

# The Rambler No. 4

By Samuel Johnson

*Transcription, correction, editorial commentary, and  
markup by Students and Staff of Marymount University*

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THE  
RAMBLER.

NUMB. 4. Price 2 d ., <sup>price</sup>

SATURDAY, 31 March 1750

*To be Continued on* TUESDAYS *and* SATURDAYS

*Simul et jucunda et idonea dicere Vitae.* , <sup>epigraph</sup> HOR[ace], <sup>Horace</sup>

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, <sup>heroic</sup>, 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.

I REMEMBER a Remark made by Scaliger, <sup>Scaliger</sup> upon Potanus, that all his Writings are filled with Images, and that

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if you take from him his Lillies and his Roses, his Satyrs and his Dryads, he will have nothing left that can be called Poetry. In like Manner, 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, <sup>closet</sup>, 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*, <sup>plus\_oneris</sup> little Indulgence, and therefore more Difficulty. They are engaged in Portraits of which every one knows the Original, and can detect any Deviation from Exactness of Resemblance. Other Writings are safe, except from the Malice of Learning; but these are in danger from every common Reader; as the Slipper ill executed was censured by a Shoemaker, <sup>Pliny</sup> who happened to stop in his way at the Venus, <sup>Venus</sup> of Apelles, <sup>Apelles</sup>

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, <sup>audience</sup> to whom they serve as Lectures of Conduct, and Introductions into Life. They are the Entertainment of Minds unfurnished with Ideas, and therefore

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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.

THAT the highest Degree of Reverence should be paid to Youth, and that nothing indecent or unseemly should be suffered to approach their Eyes or Ears, are Precepts extorted by Sense and Virtue from an ancient Writer by no Means eminent for Chastity of Thought. The same Kind, tho' not the same Degree of Caution, is required in every thing which is laid before them, to secure them from unjust Prejudices, perverse Opinions, and improper Combinations of Images.

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.

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.

FOR this Reason these familiar Histories,<sup>histories</sup> 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,<sup>possession</sup> Care ought

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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.

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.

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,<sup>promiscuous</sup> 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.

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 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.<sup>increase</sup>

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.

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.

SOME have advanced, without due Attention to the Consequences of this Notion, that certain Virtues have their correspondent Faults, and therefore that to exhibit either apart is to deviate from Probability. Thus Men are observed by *Swift*, <sup>Swift</sup> *to be grateful in the same Degree as they are resentful*, <sup>grateful</sup> This Principle, with others of the same Kind, supposes Man to act from a brute Impulse, and pursue a certain Degree of Inclination, without any Choice of the Object; for, otherwise, though it should be allowed that Gratitude and Resentment arise from the same Constitution of the Passions, it follows not that they will be equally indulged when Reason is consulted; yet unless that Consequence be admitted, this sagacious Maxim becomes an empty Sound, without any Relation to Practice or to Life.

NOR is it evident that even the first Motions to these Effects are always in the same Proportion. For Pride, which produces Quickness of Resentment, will frequently obstruct Gratitude, by Unwillingness to admit that Inferiority which Obligation implies; and it is very unlikely, that he who cannot think he receives a Favour will ever acknowledge it.

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 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, 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 Stratagems; for while it is supported by either Parts, <sup>parts</sup> 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, <sup>wits</sup> 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, and ends in Ignominy.

*LONDON:*

Printed for J. PAYNE, and J. BOQUET, in Pater-noster-Row, <sup>publishers;</sup>

where Letters for the RAMBLER are received.

## Footnotes

- price This issue cost two pence. In the eighteenth-century coinage system, 12 pence made a shilling, and 20 shillings made a pound. According to the [Old Bailey Online](#), "A waterman would expect six pence to take you from Westminster to London Bridge, while a barber asked the same to dress your wig and give you a shave." While two pence was not out of reach for most people, the publication frequency of *The Rambler* and similar items would make regular personal purchasing out of the realm of possibility for most. However, men might read a copy in a coffeeshop, entry to which, in the seventeenth century, was a penny. For a deeper look at money, purchasing power, and income, see [Robert Hume's article "The Value of Money in Eighteenth-Century England: Incomes, Prices, Buying Power—and Some Problems in Cultural Economics"](#) in *Huntington Library Quarterly* (2015).  
- [TH]
- epigraph From Horace's [Ars Poetica 334](#): 'to deliver at once both the pleasures and the necessities of life' (Perseus Project).  
- [TH]
- Horace Quintus Horatius Flaccus, or Horace, was a Roman lyric poet of the 1st century BCE. The image above is a bronze portrait medal containing his likeness, dating to the 4th century CE, housed in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris ([Encyclopedia Britannica](#)).  
- [TH]
- heroic Heroic romance is a genre that flourished during the 17th century and remained popular, as parodied by Charlotte Lennox in *The Female Quixote*, into the 18th. It had a profound influence on the development of the novel, though many writers of the 18th century would work to dissociate the genres, as Johnson does here. Formally loose in structure, heroic romances also "deliberately eschew[ed] contemporaneity"; their plots featured courtly lovers engaged in "heroic stories of love and war in a remote and idealized past" ([Shellinger, Encyclopedia of the Novel](#), 1046). Some representative heroic romances include *Euphues* by John Lyly, *L'Astree* by Honore d'Urfé, and *Clelie* by Madame de Scudery.  
- [TH]
- Scaliger [Julius Caesar Scaliger](#) (1484-1558) was a Franco-Italian humanist polymath most widely-known for his *Poetices Libri Septem* (1561). For more information on the *Poetices*, see [Bernard Weinberg's "Scaliger versus Aristotle on Poetics"](#) (1942) and [this review by David Marsh of a new edition and German translation of the whole](#). Scaliger critiques the poetry of Italian humanist [Giovanni Pontano](#) (1429-1503).  
- [TH]
- closet In the eighteenth century, a "closet" was a small office or private room leading off of a bedroom; here, individuals would conduct business, write letters, read, or converse with close acquaintances. It was not used to store clothes. For more information, see *Daily Life in 18th-Century England* (85-86), or [Danielle Bobker's "Literature and Culture of the Closet in the](#)

