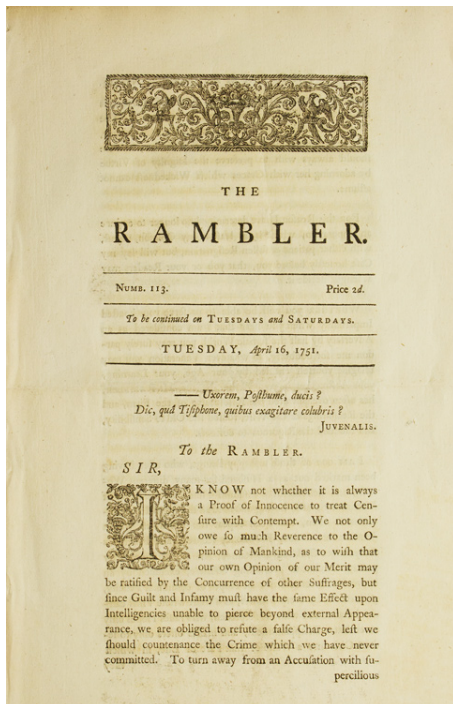


Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler*, number 4, 31 March 1750



THE Works of Fiction, with which the present Generation seems more particularly delighted, are such as exhibit Life in its true State, diversified only by Accidents that daily happen in the World, and influenced by those 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, 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 Desarts, 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 farther Care than to retire to his Closet, let loose his Invention, and heat his Mind with Incredibilities; and 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 Converse, 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 [...].

BUT the Danger of not being approved as just Copyers of human Manners, is not the most important Apprehension that an author of this Sort ought to have before him. These Books are written chiefly to the Young, the Ignorant, and the Idle, to whom they serve as Lectures of Conduct, and Introductions into Life. They are the Entertainment of Minds unfurnished with Ideas, and therefore easily susceptible of Impressions; not fixed by Principles, and therefore easily following the Current of Fancy; not informed by Experience, and consequently open to every false Suggestion and partial Account. [..]

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; the Virtues and Crimes were equally beyond his Sphere of Activity; and he amused himself with Heroes and with

Traitors, Deliverers and Persecutors, as with Beings of another Species, whose Actions were regulated upon Motives of their own, and who had neither Faults nor Excellences in common with himself.

5 BUT when an Adventurer is levelled with the rest of the World, and acts in such Scenes of the universal Drama, as may be the Lot of any other Man; young Spectators fix their Eyes upon him with closer Attention, and hope by observing his Behaviour and Success to regulate their own Practices, when they shall be engaged in the like Part.

10 FOR this Reason these familiar Histories, may perhaps be made of greater Use than the Solemnities of professed Morality, and convey the Knowledge of Vice and Virtue with more Efficacy than Axioms and Definitions. But 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; and that which is likely to operate so strongly, should not be mischievous or uncertain in its Effects.

15 THE chief Advantages which these Fictions have over real Life is, that their Authors are at liberty, tho' not to invent, yet to select Objects, and to cull from the Mass of Mankind, those Individuals upon which the Attention ought most to be employ'd; as a Diamond, though it cannot be made, may be polished by Art, and placed in such a Situation, as to display that Lustre which before was buried among common Stones.

20 IT is justly considered as the greatest Excellency of Art, to imitate Nature; but it is necessary to distinguish those Parts of Nature, which are most proper for Imitation: Greater Care is still required in representing Life, which is so often discoloured by Passion, or deformed by Wickedness. 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 Mirrour which shows all that presents itself without Discrimination.

25 IT is therefore not a sufficient Vindication of a Character, that it is drawn as it appears; for many Characters ought never to be drawn; nor of a Narrative, that the Train of Events is agreeable to Observation and Experience; for that Observation which is called Knowledge of the World, will be found much more frequently to make Men cunning than good. The Purpose of these Writings is surely not only to show Mankind, but to provide that they may be seen hereafter with less Hazard; to teach the means of avoiding the Snares which are laid by TREACHERY for INNOCENCE, without infusing any
30 Wish for that Superiority with which the Betrayer flatters his Vanity; to give the Power of counteracting Fraud without the Temptation to practise it; to initiate Youth by mock Encounters in the Art of necessary Defense, and to increase Prudence without impairing Virtue.

35 MANY Writers, for the sake of following Nature, so mingle good and bad Qualities in their principal Personages, that they are both equally conspicuous; and as we accompany them through their Adventures with Delight, and are led by Degrees to interest ourselves in their Favour, we lose the Abhorrence of their Faults, because they do not hinder our Pleasure, or, perhaps, regard them with some Kindness for being united with so much Merit.

40 THERE have been Men indeed splendidly wicked, whose Endowments threw a Brightness on their Crimes, and whom scarce any Villainy made perfectly detestable, because they never could be wholly divested of their Excellencies; but such have been in all Ages the great Corruptors of the World, and their Resemblance ought no more to be preserved, than the Art of murdering without Pain.

[...] IT is of the utmost Importance to Mankind, that Positions of this Tendency should be laid open and confuted; for while Men consider Good and Evil as springing from the same Root, they will spare the one for the sake of the other, and in judging, if not of others at least of themselves, will be apt to estimate their Virtues by their Vices. To this fatal Error all those will contribute, who confound the
5 Colours of Right and Wrong, and instead of helping to settle their Boundaries, mix them with so much Art, that no common Mind is able to disunite them.

IN Narratives, where historical Veracity has no Place, I cannot discover why there should not be exhibited the most perfect Idea of Virtue; of Virtue not angelical, nor above Probability; for what we cannot credit we shall never imitate; but the highest and purest Kind that Humanity can reach, which,
10 when exercised in such Trials as the various Revolutions of Things shall bring upon it, may, by conquering some Calamities, and enduring others, teach us what we may hope, and what we can perform. Vice, for Vice is necessary to be shewn, should always disgust; nor should the Graces of Gaiety, or the Dignity of Courage, be so united with it, as to reconcile it to the Mind. Wherever it appears, it should raise Hatred by the Malignity of its Practices; and Contempt, by the Meanness of its
15 Stratagems; for while it is supported by either Parts, or Spirit, it will be seldom heartily abhorred. The Roman Tyrant was content to be hated, if he was but feared; and there are Thousands of the Readers of Romances willing to be thought wicked, if they may be allowed to be Wits. It is therefore to be always inculcated, that Virtue is the highest Proof of a superior Understanding, and the only solid Basis of Greatness; and that Vice is the natural Consequence of narrow Thoughts; that it begins in Mistake,
20 and ends in Ignominy.