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The History Of Tom Jones, A Foundling

In Four Volumes

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Chap. I. An Essay to prove that an Author will write better, for having some Knowledge of the Subject on which he writes.

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THE
HISTORY
OF A
FOUNDLING.

BOOK XIV.

Containing two Days.

CHAP. I.

An Essay to prove that an Author will write the better, for having some Knowledge of the Subject on which he writes.

AS several Gentlemen in these Times, by the wonderful Force of Genius only, without the least Assistance of Learning, perhaps, without being well able to read, have made a considerable Figure in the Republic of Letters; the modern Critics, I am told, have lately begun to assert, that all kind of Learning is entirely useless to a Writer; and, indeed, no

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other than a kind of Fetters on the natural Spritelines and Activity of the Imagination, which is thus weighed down, and prevented from soaring to those high Flights which otherwise it would be able to reach.

This Doctrine, I am afraid, is, at present, carried much too far: For why should Writing differ so much from all other Arts? the Nimbleness of a Dancing-Master is not at all prejudiced by being taught to move; nor doth any Mechanic, I believe, exercise his Tools the worse by having learnt to use them. For my own Part, I cannot conceive that *Homer* or *Virgil* would have writ with more Fire, if, instead of being Masters of all the Learning of their Times, they had been as ignorant as most of the Authors of the present Age. Nor do I believe that all the Imagination, Fire, and Judgment of *Pitt* could have produced those Orations that have made the Senate of *England* in these our Times a Rival in Eloquence to *Greece* and *Rome*, if he had not been so well read in the Writings of *Demosthenes* and *Cicero*, as to have transferred their whole Spirit into his Speeches, and with their Spirit, their Knowledge too.

I would not here be understood to insist on the same Fund of Learning in any of my Bretheren, as *Cicero* persuades us is necessary to the Composition of an Orator. On the contrary, very little Reading is, I conceive, necessary to the Poet, less to the Critic, and the least of all to the Politician. For the first, perhaps, *Bysses*'s Art of Poetry, and a few of our modern Poets, may suffice; for the second, a moderate Heap of Plays; and for the last, an indifferent Collection of political Journals.

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To say the Truth, I require no more than that a Man should have some little Knowledge of the Subject on which he treats, according to the old Maxim of Law, *Quam quisque norit artem in eâ se exercent.* With this alone a Writer may sometimes do tolerably well; and indeed without this, all the other Learning in the World will stand him in little stead.

For Instance let us suppose that *Homer* and *Virgil*, *Aristotle* and *Cicero*, *Thucydides* and *Livy* could have met all together, and have clubbed their several Talents to have composed a Treatise on the Art of Dancing; I believe it will be readily agreed they could not have equalled the excellent Treatise which *Mr. Effex* hath given us on that Subject, entitled, *The Rudiments of genteel Education.* And, indeed, should the excellent *Mr. Broughton* be prevailed on to set *Pist* to Paper, and to complete the abovesaid Rudiments, by delivering down the true Principles of Athletics, I question whether the World will have any Cause to lament, that none of the great Writers, either antient or modern, have ever treated about that noble and useful Art.

To avoid a Multiplicity of Examples in so plain a Case, and to come at once to my Point, I am apt to conceive, that one Reason why many *English* Writers have totally failed in describing the Manners of upper Life, may possibly be, that in Reality they know nothing of it.

This is a Knowledge unhappily not in the Power of many Authors to arrive at. Books will give us a very imperfect Idea of it; nor will the Stage a much better: The fine Gentleman formed upon reading the former will almost always



turn out a Pedant, and he who forms himself upon the latter, a Coxcomb.

Nor are the Characters drawn from these Models better supported. *Vanbrugh* and *Congreve* copied Nature; but they who copy them draw as unlike the present Age, as *Hogarth* would do if he was to paint a Rout or a Drum in the Dresses of *Titian* and of *Vandyke*. In short, Imitation here will not do the Business. The Picture must be after Nature herself. A true Knowledge of the World is gained only by Conversation, and the Manners of every Rank must be seen in order to be known.

Now it happens that this higher Order of Mortals is not to be seen, like all the rest of the Human Species, for nothing, in the Streets, Shops, and Coffee-houses: Nor are they shewn like the upper Rank of Animals, for so much a Piece. In short, this is a Sight to which no Persons are admitted, without one or other of these Qualifications, *viz.* either Birth or Fortune, or what is equivalent to both, the honourable Profession of a Gamester. And, very unluckily for the World, Persons so qualified very seldom care to take upon themselves the bad Trade of Writing; which is generally entered upon by the lower and poorer Sort, as it is a Trade which many think requires no Kind of Stock to set up with.

Hence those strange Monsters in Lace and Embroidery, in Silks and Brocades, with vast Wigs and Hoops; which, under the Name of Lords and Ladies, strut the Stage, to the great Delight of Attornies and their Clerks in the Pit, and of the Citizens and their Apprentices in the Galleries; and which are no more to be found
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in real Life, than the Centaur, the Chimera, or any other Creature of mere Fiction. But to let my Reader into a Secret, this Knowledge of upper Life, though very necessary for preventing Mistakes, is no very great Resource to a Writer whose Province is Comedy, or that Kind of Novels, which, like this I am writing, is of the comic Class.

What Mr. *Pope* says of Women is very applicable to most in this Station, who are indeed so entirely made up of Form and Affectation, that they have no Character at all, at least, none which appears. I will venture to say the highest Life is much the dullest, and affords very little Humour or Entertainment. The various Callings in lower Spheres produce the great Variety of humorous Characters; whereas here, except among the few who are engaged in the Pursuit of Ambition, and the fewer still who have a Relish for Pleasure, all is Vanity and servile Imitation. Dressing and Cards, eating and drinking, bowing and courtesying, make up the Business of their Lives.

Some there are however of this Rank, upon whom Passion exercises its Tyranny, and hurries them far beyond the Bounds which Decorum prescribes; of these, the Ladies are as much distinguished by their noble Intrepidity, and a certain superior Contempt of Reputation, from the frail ones of meaner Degree, as a virtuous Woman of Quality is by the Elegance and Delicacy of her Sentiments from the honest Wife of a Yeoman or Shopkeeper. Lady *Bellaston* was of this intrepid Character; but let not my Country Readers conclude from her, that this is the general Conduct of Women of Fashion, or that

