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A Vindication of the Press

Daniel Defoe

A Vindication of the Press (1718)

With an Introduction by Otho Clinton Williams

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A Vindication of the Press

INTRODUCTION

A Vindication of the Press is one of Defoe's most characteristic pamphlets and for this reason as well as for its rarity deserves reprinting. Besides the New York Public Library copy, here reproduced, I know of but one copy, which is in the Indiana University Library. Neither the Bodleian nor the British Museum has a copy.

Like many items in the Defoe canon, this tract must be assigned to him on the basis of internal evidence; but this evidence, though circumstantial, is convincing. W.P. Trent included A Vindication in his bibliography of Defoe in the CHEL, and later bibliographers of Defoe have followed him in accepting it. Since the copy here reproduced was the one examined by Professor Trent, the following passage from his ms. notes is of interest:

The tract was advertised, for "this day," in the St. James Evening Post, April 19-22, 1718. It is not included in the chief lists of Defoe's writings, but it has been sold as his, and the only copy I have seen, one kindly loaned me by Dr. J.E. Spingarn, once belonged to some eighteenth century owner, who wrote Defoe's name upon it. I was led by the advertisement mentioned above to seek the pamphlet, thinking it might be Defoe's; but I failed to secure a sight of it until Professor Spingarn asked me whether in my opinion the ascription to Defoe was warranted, and produced his copy.

Perhaps the most striking evidence for Defoe's authorship of A Vindication is the extraordinary reference to his own natural parts and to the popularity of The True-Born Englishman some seventeen years after that topical poem had appeared [pp. 29f.]. Defoe was justly proud of this verse satire, one of his most successful works, and referred to it many times in later writings; it is hard to believe, however, that anyone but Defoe would have praised it in such fulsome terms in 1718.

The general homeliness and facility of the style, together with characteristic phrases which occur in his other writings, indicate Defoe's hand. Likewise homely similitudes and comparisons, specific parallels with his known work, and characteristic treatment of matter familiar in his other works, all furnish evidence of his authorship of this pamphlet.

Just what motive caused Defoe to write A Vindication of the Press is not clear. Unlike his earlier An Essay on the Regulation of the Press (1704), A Vindication does not seem to have been occasioned by a specific situation, and in it Defoe is not alone concerned with freedom of the press, but writes on a more general and discursive level. His opening paragraph states that "The very great Clamour against some late Performances of Authorship, and the unprecedented Criticisms introduc'd" make such an essay as he writes "absolutely necessary." Yet there is no clear indication of just what works occasion this necessity. The ironic reference to Mr. Dennis at the end of the first paragraph, taken together with the praise of Mr. Pope's translation of Homer and the allusion to "the malicious and violent Criticisms of a certain Gentleman in its Disfavour" [p. 23], might suggest that Defoe had in mind Dennis' Remarks upon Mr. Pope's Translation of Homer, but even the entire body of writings attacking Pope's Homer would hardly seem sufficient to give point to this somewhat omnibus and unfocused essay.

Equally suggestive, perhaps, are Defoe's references to the Bangorian controversy and to Bishop Hoadley [pp. 10, 23]. This controversy raged from 1717 to 1720 and produced a spate of pamphlets (to which Defoe contributed), many of which were marked by heated argument and acrimony. Defoe, with his liking for moderation, no doubt intended to

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make an oblique criticism of the license of many of the Bangorian tracts. But these tracts are certainly not advanced as the prime occasion for A Vindication.

Defoe points out in the first section of his essay how important is freedom of the press as the foundation of the "valuable liberties" of Englishmen. I have been unable to find any reference to a specific threat of regulation of the press at this time that might have occasioned A Vindication. Nevertheless, it is possible that sentiment for control of the press, perhaps incited by the Bangorian controversy, was felt in 1718 and may have been a contributing motive to the composition of this tract. Whatever the immediate motives for writing it may have been, the variety of its contents suggests that Defoe saw an opportunity to turn a penny, to express himself on a number of his pet subjects, and to defend his own position as a professional writer.

