It was variously described as "tedious and long," "too much history and too little story," and "the most uncomfortable book you can imagine." Such, however, has not been the verdict of time. "Henry Esmond" as a work of art is Thackeray's greatest book. The scheme of a memoir form precluded the lengthy moralizings that burden so much of his writing; the characters are painted swiftly and well; and the situations arising from their interrelations and contact are developed with fine dramatic brevity and color. His natural inclination toward the age, and the material gathered in working up the "Humorists," gave Thackeray perfect ease in the period and atmosphere, and set the eighteenth century breathing before us.

Thackeray, his health being very uncertain, now felt more and more the wisdom of putting by for his "little girls at home," and hit on the American tour as a means toward this end. He sailed October 30, 1852, with Arthur Hugh Clough and Lowell. There seems to have been some contention be-

tween Boston and New York as to which should welcome first the distinguished visitor. Fortune arranged the matter by having him land in Boston and make his *début* as a lecturer in New York. His impressions of America were very unlike those recorded by Dickens, who had repaid the enthusiasm and hospitality of the Americans by publishing criticisms both petty and insular. How different is the tone of Thackeray's letters! He didn't expect to like the people as he does, he writes back, and he finds many most pleasant companions, natural and well-read, and well-bred too, and supposes that he is none the worse pleased because everybody has read his books and praises his lectures. So also the rush and restlessness pleases him, and he likes, for a little, the dash of the stream. "It is all praise and kindness." His tour included Boston, New York, Washington, Richmond, Charleston, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and perhaps other places, and the profits of the trip, though not definitely known, were satisfactory, — in a letter he speaks of counting on £2500 at least.

Early in the next year Thackeray was in England again, in Paris, then in Baden, working on "The Newcomes." In it the manner and the treatment are the same as in "Vanity Fair," though, on the one hand, "The Newcomes" is more digressive and less interesting, and, on the other, the portrait of Colonel Newcome surpasses all the former portraits in depth and beauty. After "The Newcomes" Thackeray began his arrangements for another American venture and set about the composition of his lectures on the "Four Georges," which were to make their first appearance in America instead of in London. Then followed a repetition, but even more successful, of the earlier visit to America; everybody loving Thackeray, and Thackeray loving everybody, lecturing, dining, playing with his host's children wherever he might be, or writing to his own. "What charming letters Anne writes me!" — this from Savannah, Georgia. "St.

Valentine brought me a delightful letter from her too, and from the dear old mother, and whether it's the comfort of this house, or the pleasure of having an hour's chat with you, or the sweet clean bed I had last night, and undisturbed rest and good breakfast — altogether I think I have no right to grumble at my lot, and am very decently happy." Upon his return home the lectures on the Georges, although considerably criticized by English reviewers for making too free with the sanctity of kings, were repeated with triumphant success in London, Oxford, and other towns, and brilliantly in Edinburgh, where he had "three per cent of the whole population."

In the summer of 1857, Thackeray sought to add a new interest to his life: he entered politics. The city of Oxford was the chosen constituency, his party the Liberal. His speeches delivered in the canvass were regarded as worthy of him, tactful, marked by good sense and courtesy; in them he advocated an extension of the suffrage and a more democratic distribution of offices according to merit rather than rank. The speech he delivered when the returns showed that he was beaten, was, as might have been expected, full of taste and fine feeling, and is worthy of reading even yet.

Freed from politics, he began a new serial, the "Virginians"; in which, though not so successfully as in the first instance, he used again the material compiled for his lectures and reintroduced many of the figures in "Henry Esmond." Like Balzac he was fond of taking his people on from book to book; he even planned at this time to reverse the scheme by laying a plot in the time of Henry V and bringing upon the stage of action the ancestors of all his characters. The plan never materialized. It was while the "Virginians" was in progress that the much written of quarrel between Thackeray and Dickens arose.

This coolness, though it may have been rooted in a smouldering jealousy unperceived of either, had its immedi-

ate origin in an article that appeared in *Town Talk*. The author, Edmund Yates, made numerous statements about Thackeray, of a more or less personal character and in thoroughly bad taste. Thackeray, as was natural enough, resented them. Yates sought Dickens's advice, and Thackeray thought, and others with him, that Dickens took in the matter an unfriendly attitude toward Thackeray. The estrangement between the two great men did not end until a week before Thackeray's death, when they met on the steps of the Athenæum Club and shook hands.<sup>1</sup>

