

From THE COVENT-GARDEN JOURNAL.

Henry Fielding

Table of Contents

<u>From THE COVENT-GARDEN JOURNAL.....</u>	1
<u>Henry Fielding.....</u>	1
<u>No. 33.....</u>	3

From THE COVENT-GARDEN JOURNAL.

Henry Fielding

This page copyright © 2002 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

THE COVENT-GARDEN JOURNAL. No. 10.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 4, 1752.

At nostri proavi Plautinos et numeros, et
Laudavere sales; nimium patienter utrumque,
Ne dicam stulte, mirati.

MODERNISED.

In former times this tasteless, silly town
Too fondly prais'd Tom D'Urfey and Tom Brown.

THE present age seems pretty well agreed in an opinion, that the utmost scope and end of reading is amusement only; and such, indeed, are now the fashionable books, that a reader can propose no more than mere entertainment, and it is sometimes very well for him if he finds even this, in his studies.

Letters, however, were surely intended for a much more noble and profitable purpose than this. Writers are not, I presume, to be considered as mere jack-puddings, whose business it is only to excite laughter: this, indeed, may sometimes be intermixed and served up with graver matters, in order to titillate the palate, and to recommend wholesome food to the mind; and for this purpose it hath been used by many excellent authors: for why, as Horace says, should not any one promulgate truth with a smile on his countenance? Ridicule indeed, as he again intimates, is commonly a stronger and better method of attacking vice than the severer kind of satire.

When wit and humour are introduced for such good purposes, when the agreeable is blended with the useful, then is the writer said to have succeeded in every point. Pleasantry (as the ingenious author of *Clarissa* says of a story) should be made only the vehicle of instruction; and thus romances themselves, as well as epic poems, may become worthy the perusal of the greatest of men: but when no moral, no lesson, no instruction, is conveyed to the reader, where the whole design of the composition is no more than to make us laugh, the writer comes very near to the character of a buffoon; and his admirers, if an old Latin proverb be true, deserve no great compliments to be paid to their wisdom.

After what I have here advanced I cannot fairly, I think, be represented as an enemy to laughter, or to all those kinds of writing that are apt to promote it. On the contrary, few men, I believe, do more admire the works of those great masters who have sent their satire (if I may use the expression) laughing into the world. Such are the great triumvirate, Lucian, Cervantes, and Swift. These authors I shall ever hold in the highest degree of esteem; not indeed for that wit and humour alone which they all so eminently possess, but because they all endeavoured, with the utmost force of their wit and humour, to expose and extirpate those follies and vices which chiefly prevailed in their several countries. I would not be thought to confine wit and humour to these writers. Shakspeare, Moliere, and some other authors, have been blessed with the same talents, and have employed them to the same purposes.

From THE COVENT-GARDEN JOURNAL.

From THE COVENT-GARDEN JOURNAL.

There are some, however, who, though not void of these talents, have made so wretched a use of them, that, had the consecration of their labours been committed to the hands of the hangman, no good man would have regretted their loss; nor am I afraid to mention Rabelais, and Aristophanes himself, in this number. For, if I may speak my opinion freely of these two last writers, and of their works, their design appears to me very plainly to have been to ridicule all sobriety, modesty, decency, virtue, and religion, out of the world. Now, whoever reads over the five great writers first mentioned in this paragraph, must either have a very bad head or a very bad heart if he doth not become both a wiser and a better man.

In the exercise of the mind, as well as in the exercise of the body, diversion is a secondary consideration, and designed only to make that agreeable which is at the same time useful, to such noble purposes as health and wisdom. But what should we say to a man who mounted his chamber-hobby, or fought with his own shadow, for his amusement only? how much more absurd and weak would he appear who swallowed poison because it was sweet?

How differently did Horace think of study from our modern readers!

Quid verum atque decens curo et rogo, et omnis in hoc sum:
Condo et compono, quae mox depromere possim.

Truth and decency are my whole care and enquiry. In this study I am entirely occupied; these I am always laying up, and so disposing that I can at any time draw forth my stores for my immediate use. The whole epistle, indeed, from which I have paraphrased this passage, is a comment upon it, and affords many useful lessons of philosophy.