A Vindication is made up of three clearly marked sections: in the first the author vindicates the usefulness of writing; in the second he discusses the usefulness--it would be more exact to say the harmfulness--of criticism; in the third he expatiates upon the qualifications of authors. One may admit at once the comparative worthlessness of the pamphlet as a contribution to criticism or critical theory. Defoe's comments upon specific writers are thoroughly conventional and commonplace, as may be seen from a glance at his remarks about Milton, Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, and others on p. 12.

Of more interest is his very high praise of Dryden, "a Man for Learning and universal writing in Poetry, perhaps the greatest that England has produc'd" [p. 15], and his comment upon the critical detraction from which he suffered. He compares Pope, interestingly enough, with Dryden, remarking that Pope ("a Person tho' Inferior to Mr. Dryden, yet speaking Impartially has few Superiors in this Age") also is persecuted by envy; and he has generous praise for that poet's translation of Homer. One may note that Defoe avoids the shortcomings of the critics whom he condemns for judging according to party. He distributes his praise indiscriminately between whig and Tory writers. In short, his essay hardly does more than confirm the critical commonplaces of the time and attest to the catholicity of the author's taste.

Of particular interest for students of Defoe is the paragraph [p. 21] in which Defoe defends the hack-writers who must write for subsistence. One should not expect their writings, which are necessarily numerous, to be as correct and finished as they might be. After comparing their pens to prostitutes because of their venality, he claims, in a half-ironic tone, for both authors and booksellers the liberty of writing and printing for either or both sides without ignominy. After all, they must write and print to live. Such practice is certainly, he observes, no more unjust or disreputable than other ways of gaining wealth such as one finds in Exchange-Alley.

This paragraph gains point when one remembers that Defoe had served both whig and Tory governments. In 1718, as letters written to Lord Stanhope in that very year testify, he was engaged in the perhaps dubious business of masquerading as a Tory, while actually in the service of the whig ministry, to take the "sting" out of the more violent Tory periodicals; and he was much concerned with the danger of his ambiguous position. In December of 1717 he had been identified as a writer for Mist's weekly Journal, the leading Tory paper, and was subjected to growing attacks in the whig press. One can hardly doubt that this paragraph is a thinly veiled defense of his own practice as a professional journalist.

It is no surprise to find the author of A Vindication, in discussing the qualifications of writers, advocating the importance of genius and "Natural Parts" above mere learning. He instances the author of The

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True-Born Englishman_ and Shakespeare, the former "Characteriz'd as a Person of Little Learning, but of prodigious Natural Parts" and the latter having "but a small share of Literature." The further example of the literary achievements of the "Fair Sex," who had, of course, no university education, reminds one of Defoe's championship elsewhere of women. The business of a writer is "to please and inform," and the general implication is that genius is more necessary to this end than learning.

Also characteristic of Defoe is his emphasis upon the advantage to an author of conversation, "the Aliment of Genius, the Life of all airy Performances" [p.32]. Likewise, his digression upon education [pp. 34f.], his charge that people of quality in England all too often neglect their children's education, his remarks upon the advantages of travel and the need of training in the vernacular, all will be familiar to readers of Defoe.

A Vindication of the Press is chiefly important for the corroboration of our knowledge of Daniel Defoe. It presents nothing that is new, but it gives further evidence of his pride in authorship, of his rationalization of his actions as a professional journalist, and of his belief in the importance of a free press. Many of his characteristic ideas are repeated with his usual consistency in point of view. Although the critical comments in the essay are thoroughly conventional, they offer evidence of contemporary literary judgments and reveal Defoe as a well-informed man of moderation and commonsense, though certainly not as a profound critic. In the catholicity of his tastes and interests Defoe is far ahead of his Puritan fellows, and his essay may be taken as one indication of the growing interest of the middle-classes for whom he wrote in the greater world of literature. As Professor Trent remarks in his ms. notes, "Defoe rarely wrote a tract without introducing something worthy of attention and comment, and the present pamphlet is no exception to the rule."

I should like to thank Dr. Henry C. Hutchins for his generosity in making available to me Professor Trent's ms. notes on _A Vindication_ and Dr. John Robert Moore for his kindness, criticisms, and suggestions.