In 1859 the *Cornhill Magazine* was established, with Thackeray as editor. He contributed to the first issue an installment of "Lovel the Widower" — a story more interesting perhaps for its personal reminiscences of Thackeray than for its own sake — and what is more important, he wrote as editor the initial number of the "Roundabout Papers." The success of the magazine was overwhelming; more than 110,000 copies of the first issue were sold, and Thackeray went off to Paris as happy as a child. His long service in journalism, his humor, his wit, his knowledge of human nature, fitted him admirably for the editor's chair, though his rather unmethodical habits and his too kind heart made the business heavy at times. Whimsically and charmingly in "Thorns in the Cushion" he tells us the Editor's woes. "At night I come home and take my letters up to bed (not daring to open them), and in the morning I find one, two, three Thorns on my pillow." The people that resent the thrusts and the jests of the essayist, they are some of the thorns; and worst of all, the little governess with the sick mother and the brothers and sisters that look to her, the editor can so easily help them by taking the poem. And how he hopes that it may be possible, but it won't do; and sometimes — though he himself does not tell us this — the piece is accepted,

<sup>1</sup> For fuller discussion see the "Life" by Merivale and Marzials, pp. 195-198

paid for from his own pocket, and never appears, but strays somehow later on into the waste basket. To be himself and a sharp editor at the same moment is hard for him.

"Lovel the Widower" was followed by "The Adventures of Philip on his Way Through the World," a book full of discursiveness and seeming fatigue, and no more admirable than its predecessor. But it is good to see the old power and charm return more or less in his last book, "Dennis Duval," — in what we have of it, for he never lived to finish the story. Meanwhile the "Roundabout Papers," — "On a Lazy Boy," "On Two Children in Black," "On Screens in Dining Rooms," on all manner of subjects, charming, delicate, finished, with the exact turn that only Thackeray could give them, continued to appear till his death. His health by this time had been going from bad to worse, the struggles and sorrows and labors of his life had aged him greatly. He felt it, and already thought of himself as an old man; it was noticed afterwards that the last papers in the *Cornhill* had been almost like sermons. On the morning of the 24th of December, Christmas Eve, 1863, he was found lying dead, his arms and face rigid, as if he had died in great pain.

Thackeray's work long before his death had already placed him among the great English writers. The novels, perhaps, head the list of his achievements: "The Yellowplush Correspondence," 1838; "Catherine," 1839; "A Shabby Genteel Story," 1840; "The History of Samuel Titmarsh" and "The Great Hoggarty Diamond," 1841; "The Luck of Barry Lyndon," 1844; "Vanity Fair," 1847-1848; "The History of Pendennis," 1848-1850; "The History of Henry Esmond, Esq., A Colonel in service of Her Majesty Queen Anne. Written by Himself," 1852; "The Newcomes," 1853-1855; "The Virginians. A Tale of the Last Century," 1857-1859; "Lovel the Widower," 1860; "The Adventures of Philip," 1861-1862; "Dennis Duval," never finished, but published

after Thackeray's death, 1864. There are several books of travel and description: "The Paris Sketchbook," 1840; "The Irish Sketchbook," 1843; "Little Travels and Road-side Sketches," 1844-1845; "Punch in the East," 1845; "From London to Grand Cairo," 1846. The "Ballads" appeared first in book form in 1855. Besides the novels, the travels, and the poems, there were the great number of miscellaneous writings that appeared in *Punch*, in *Fraser's*, the *Cornhill*, and elsewhere: the review of Carlyle's "French Revolution," 1837; "Fitz-Boodle's Confessions," 1842-1843; "Miss Tickletoby's Lectures on English History," 1842; "The Snobs of England," 1846-1847; "Punch's Prize Novelists," 1847; "The Proser," 1850; "Mr. Brown's Letters to a Young Man About Town," 1849; "English Humorists of the Eighteenth Century," 1851-1853; "The Four Georges," delivered in 1855, published in the *Cornhill*, 1860, in book form, 1861; and the "Roundabout Papers" in the *Cornhill*, 1860-1863. He was also the author of several Christmas books of different kinds: "Mrs. Perkins's Ball," 1846; "Our Street," 1847; "Doctor Birch and his Young Friends," 1848; "Rebecca and Rowena," 1849; "The Kickleburys on the Rhine," 1850; "The Rose and the Ring," 1854.

