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The History Of Tom Jones, A Foundling

In Four Volumes

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Chap. I. A wonderful long Chapter concerning the Marvellous; being much the longest of all our introductory Chapters.

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THE
HISTORY
OF A
FOUNDLING.

BOOK VIII.

Containing above two Days.

CHAP. I.

A wonderful long Chapter concerning the Marvellous ; being much the longest of all our introductory Chapters.

AS we are now entering upon a Book, in which the Course of our History will oblige us to relate some Matters of a more strange and surprizing Kind than any which have hitherto occurred, it may not be amiss in the prolegomenous, or introductory Chapter, to say something of that Species of Writing which is called the Marvellous. To this we shall, as well for the Sake of ourselves, as of others, endeavour to set some certain Bounds ; and indeed
nothing

nothing can be more necessary, as Critics * of different Complexions are here apt to run into very different Extremes; for while some are, with M. *Dacier*, ready to allow, that the same Thing which is impossible may be yet probable †, others have so little Historic or Poetic Faith, that they believe nothing to be either possible or probable, the like to which hath not occurred to their own Observation.

First then, I think, it may very reasonably be required of every Writer, that he keeps within the Bounds of Possibility; and still remembers that what it is not possible for Man to perform, it is scarce possible for Man to believe he did perform. This Conviction, perhaps, gave Birth to many Stories of the antient Heathen Deities (for most of them are of poetical Original.) The Poet, being desirous to indulge a wanton and extravagant Imagination, took Refuge in that Power, of the Extent of which his Readers were no Judges, or rather which they imagined to be infinite, and consequently they could not be shocked at any Prodigies related of it. This hath been strongly urged in Defence of *Homer's* Miracles; and it is, perhaps, a Defence; not, as Mr. *Pope* would have it, because *Ulysses* told a Set of foolish Lies to the *Phæacians*, who were a very dull Nation; but because the Poet himself wrote to Heathens, to whom poetical Fables were Articles of Faith. For my own Part, I must confess, so compassionate is my Temper, I wish *Polypheme* had confined himself to his Milk

* By this Word here, and in most other Parts of our Work, we mean every Reader in the World.

† It is happy for M. *Dacier* that he was not an *Irishman*.

Diet, and preserved his Eye; nor could *Ulysses* be much more concerned than myself, when his Companions were turned into Swine by *Circe*, who shewed, I think, afterwards, too much Regard for Man's Flesh to be supposed capable of converting it into Bacon. I wish, likewise, with all my Heart, that *Homer* could have known the Rule prescribed by *Horace*, to introduce supernatural Agents as seldom as possible. We should not then have seen his Gods coming on trivial Errands, and often behaving themselves so as not only to forfeit all Title to Respect, but to become the Objects of Scorn and Derision. A Conduct which must have shocked the Credulity of a pious and sagacious Heathen; and which could never have been defended, unless by agreeing with a Supposition to which I have been sometimes almost inclined, that this most glorious Poet, as he certainly was, had an Intent to burlesque the superstitious Faith of his own Age and Country.

But I have rested too long on a Doctrine which can be of no Use to a Christian Writer: For as he cannot introduce into his Works any of that heavenly Host which make a Part of his Creed; so is it horrid Puerility to search the Heathen Theology for any of those Deities who have been long since dethroned from their Immortality. Lord *Shaftesbury* observes, that nothing is more cold than the Invocation of a Muse by a Modern; he might have added that nothing can be more absurd. A Modern may with much more Elegance invoke a Ballad, as some have thought *Homer* did, or a Mug of Ale with the Author of *Hudibras*; which latter may perhaps have inspired

spired much more Poetry as well as Prose, than all the Liquors of *Hippocrene* or *Helicon*.

The only supernatural Agents which can in any Manner be allowed to us Moderns, are Ghosts; but of these I would advise an Author to be extremely sparing. These are indeed like Arsenic, and other dangerous Drugs in Physic, to be used with the utmost Caution; nor would I advise the Introduction of them at all in those Works, or by those Authors to which, or to whom a Horse-Laugh in the Reader would be any great Prejudice or Mortification.

As for Elves and Fairies, and other such Mummery, I purposely omit the Mention of them, as I should be very unwilling to confine within any Bounds those surprizing Imaginations, for whose vast Capacity the Limits of human Nature are too narrow; whose Works are to be considered as a new Creation; and who have consequently just Right to do what they will with their own.

Man therefore is the highest Subject (unless on very extraordinary Occasions indeed) which presents itself to the Pen of our Historian, or of our Poet; and in relating his Actions, great Care is to be taken, that we do not exceed the Capacity of the Agent we describe.