Otho Clinton Williams
San Jose State College

Vindication of the Press:

OR, AN ESSAY ON THE _Usefulness of Writing_, ON CRITICISM, AND THE
Qualification of AUTHORS.

Wherein is shewn,

That 'tis for the Advantage of all Governments to encourage writing;
otherwise a Nation would never be secure from the Attempts of its most
secret Enemies; Barbarous and prejudic'd Criticisms on Writings are
detected, and Criticism is justly stated. With an Examination into
what Genius's and Learning are necessary for an AUTHOR in all manner
of Performances.

LONDON:

Printed for _T. Warner_, at the _Black-Boy_ in Pater-Noster-Row.
MDCCXVIII.

[Price Sixpence.]

[ILLUSTRATION]

A Vindication of the Press

A Vindication of the PRESS:

OR, AN ESSAY ON THE Usefulness of Writing, &c.

The very great Clamour against some late Performances or Authorship, and the unpresidented Criticisms introduc'd, render a Treatise on the Usefulness of Writing in general so absolutely necessary, that the Author of this Essay has not the least Apprehensions of Displeasure from the most inveterate, but on the contrary, doubts not an Approbation, even of the Great Mr. Dennis.

For the Usefulness of Writing in the Church, I shall trace back to the Annals of our Saviour and his Apostles. Had not Writing been at that Time in use, what Obscurity might we reasonably have expected the whole World would have labour'd under at this Day? when, notwithstanding the Infidels possess such vast Regions, and Religion in its Purity shines but in a small Quarter of the Globe. 'Tis easy-to imagine, that without the New-Testament every Person of excellency in Literature, and compleat in Hypocrisy, either out of Interest, or other worldly Views, would have taken the Liberty to deny the most Sacred Traditions, and to have impos'd upon the Populace as many Religions as they pleas'd, and that the ignorant Multitude would easily acquiesce, as they do in Turkey, and other distant Parts of the World, which deny the Divinity of our Saviour.

What fatal Errors, Schisms, and concomitant Evils would have been introduc'd, must be apparent to all Persons of the least Penetration. The Quakers might at this Time possibly have been our National Church, and our present Happiness, with regard to those Considerations, can no way be more lively and amply demonstrated than in taking a step at once from Mr. Penn's Conventicle to the Cathedral Church of St. Pauls.

The Regularity and heavenly Decorum of the latter, give an Awe and Transport to the Audience at the same time they ornament Religion; and the Confusion of the former fully shews, that as it only serves to amuse a Crowd of ignorant Wretches, unless meerly with temporal Views (Sectarists generally calculating Religion for their Interests) so it gives a License to all manner of Indecencies, and the Congregations usually resort thither with the same Regard as a Rake of the Town would do to Mother Wybourn's, or any publick Place of Diversion.

Whether it be not natural to have expected a Confusion in the Church, equal to that of the worst Sectaries in the world, had not the Use of Writing been early attain'd and practis'd, I appeal to the Breast of every unprejudic'd Reader; and if so, how infinitely happy are we by the Use of our Sacred Writings, which clear up the Cloud of Ignorance and Error, and give a Sanction to our Religion, besides the Satisfaction we of the Church of England have in this felicitous Contemplation, that our Religion, since the Reformation, strictly observ'd, is the nearest that of our Saviour and his Apostles of any Profession of Faith upon Earth.

'Tis owing to Writing, that we enjoy the purest Religion in the world, and exclusive of it, there would have been no possibility of transmitting down entirely those valuable Maxims of Solomon, and the Sufferings of the Righteous Job, in the old Testament; which are so extensive to all Parts and Stations of Life, that as they are infinitely preferable to all other writings of the kind, so they afford the greatest Comfort and Repose in the Vicisitudes incident to Humane Nature.

How far Theology is improv'd from those inestimable writings, I need not to enlarge, since it is highly conspicuous that they are the Foundation of all Divine Literature; and how ignorant and imperfect we

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should have been without them, is no great difficulty to explain; and who can sufficiently admire the Psalter of David, which fills the Soul with Rapture, and gives an Anticipation of sublimest Joys.