When we are employed in reading a great and good author, we ought to consider ourselves as searching after treasures, which, if well and regularly laid up in the mind, will be of use to us on sundry occasions in our lives. If a man, for instance, should be overloaded with prosperity or adversity (both of which cases are liable to happen to us), who is there so very wise, or so very foolish, that, if he was a master of Seneca and Plutarch, could not find great matter of comfort and utility from their doctrines? I mention these rather than Plato and Aristotle, as the works of the latter are not, I think, yet completely made English, and, consequently, are less within the reach of most of my countrymen.

But perhaps it may be asked, will Seneca or Plutarch make us laugh? Perhaps not; but if you are not a fool, my worthy friend, which I can hardly with civility suspect, they will both (the latter especially) please you more than if they did. For my own part, I declare, I have not read even Lucian himself with more delight than I have Plutarch; but surely it is astonishing that such scribblers as Tom Brown, Tom D'Urfey, and the wits of our age, should find readers, while the writings of so excellent, so entertaining, and so voluminous an author as Plutarch remain in the world, and, as I apprehend, are very little known.

The truth I am afraid is, that real taste is a quality with which human nature is very slenderly gifted. It is indeed so very rare, and so little known, that scarce two authors have agreed in their notions of it; and those who have endeavoured to explain it to others seem to have succeeded only in shewing us that they know it not themselves. If I might be allowed to give my own sentiments, I should derive it from a nice harmony between the imagination and the judgment; and hence perhaps it is that so few have ever possessed this talent in any eminent degree. Neither of these will alone bestow it; nothing is indeed more common than to see men of very bright imaginations, and of very accurate learning (which can hardly be acquired without judgment), who are entirely devoid of taste; and Longinus, who of all men seems most exquisitely to have possessed it, will puzzle his reader very much if he should attempt to decide whether imagination or judgment shine the brighter in that inimitable critic.

From THE COVENT-GARDEN JOURNAL.

But as for the bulk of mankind, they are clearly void of any degree of taste. It is a quality in which they advance very little beyond a state of infancy. The first thing a child is fond of in a book is a picture, the second is a story, and the third a jest. Here then is the true Pons Asinorum, which very few readers ever get over.

From what I have said it may perhaps be thought to appear that true taste is the real gift of nature only; and if so, some may ask to what purpose have I endeavoured to show men that they are without a blessing which it is impossible for them to attain?

Now, though it is certain that to the highest consummation of taste, as well as of every other excellence, nature must lend much assistance, yet great is the power of art, almost of itself, or at best with only slender aids from nature; and, to say the truth, there are very few who have not in their minds some small seeds of taste. All men, says Cicero, have a sort of tacit sense of what is right or wrong in arts and sciences, even without the help of arts. This surely it is in the power of art very greatly to improve. That most men, therefore, proceed no farther than as I have above declared, is owing either to the want of any, or (which is perhaps yet worse) to an improper education.

I shall probably, therefore, in a future paper, endeavour to lay down some rules by which all men may acquire at least some degree of taste. In the meanwhile, I shall (according to the method observed in inoculation) recommend to my readers, as a preparative for their receiving my instructions, a total abstinence from all bad books. I do therefore most earnestly intreat all my young readers that they would cautiously avoid the perusal of any modern book till it hath first had the sanction of some wise and learned man; and the same caution I propose to all fathers, mothers, and guardians.

Evil communications corrupt good manners, is a quotation of St Paul from Menander. *Evil books corrupt at once both our manners and our taste.*

* * * * *

No. 33.

SATURDAY, APRIL 23, 1752.

Odi profanum vulgas. HOR.

I hate profane rascals.