Nor is Possibility alone sufficient to justify us, we must keep likewise within the Rules of Probability. It is, I think, the Opinion of *Aristotle*; or if not, it is the Opinion of some wise Man, whose Authority will be as weighty, when it is as old; 'that it is no Excuse for a Poet who relates what is incredible, that the thing related is really Matter of Fact.' This may perhaps be allowed true with regard to Poetry, but it may



be thought impracticable to extend it to the Historian: For he is obliged to record Matters as he finds them; though they may be of so extraordinary a Nature, as will require no small Degree of historical Faith to swallow them. Such was the successful Armament of *Xerxes*, described by *Herodotus*, or the successful Expedition of *Alexander* related by *Arrian*. Such of later Years was the Victory of *Agincourt* obtained by *Harry* the Fifth, or that of *Narva* won by *Charles* the Twelfth of *Sweden*. All which Instances, the more we reflect on them, appear still the more astonishing.

Such Facts, however, as they occur in the Thread of the Story; nay, indeed, as they constitute the essential Parts of it, the Historian is not only justifiable in recording as they really happened; but indeed would be unpardonable, should he omit or alter them. But there are other Facts not of such Consequence nor so necessary, which tho' ever so well attested, may nevertheless be sacrificed to Oblivion in Compliance to the Scepticism of a Reader. Such is that memorable Story of the Ghost of *George Villiers*, which might with more Propriety have been made a Present of to *Dr. Drelincourt*, to have kept the Ghost of *Mrs. Veale* Company, at the Head of his Discourse upon Death, than have been introduced into so solemn a Work as the History of the Rebellion.

To say the Truth, if the Historian will confine himself to what really happened, and utterly reject any Circumstance, which, tho' never so well attested, he must be well assured is false, he will sometimes fall into the Marvellous, but never into the Incredible. He will often raise the
Wonder

Wonder and Surprize of his Reader, but never that incredulous Hatred mentioned by *Horace*. It is by falling into Fiction therefore, that we generally offend against this Rule, of deserting Probability, which the Historian seldom if ever quits, till he forsakes his Character, and commences a Writer of Romance. In this, however, those Historians who relate publick Transactions have the Advantage of us who confine ourselves to Scenes of private Life. The Credit of the former is by common Notoriety supported for a long Time; and publick Records, with the concurrent Testimony of many Authors, bear Evidence to their Truth in future Ages. Thus a *Trajan* and an *Antoninus*, a *Nero* and a *Caligula*, have all met with the Belief of Posterity; and no one doubts but that Men so very good, and so very bad, were once the Masters of Mankind.

But we who deal in private Character, who search into the most retired Recesses, and draw forth Examples of Virtue and Vice, from Holes and Corners of the World, are in a more dangerous Situation. As we have no publick Notoriety, no concurrent Testimony, no Records to support and corroborate what we deliver, it becomes us to keep within the Limits not only of Possibility, but of Probability too; and this more especially in painting what is greatly good and amiable. Knavery and Folly, though never so exorbitant, will more easily meet with Assent; for Ill-nature adds great Support and Strength to Faith.

Thus we may, perhaps, with little Danger, relate the History of *Fisher*; who having long owed his Bread to the Generosity of Mr. *Derby*,

and having one Morning received a considerable Bounty from his Hands, yet in order to possess himself of what remained in his Friend's Scrutore, concealed himself in a publick Office of the Temple, through which there was a Passage into Mr. *Derby's* Chambers. Here he overheard Mr. *Derby* for many Hours solacing himself at an Entertainment which he that Evening gave his Friends, and to which *Fisher* had been invited. During all this Time, no tender, no grateful Reflections arose to restrain his Purpose; but when the poor Gentleman had let his Company out through the Office, *Fisher* came suddenly from his lurking Place, and walking softly behind his Friend into his Chamber, discharged a Pistol-Ball into his Head. This may be believed, when the Bones of *Fisher* are as rotten as his Heart. Nay, perhaps, it will be credited that the Villain went two Days afterwards with some young Ladies to the Play of *Hamlet*; and with an unaltered Countenance heard one of the Ladies, who little suspected how near she was to the Person, cry out, ' Good God ! if the Man ' that murdered Mr. *Derby* was now present ! ' Manifesting in this a more seared and callous Conscience than even *Nero* himself; of whom we are told by *Suetonius*, ' that the Consciouf- ' ness of his Guilt, after the Death of his Mother, became immediately intolerable, and so ' continued; nor could all the Congratulations ' of the Soldiers, of the Senate, and the People, ' allay the Horrors of his Conscience.'