Besides the Advantages of Sacred Writings in the Cause of Religion; 'tis chiefly owing to Writing, that we have our most valuable Liberties preserv'd; and 'tis observable, that the Liberty of the Press is no where restrain'd but in Roman Catholick Countries, or Kingdoms, or States Exercising an Absolute Power.

In the Kingdom of France writings relating to the Church and State are prohibited upon the severest Penalties, and the Consequences of those Laws are very Obvious to all Persons of Discernment here; they serve to secure the Subject in the utmost Obscurity, and as it were Effect an entire Ignorance, whereby an exorbitant Power is chearfully submitted to, and a perfect Obedience paid to Tyranny; and the Ignorance and Superstition of these People so powerfully prevail, that the greatest Oppressor is commonly the most entirely Belov'd, which I take to be sufficiently ently Illustrated in the late Lewis the Fourteenth, whose Arbitrary Government was so far from Diminishing the Affections of his Subjects, that it highten'd their Esteem for their Grand Monarch.

But of late the populace of France are not so perfectly enclouded with Superstition, and if a young Author can pretend to Divine, I think it is easy to foresee that the papal Power will in a very short space be considerably lessen'd if not in a great measure disregarded in that Kingdom, by the intestine Jarrs and Discords of their Parties for Religion, and the Desultory Judgments of the most considerable Prelates.

The best Support of an Arbitrary Power is undoubtedly Ignorance, and this cannot be better cultivated than by an Absolute Denial of Printing; the Oppressions of the Popularity cannot be thoroughly Stated, or Liberty in general Propagated without the use of the Press in some measure, and therefore the Subjects must inevitably submit to such Ordinances as an Ambitious or Ignorant Monarch and his Tyrannical Council shall think fit to impose upon them, how Arbitrary soever: And the Hands of the Patriots and Men of Eminence who should Illuminate the Age, and open the Eyes of the deluded People are thereby tied up, and the Infelicity of the Populace so compleat that they are incapable of either seeing their approaching Misery, or having a redress of present Grievances.

In Constantinople I think they have no such thing as Printing allow'd on any Account whatsoever; all their Publick Acts relating to the Church and State are recorded in writing by expert Amanuensis's, so very strict are the Divan and great Council of the Sultan in prohibiting the Publication of all manner of Writings: They are very sensible had Persons a common Liberty of stating their own Cases, they might Influence the Publick so far, that the Yoke of Tyranny must sink if not be rendred insupportable; and this is regarded in all Kingdoms and Countries upon Earth Govern'd by a Despotick Power.

To what I have already offer'd in favour of the Press, there may be Exceptions taken by some Persons in the world; and as it is my Intentions to solve all Objections that may be rais'd to what I advance, as I proceed, I think I cannot too early make known, that I am apprehensive the following Observations may be made; viz. that a general License of the Press is of such a fatal Tendency, that it causes Uneasinesses in the State, Confusions in the Church, and is destructive sometimes even to Liberty, by putting the ruling Powers upon making Laws of Severity, on a Detection of ill Designs against the State, otherwise never intended.

In answer to which, I shall give the following Particulars: In respect to Uneasinesses in the State, it may not be amiss to premise, that it is esteem'd by Men of Penetration, no small wisdom in the present

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Administration, to bestow Preferments on the brightest and most enterprising Authors of the Age; but whether it be so much out of a Regard to the Service they are capable of to the State in their Employs, as to their Writing for the Government, and to answer treasonable Pamphlets, poison'd Pens, &c. I do not take upon me to determine. I must confess, where a Faction prevails, it gives a sensible Monarch some Pain to see Disafection propagated by the Press, without any manner of Restraint; but then, on the other Hand, such a Ruler is thereby let into the Secrets of the Faction, he may with facility penetrate into their deepest Intrigues, and be enabled to avert an impending Storm. Upon approach of a Rebellion, he will be thoroughly sensible from what Quarter his greatest Danger is to be expected, whereby it will be entirely his own Fault, if he be without a sufficient Guard against it, which he could not be appriz'd of (with any certainty) without a general Liberty of writing: And tho' Slander must occasion a great deal of Uneasiness to a crown'd Head, the Power of bestowing Favours on Friends only is no small Satisfaction to the Prince, and a sufficient Punishment to his Enemies. And it is my Opinion, that the Grand Sultan, and other Eastern Potentates, would be in a great deal less danger of Deposing, (a Practice very frequent of late) if in some measure a Liberty of writing was allow'd; for the Eyes of the People would be open, as well for as against their Prince, and their fearing a worse Evil should succeed, might make them easy under a present Oppression.