Thackeray's first excellence, it seems to me, lies in his deep humanity, the sane and ripened heart and the vision that made him feel and understand, the humor and buoyancy and the keen wit that hover about his thought. His faults, at the worst, consist in a lack of art, oftentimes in detailed construction, as in "The Newcomes," "Pendennis," or even in that most nearly perfect of his books, "Henry Esmond"; an overwillingness to moralize and sentimentalize, as in "The Newcomes," especially among the novels, and in many of the miscellanies; and a failure to make the adequate revision. His virtues lie in his capacity for sympathy, as in the beautiful portrait of Colonel Newcome, or of the death of my Lord

in "Henry Esmond," or the portrait of Goldsmith; his shrewd insight into motives and temperaments, such as we find, for instance, in his treatment of Beatrix and the Stuart, or of the subtle quality of the Viscountess's love; his power to take the reader into his confidence, his balance and absence of pose or affectation, his culture, his swift and moving characters and situations.

In appearance Thackeray was tall, six feet four, and broad-chested. The thick hair, turning early to gray, the ample brow, the broken nose, and the clear eyes, tended to give to his head, which he carried high, an air of dignity, perhaps even of supercilious coldness; but the mouth was sensitive and mild, and his whole manner and expression, when he spoke, kindly charming, full of the delicate variations of his many-sided character and moods.

As a man he was all heart and life; loving and needing love; careless with his money and his kindness, generous and loyal; sensitive and reserved; and filled, as Trollope said, "with an almost equally exaggerated sympathy with the joys and troubles of individuals around him"; a Bohemian all his days, with an eternal child in his breast, a man who loved to lounge and talk and dream, to live intensely and fully, indifferent to the prudence of gain and loss. There was talk once of his being a snob and a cynic, but it is all forgotten. "He is become a great man, I am told," writes his friend Edward Fitzgerald, "goes to Holland House, and to Devonshire House; and for some reason or other will not write one word to me. But I am sure this is not because he is asked to Holland House;" and we, too, know now that, whatever the reason might have been, it could not have been because he was asked to Holland House; he was no snob. And he was no cynic; we know now the depth of the loving faith that kept itself sweet in the face of the foibles and weakness and folly that he read so well. Indeed, strange as it may seem at

first thought, the keynote to his character was probably to be found in sentiment rather than in cynicism.

Thackeray in politics was a Liberal. His religion is characteristic of the man; under a due reserve, poetic faith in the broader Christian ideas, and the prayer that he might never write a word inconsistent with the love of God or the love of man, that he might always speak the truth with his pen, and "that he might never be actuated by a love of greed — For the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord."

### THE ENGLISH HUMORISTS

There are two views of history that may be taken in connection with the "English Humorists." The first demands that history to be good must be based on the actual fact, that it must be literal to be true, and that thereupon rests the standard of excellence. The other opinion, in view of the fact that all the points about a subject may never be obtained, that witnesses vary, that the so-called fact itself is often but half the reality, that, briefly, truth is in a well, — the other opinion holds that the office of history is to be morally creative; which means that we should be made to feel, to take sides, to be moved, to act, and through this exercise to get character development; and insists that to this end the literal data may be sacrificed, if necessary, in the interest of vividness and power. Both these theories apply to the "Humorists." But while Thackeray in his treatment observes no small amount of accuracy, his work in the main implies, as many literary histories do, the second point of view rather than the first.

The fundamental appeal of the book is its humanity. Thackeray's life and temperament, his broad experience and broader sympathies, fit him for the task of reviewing such widely diverse lives and temperaments as the twelve humorists



exhibit. We are made to live with the characters, to worship, despise, and pursue them as Thackeray, in his vital conception of them, chooses to direct us. And this, though individually it may be harsh, as in the case of Swift, or lenient, as in the case of Pope, is yet valuable to the race at large by reason of the vividness and power that the impulse of Thackeray's conception puts into it.

It may be said that as criticism the whole strain of the essays is, like much of English criticism, more personal than critical, based more on the man than on the work. Continental criticism tends to separate the two, but the English tendency has been, up to the last few years, to insist on the man and his art as one. The essays on the humorists are intended, however, more as studies, as life portraits, than as literary criticism. Their lives are taken up not fact by fact, year by year, but from this side and from that, shifted, turned, quoted, questioned, drawn from the centuries and presented as Thackeray wills them to be. The result in this case justifies the method. There is a hovering over the subject, in a manner characteristic of all Thackeray's work, a happy all-roundness of impression that is in its way as definite as any mere accuracy could be.

Apart from the method of treatment, it would appear that all the men chosen might not be regarded ordinarily as humorists. The answer to that is to be found in the opening paragraph: "The humorous writer professes to awaken and direct your love, your pity, your kindness, — your scorn for untruth, pretension, imposture — your tenderness for the weak, the poor, the oppressed, the unhappy. He takes upon himself to be the week-day preacher, so to speak." From that standpoint all the twelve may be admitted to the company.

The reviews of the day were generally favorable to the essays, though there is of course the usual difference of opinion among the critics.