[Eighteenth Century](#)," from which site the accompanying image, showing the Green Closet at Frogmore, has been drawn.

- [TH]

plus\_one  
In [Horace's Epistles 2.1](#), this quote appears at line 170. In this epistle to Augustus, Horace is mounting a defense of contemporary poetry and decrying the poor taste of the public. In particular he argues that though comic subjects are thought easier to write, they are actually more challenging than tragic subjects because readers give them less "indulgence." Johnson will put this "indulgence" in terms of the readers' familiarity with the more common subjects of comedy (Perseus Project).

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Pliny Johnson alludes here to a story from [Pliny the Elder's Natural History \(35.36\)](#).

- [TH]

Venus Roman counterpart to the Greek goddess Aphrodite, Venus is a signifier of love, sex, prosperity, and desire ([Wikipedia](#)).

- [TH]

Apelles Apelles of Kos, a Greek painter of the 4th century BCE ([Wikipedia](#)). Johnson here alludes to a lost painting of Venus Anadyomenes, or Venus rising from the sea.

- [TH]

audience This is one of the most-quoted moments in the essay. Here, Johnson is making the case that the young, untutored, inexperienced minds that form the primary audience of the novel are easily led astray by the familiarity of their subjects and the verisimilitude of their style.

- [TH]

histories Johnson here uses the term "familiar history" to describe the probable fictions produced by "our present Writers." The term suggests the truth-value associated with many eighteenth-century fictions that, like *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) or *Pamela* (1740), were advertised as having been largely written by the characters themselves. These are supposedly true histories, memoirs, or other accounts of people who would seem familiar to contemporary audiences.

- [TH]

possession Here Johnson argues that representations which are rendered in so familiar and realistic a manner are especially dangerous to untutored minds because they seem to be truth rather than fiction; he therefore cautions that authors provide the best models for behavior and the cultivation of the mind. Johnson references eighteenth-century thought about the power of the imagination to affect the body regardless of the will, like that discussed by [Michele de Montaigne](#) in "[Of the Power of the Imagination](#)." For information about the power of the female imagination to create monstrous beings, see, among other works, [Marie H el ene Huet's Monstrous Imagination \(1993\)](#).

- [TH]

- promiscuous "Promiscuous" here refers to a lack of distinction or discrimination; it is not primarily sexual. See [this Google N-Gram graph charting the usage of the term over time](#).  
- [TH]
- increase In this passage, Johnson articulates his sense of the purpose of novelistic writing. For him, the purpose of fiction is education, as it provides a kind of experience that is protected from the dangers that might accompany such actions in real life.  
- [TH]
- Swift Jonathan Swift, an Anglo-Irish satiric author of the early 18th century, is most well-known today for writing *Gulliver's Travels* . The title page to the first edition of *Gulliver's Travels* , reproduced from Wikimedia Commons, is above. For more information on Swift, see [this biographical essay by Ian Campbell Ross \(2016\)](#), and readers may also be interested in [this 2017 online exhibition about Swift from the Library of Trinity College, Dublin](#).  
- [TH]
- grateful From the second volume of the *Miscellanies* , compiled by Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope, this particular quotation is from [Thoughts on Various Subjects](#)," a collection of witty aphorisms by Pope and contained in the second volume.  
- [TH]
- parts According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* , "part" used in this sense (II.15) refers to "A personal quality or attribute, esp. of an intellectual kind; an ability, gift, or talent."  
- [TH]
- wits To be a "wit" in the eighteenth century was to be clever. But it could also be a term of derision, referring to a set of people who claimed false cleverness. Here, Johnson is suggesting that such people would rather be thought by others to be clever, even at the expense of being thought wicked. See [Jack Lynch's "Guide to Eighteenth-Century Vocabulary"](#), which includes a definition of this word.  
- [TH]
- publisher Publishers John Payne and Joseph Boquet joined forces at mid-century, working from the center of the English book trade in Paternoster Row. The pair published *The Rambler* from 1750, bringing them much profit. It is said that the publishers offered Johnson the astonishing sum of 2 guineas per issue. For a brief overview of the printers, see footnote 2 to a 1750 letter between Samuel Johnson and Charlotte Lennox (4), discussing the publication of her *Poems* , in [Norbert Schürer's \*Charlotte Lennox: Correspondence and Miscellaneous Documents\*](#) .  
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