As for Confusion in the Church, I look upon this to be the greatest Objection that can be raised; but then it must be allow'd, that without writing the Reformation (the Glory of our Religion) could never have been effected; and in respect to religious Controversies, tho' I own they are seldom attended with good Consequences, yet I must beg leave to observe, that as the Age we now live in, is more bright and shining in substantial Literature than any preceding Century, so the generality of Mankind are capable of judging with such an Exactness as to avoid a Bad; not but, I confess, I think many of the Persons concern'd in the Controversy lately on foot, with relation to the Bishop of Bangor's Sermon, preach'd before His Majesty, deserve to be stigmatiz'd, as well for their indecent Heat, as for the Latitude taken with regard to the Holy Scriptures. And for the last Objection, I never knew that writing was any ways destructive to Liberty, unless it was in a Pamphlet, [entitled King-Killing no Murder] which 'tis said occasion'd the Death of Oliver Cromwel.

These are the Uses of writings in the Church and the State, with Answers to such Objections as may be made against them, not to mention particularly in respect to the former, the writings of the Fathers, and even of some Heathen Philosophers, such as Seneca, &c. And besides the valuable Performances of our most eminent Divines in all Ages, as Dr. Taylor, Bishop Usher, Tillotson, Beveridge &c. and The whole Duty of Man, &c. in our private Devotions. I now proceed to the Uses in Arts and Sciences.

How much Posterity will be oblig'd to the Great Sir Isaac Newton and Doctor Flamstead for their Mathematical writings, is more easy to imagine than the Improvements which may be made from thence; there's a great deal of Reason to believe, that if a future Age produces a Successor to Sir Isaac, (at present I take it, there's none in the world) that not only the Longitude at Sea will be discover'd, but the perpetual Motion, so many Ages sought after, found out.

How much are the Gentlemen of the Law oblig'd to my Lord Littleton's Institutes and Coke's Commentaries thereupon? writing in this Profession is esteem'd so Essential, that there's seldom a Judge quits the Stage of Life, without a voluminous Performance, as a Legacy to the World, and there's rarely a Term without some Production of the Press: The Numbers of these writings are very much augmented by the various Reports of Cases from Time to Time made; and these seem to be entirely necessary by way of Precedent, as a discreet and cautious Justice will not take upon him to determine a Cause of difficulty

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without the Authority of a Precedent.

And in the Practice of Physick, are not the present Professors infinitely obliged to the Discoveries and Recipes of Aristotle, Galen, &c? How much the world is oblig'd to the Declamations of Tully, Cicero, for Oratory; to the famous writings of Milton for the Foundation of Divine Poetry; Poetry in general is improv'd from the writings of Chaucer, Spencer, and others; Dramatick Entertainments perfected by Shakespear; our Language and Poetry refin'd by Dryden; the Passions rais'd by Otway; the Inclination mov'd by Cowley; and the world diverted by Hudibras, (not to mention the Perfections of Mr. Addison, and several others of this Age) I leave to the Determination of every impartial Reader.

'Tis by Writing that Arts and Sciences are Cultivated, Navigation and Commerce (by which alone wealth is attain'd) to the most distant parts of the world Improv'd, Geography Compleated, the Languages, Customs and Manners of Foreign Nations known; and there is scarce any one Mechanick calling of Note or Signification, but Treatises have been written upon, to transmit the valuable Observations of Ingenious Artificers to the latest Posterity.