SIR, In this very learned and enlightened age, in which authors are almost as numerous as booksellers, I doubt not but your correspondents furnish you with a sufficient quantity of waste paper. I perhaps may add to the heap; for, as men do not always know the motive of their own actions, I may possibly be induced, by the same sort of vanity as other puny authors have been, to desire to be in print. But I am very well satisfied with you for my judge, and if you should not think proper to take any notice of the hint I have here sent you, I shall conclude that I am an impertinent correspondent, but that you are a judicious and impartial critic. In my own defence, however, I must say that I am never better pleased than when I see extraordinary abilities employed in the support of His honour and religion, who has so bountifully bestowed them. It is for this reason that I wish you would take some notice of the character, or rather story, here sent you. In my travels westward last summer I lay at an inn in Somersetshire, remarkable for its pleasant situation and the obliging behaviour of the landlord, who, though a downright rustic, had an awkward sort of politeness arising from his good-nature that was very pleasing, and, if I may be allowed the expression, was a sort of good-breeding undrest. As I intended to make a pretty long journey the next day, I rose time enough to behold that glorious luminary the sun set out on his course, which, by-the-by, is one of the finest sights the eye can behold; and, as it is a thing seldom seen by people of fashion, unless it be at

the theatre at Covent-garden, I could not help laying some stress upon it here. The kitchen in this inn was a very pleasant room; I therefore called for some tea, sat me in the window that I might enjoy the prospect which the country afforded, and a more beautiful one is not in the power of imagination to frame. This house was situated on the top of a hill; and for two miles below it meadows, enlivened with variety of cattle, and adorned with a greater variety of flowers, first caught my sight. At the bottom of this vale ran a river which seemed to promise coolness and refreshment to the thirsty cattle. The eye was next presented with fields of corn that made a kind of an ascent which was terminated by a wood, at the top of which appeared a verdant hill situate as it were in the clouds where the sun was just arrived, and, peeping o'er the summit, which was at this time covered with dew, gilded it over with his rays and terminated my view in the most agreeable manner in the world. In a word, the elegant simplicity of every object round me filled my heart with such gratitude, and furnished my mind with such pleasing meditations, as made me thank Heaven I was born. But this state of joyous tranquillity was not of long duration: I had scarce begun my breakfast, when my ears were saluted with a genteel whistle, and the noise of a pair of slippers descending the staircase; and soon after I beheld a contrast to my former prospect, being a very beauish gentleman, with a huge laced hat on, as big as Pistol's in the play; a wig somewhat dishevelled, and a face which at once gave you a perfect idea of emptiness, assurance, and intemperance. His eyes, which before were scarce open, he fixt on me with a stare which testified surprise, and his coat was immediately thrown open to display a very handsome second-hand gold-laced waistcoat. In one hand he had a pair of saddlebags, and in the other a hanger of mighty size, both of which, with a graceful G d d n you, he placed upon a chair. Then, advancing towards the landlord, who was standing by me, he said, By G d, landlord, your wine is damnable strong. I don't know, replied the landlord; it is generally reckoned pretty good, for I have it all from London. Pray, who is your wine merchant? says the man of importance. A very great man, says the landlord, in his way; perhaps you may know him, sir; his name is Kirby. Ah, what! honest Tom? he and I have cracked many a bottle of claret together; he is one of the most considerable merchants in the city; the dog is hellish poor, damnable poor, for I don't suppose he is worth a farthing more than a hundred thousand pound; only a plum, that's all; he is to be our lord-mayor next year. I ask pardon, sir, that is not the man, for our Mr Kirby's name is not Thomas but Richard. Ay! says the gentleman, that's his brother; they are partners together. I believe, says the landlord, you are out, sir, for that gentleman has no brother. D n your nonsense, with you and your outs! says the beau; as if I should not know better than you country puts; I who have lived in London all my lifetime. I ask a thousand pardons, says the landlord; I hope no offence, sir. No, no, cries the other; we gentlemen know how to make allowance for your country breeding. Then stepping to the kitchen door, with an audible voice he called the ostler, and in a very graceful accent said, D n your blood, you cock-eyed son of a bitch, bring me my boots! did not you hear me call? Then turning to the landlord said, Faith! that Mr What-de-callum, the exciseman, is a damned jolly fellow. Yes, sir, says the landlord, he is a merryish sort of a man. But, says the gentleman, as for that schoolmaster, he is the queerest bitch I ever saw; he looks as if he could not say boh to a goose. I don't know, sir, says the landlord; he is reckoned to be a desperate good schollard about us, and the gentry likes him vastly, for he understands the measurement of land and timber, knows how to make dials and such things; and for ciphering few can outdo 'en. Ay! says the gentleman, he does look like a cipher indeed, for he did not speak three words all last night. The ostler now produced the boots, which the gentleman taking in his hand, and having placed himself in the chair, addressed in the following speech: My good friends, Mr Boots, I tell you plainly that, if you plague me so damnably as you did yesterday morning, by G I'll commit you to the flames; stap my vituals! as my lord Huntingdon says in the play. He then looked full in my face, and asked the landlord if he had ever been at Drury-lane playhouse; which he answered in the negative. What! says he, did you never hear talk of Mr Garrick and king Richard? No, sir, says the landlord. By G, says the gentleman, he is the cleverest fellow in England. He then spouted a speech out of King Richard, which begins, Give me an horse, &c. There, says he, that, that is just like Mr Garrick. Having pleased himself vastly with this performance, he shook the landlord by the hand with great good-humour, and said, By G you seem to be an honest fellow, and good blood; if you'll come and see me in London, I'll give you your skinful of wine, and treat you with a play and a whore every night you stay. I'll show you how it is to live, my boy. But here, bring me some paper, my girl; come, let us have one of your love-letters to air my boots. Upon which the landlord presented him with a piece of an old newspaper. D n you! says the gent, this is not half enough; have you never a Bible or Common Prayer-book in the house? Half a dozen

