

tion may at intervals receive a check from sense and learning, it can never be thoroughly extirpated from human nature.

It is strange, a judicious reader is apt to say, upon the perusal of these wonderful historians, *that such prodigious events never happen in our days*. But it is nothing strange, I hope, that men should lie in all ages. You must surely have seen instances enow of that frailty. You have yourself heard many such marvellous relations started, which, being treated with scorn by all the wise and judicious, have at last been abandoned even by the vulgar. Be assured, that those renowned lies, which have spread and flourished to such a monstrous height, arose from like beginnings; but being sown in a more proper soil, shot up at last into prodigies almost equal to those which they relate.⁴

Samuel Johnson (1709–1784)

A prolific essayist whose work appeared in his own journals The Rambler and The Idler as well as in other mid-century periodicals such as Gentleman's Magazine and The Adventurer, Samuel Johnson also directed the first major dictionary of the English language (1755) and wrote Lives of the English Poets (1781). His conversational wit was immortalized by James Boswell's The Life of Samuel Johnson (1791). In this Rambler essay, and again in his Preface to Shakespeare, Johnson worries about the power of imagination to disorder usual senses of reality, and so advocates a moralistic, didactic, and realistic literature formed on the rules that Walpole wished to escape and that later Romantics ignored.

The Rambler No. 4 (March 31, 1750)

Simul et jucunda et idonea dicere vitae.

HORACE, *Ars Poetica*, 334

And join both profit and delight in one. CREECH¹

The works of fiction, with which the present generation seems more particularly delighted, are such as exhibit life in its true state, diversified

⁴A professed atheist, Hume will go on to doubt the miracles described by early Christians, hinting that Christianity itself is one of those “renowned lies.”

¹Horace's phrase, translated by 17th-c. scholar Thomas Creech, on poetic excellence.

only by accidents that daily happen in the world, and influenced by passions and qualities which are really to be found in conversing with mankind.

This kind of writing may be termed not improperly the comedy of romance,² and is to be conducted nearly by the rules of comic poetry. Its province is to bring about natural events by easy means, and to keep up curiosity without the help of wonder: it is therefore precluded from the machines and expedients of the heroic romance, and can neither employ giants to snatch away a lady from the nuptial rites, nor knights to bring her back from captivity; it can neither bewilder its personages in deserts, nor lodge them in imaginary castles. [. . .] Almost all the fictions of the last age will vanish, if you deprive them of a hermit and a wood, a battle, and a shipwreck.

Why this wild strain of imagination found reception so long in polite and learned ages, it is not easy to conceive; but we cannot wonder that while readers could be procured, the authors were willing to continue it; for when a man had by practice gained some fluency of language, he had no further care than to retire to his closet,³ let loose his invention, and heat his mind with incredibilities; a book was thus produced without fear of criticism, without the toil of study, without knowledge of nature, or acquaintance with life.

The task of our present writers is very different; it requires together with that learning which is to be gained from books, that experience which can never be attained by solitary diligence, but must arise from general converse⁴ and accurate observation of the living world. Their performances have, as Horace expresses it, *plus oneris quantum veniae minus*, little indulgence, and therefore more difficulty.⁵ They are engaged in portraits of which every one knows the original, and can detect any deviation from exactness of resemblance. [. . .]

But the fear of not being approved as just copiers of human manners, is not the most important concern that an author of this sort ought to have before him. These books are written chiefly to

²Johnson's term for the realistic novel; "comedy" means common daily life, as opposed to the heroic feats of knights and kings.

³Private room.

⁴Sociable interchange.

⁵Translating Horace's *Epistles* Book II, Epistle 1: *To Augustus* 324; the performances are the novels.

Read to all

the young, the ignorant, and the idle. [. . .] They are the entertainment of minds unfurnished with ideas, and therefore easily susceptible of impressions. [. . .] In the romances formerly written, every transaction and sentiment was so remote from all that passes among men, that the reader was in very little danger of making any applications to himself. [. . .] But when an adventurer is levelled with the rest of the world [. . .]; young spectators [. . .] hope, by observing his behaviour and success, to regulate their own practices. [. . .] If the power of example is so great as to take possession of the memory by a kind of violence, and produce effects almost without the intervention of the will, care ought to be taken, that, when the choice is unrestrained, the best examples only should be exhibited. [. . .] If the world be promiscuously described, I cannot see of what use it can be to read the account; or why it may not be as safe to turn the eye immediately upon mankind as upon a mirror which shows all that presents itself without discrimination.

from Preface to *The Plays of William Shakespeare* (1765)⁶

Nothing can please many, and please long, but just representations of general nature. [. . .] Fanciful invention may delight awhile, [. . .] but the pleasures of sudden wonder are soon exhausted, and the mind can only repose on the stability of truth.

Shakespeare is, above all writers, at least above all modern writers, the poet of nature; the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life. [. . .] Other dramatists can only gain attention by hyperbolic or aggravated characters, by fabulous and unexampled excellence or depravity, as the writers of barbarous romances invigorated the reader by giant or a dwarf; and he that should form his expectations of human affairs from the play, or from the tale, would be equally deceived. Shakespeare has no heroes; his scenes are occupied only by men, who act and speak as the reader thinks that he should himself have spoken or acted on the same occasion. Even where the agency is supernatural the dialogue is level with life. Other writers disguise the most natural passions and most frequent incidents; so that he who contemplates them in the book will not know them in the world:

⁶*Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* (New York, 1870), 508–9.