But now, on the other Hand, should I tell my Reader, that I had known a Man whose penetrating Genius had enabled him to raise a large Fortune in a Way where no Beginning was chalked

chaulked out to him: That he had done this with the most perfect Preservation of his Integrity, and not only without the least Injustice or Injury to any one individual Person, but with the highest Advantage to Trade, and a vast Increase of the public Revenue: That he had expended one Part of the Income of this Fortune in discovering a Taste superior to most, by Works where the highest Dignity was united with the purest Simplicity, and another Part in displaying a Degree of Goodness superior to all Men, by Acts of Charity to Objects whose only Recommendations were their Merits, or their Wants: That he was most industrious in searching after Merit in Distress, most eager to relieve it, and then as careful (perhaps too careful) to conceal what he had done: That his House, his Furniture, his Garden, his Table, his private Hospitality, and his public Beneficence, all denoted the Mind from which they flowed, and were all intrinsically rich and noble, without Tinsel, or external Ostentation: That he filled every Relation in Life with the most adequate Virtue: That he was most piously religious to his Creator, most zealously loyal to his Sovereign; a most tender Husband to his Wife, a kind Relation, a munificent Patron, a warm and firm Friend, a knowing and a chearful Companion, indulgent to his Servants, hospitable to his Neighbours, charitable to the Poor, and benevolent to all Mankind. Should I add to these the Epithets of wise, brave, elegant, and indeed every other amiable Epithet in our Language, I might surely say,

—*Quis credet? nemo Hercule! nemo;
Vel duo, vel nemo.*

And yet I know a Man who is all I have here described. But a single Instance (and I really know not such another) is not sufficient to justify us, while we are writing to thousands who never heard of the Person, nor of any thing like him. Such *Raræ Aves* should be remitted to the Epitaph-Writer, or to some Poet, who may condescend to hitch him in a Distich, or to slide him into a Rhime with an Air of Carelesness and Neglect, without giving any Offence to the Reader.

In the last Place, the ACTIONS should be such as may not only be within the Compass of human Agency, and which human Agents may probably be supposed to do; but they should be likely for the very Actors and Characters themselves to have performed: For what may be only wonderful and surprizing in one Man, may become improbable, or indeed impossible, when related of another.

This last Requisite is what the dramatic Critics call Conservation of Character; and it requires a very extraordinary Degree of Judgment, and a most exact Knowledge of human Nature.

It is admirably remarked by a most excellent Writer, That Zeal can no more hurry a Man to act in direct Opposition to itself, than a rapid Stream can carry a Boat against its own Current. I will venture to say, that for a Man to act in direct Contradiction to the Dictates of his Nature, is, if not impossible, as improbable and as miraculous as any Thing which can well be conceived. Should the best Parts of the Story of *M. Antoninus* be ascribed to *Nero*, or should the worst Incidents of *Nero's* Life be imputed to *Antoninus*, what would be more shocking to Belief than either Instance? whereas both these being related
of

of their proper Agent, constitute the Truly Marvellous.

Our modern Authors of Comedy have fallen almost universally into the Error here hinted at: Their Heroes generally are notorious Rogues, and their Heroines abandoned Jades, during the first four Acts; but in the fifth, the former become very worthy Gentlemen, and the latter, Women of Virtue and Discretion: Nor is the Writer often so kind as to give himself the least Trouble, to reconcile or account for this monstrous Change and Incongruity. There is, indeed, no other Reason to be assigned for it, than because the Play is drawing to a Conclusion; as if it was no less natural in a Rogue to repent in the last Act of a Play, than in the last of his Life; which we perceive to be generally the Case at *Tyburn*, a Place which might, indeed, close the Scene of some Comedies with much Propriety, as the Heroes in these are most commonly eminent for those very Talents which not only bring Men to the Gallows, but enable them to make an heroic Figure when they are there.

Within these few Restrictions, I think, every Writer may be permitted to deal as much in the Wonderful as he pleases; nay, if he thus keeps within the Rules of Credibility, the more he can surprise the Reader, the more he will engage his Attention, and the more he will charm him. As a Genius of the highest Rank observes in his 5th Chapter of the *Bathos*, 'The great Art of all Poetry is to mix Truth with Fiction; in order to join the Credible with the Surprising.'

For tho' every good Author will confine himself within the Bounds of Probability, it is by no means necessary that his Characters, or his