chapters of Genesis, with a few prayers, make an excellent fire in a pair of boots. Oh! Lord forgive you! says the landlord; sure you would not burn such books as those? No! cries the spark; where was you born? Go into a shop of London and buy some butter or a quartern of tea, and then you'll see what use is made of these books. Ay! says the landlord, we have a saying here in our country that 'tis as sure as the devil is in London, and if he was not there they could not be so wicked as they be. Here a country fellow who had been standing up in one corner of the kitchen eating of cold bacon and beans, and who, I observed, trembled at every oath this spark swore, took his dish and pot, and marched out of the kitchen, fearing, as I afterwards learnt, that the house would fall down about his ears, for he was sure, he said, That man in the gold-laced hat was the devil. The young spark, having now displayed all his wit and humour, and exerted his talents to the utmost, thought he had sufficiently recommended himself to my favour and convinced me he was a gentleman. He therefore with an air addressed himself to me, and asked me which way I was travelling? To which I gave him no answer. He then exalted his voice; but, at my continuing silent, he asked the landlord if I was deaf. Upon which the landlord told him he did not believe the gentleman was dunch, for that he talked very well just now. The man of wit whispered in the landlord's ear, and said, I suppose he is either a parson or a fool. He then drank a dram, observing that a man should not cool too fast; paid sixpence more than his reckoning, called for his horse, gave the ostler a shilling, and galloped out of the inn, thoroughly satisfied that we all agreed with him in thinking him a clever fellow and a man of great importance. The landlord, smiling, took up his money, and said he was a comical gentleman, but that it was a thousand pities he swore so much; if it was not for that, he was a very good customer, and as generous as a prince, for that the night before he had treated everybody in the house. I then asked him if he knew that comical gentleman, as he called him? No, really, sir, said the landlord, though a gentleman was saying last night that he was a sort of rider or rideout to a linendraper at London. This, Mr Censor, I have since found to be true; for, having occasion to buy some cloth, I went last week into a linendraper's shop, in which I found a young fellow whose decent behaviour and plain dress shewed he was a tradesman. Upon looking full in his face I thought I had seen it before; nor was it long before I recollected where it was, and that this was the same beau I had met with in Somersetshire. The difference in the same man in London, where he was known, and in the country, where he was a stranger, was beyond expression; and, was it not impertinent to make observations to you, I could enlarge upon this sort of behaviour; for I am firmly of opinion that there is neither spirit nor good sense in oaths, nor any wit or humour in blasphemy. But as vulgar errors require an abler pen than mine to correct them, I shall leave that task to you, and am, sir, your humble servant, R. S.