There might be innumerable Instances given of the Advantages of Writings in all Cases, but I shall satisfy my self with the particulars already advanc'd, and proceed to such Objections, as I am apprehensive may be made relating to the writings last mentioned. First, it may be Objected that the numerous writings tend more to confound the Reader, than to inform him; to this I answer, that it is impossible there can be many writings produced, but there must be some valuable Informations communicated, easy to be collected by a judicious Reader; tho' there may be a great deal superfluous, and notwithstanding it is a considerable Charge to purchase a useful Library, (the greatest Grievance) yet we had better be at that Expencc, than to have no Books publish'd, and consequently no Discoveries; the same Reason may be given where Books in the Law, Physick, &c. are imperfect in some Part, and tend to the misleading Persons; for of two Evils the old Maxim is, always chuse the least. The only Objection that I do not take upon me to Defend, is, that against Lewd and obscene Poetry in general; (for sometimes the very great Wit may make it excuseable) which in my Opinion will admit of but a slender Apology in its Defence.

The use of writing is Illustrated in the following Lines, which conclude my first Head of this Essay.

_By ancient Writing Knowledge is convey'd,
Of famous Arts the best Foundation laid;
By these the Cause of Liberty remains,
Are Nations free'd from Arbitrary Chains,
From Errors still our Church is purified,
The State maintained, with justice on its Side._

I now advance to my second Particular, Criticism.

The fatal Criticism or Damnation which the writings of some Authors meet with thro' their Obscurity, want of Friends and Interest in the world, &c. is very discouraging to the Productions of Literature: It is the greatest difficulty immaginable, for an obscure Person to Establish a Reputation in any sort of writing; he's a long time in the same Condition with Sisyphus, rolling a heavy Stone against an aspiring Mount which perpetually descends again; it must be to his benign Stars, some lucky Subject suiting the Humour of the Times, more than the Beauty of his Performance, which he will be oblig'd for his Rise: And in this Age Persons in general, are so Estrang'd from bare Merit, that an Author destitute of Patronage will be equally Unsuccessful to a Person without Interest at Court, (and you'll as rarely find the Friendship of an Orestes, as the Chastity of Penelope) When a Man of Fortune has no other Task, than to give out

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a stupid Performance to be of his own Composing, and he's immediately respected as a Celebrated Writer: And if a Man has the good Fortune to hit the capricious Humour of the Age; after he has attained a Reputation with the utmost Difficulty, he's sure to meet with the severest Treatment, from a herd of Malicious and Implacable Scriblers.

This was the Case of the late Mr. Dryden, a Man for Learning and universal Writing in Poetry, perhaps the Greatest that England has produc'd; he was Persecuted by Envy, with the utmost Inveteracy for many Years in Succession: And is the Misfortune at this Juncture of Mr. Pope, a Person tho' Inferior to Mr. Dryden, yet speaking Impartially has few Superiors in this Age: From these Considerations it is Evident, (tho' it seems a Paradox) that it is a Reputation to be Scandaliz'd, as a Person in all Cases of this Nature is allow'd some Merit, when Envy attacks him, and the world might not be sensible of it in General, without a publick Encounter in Criticism; and many Authors would be Buried in Oblivion were they not kept alive by Clamours against their Performances.

The Criticks in this Age are arriv'd to that consummate Pitch of ill-nature, that they'll by no means permit any Person the favour to Blunder but their mighty selves, and are in all respects, except the Office of a Critick, in some measure ill Writers; I have known an unnatural Brother of the Quill causless condemn Language in the Writings of other Persons, when his own has really been the meanest; to Accuse others of Inconsistency with the utmost Vehemence, when his own Works have not been without their Æra's, and to find fault with every Line in a Poem, when he has been wholly at a loss to Correct, or at least not capable of writing one single Page of it.

There are another sort of Criticks, which are equally ill-natur'd to these I have mention'd, tho' in all other respects vastly inferior to them: They are such as no sooner hear of a Performance compos'd by a Juvenile Author, or one not hitherto known in the way of writing he has undertaken; but immediately without reading a Line give it a Stamp of Damnation; (not considering that the first Performance of an Author in any way of writing done carefully, is oftentimes the best) and if they had thoroughly perus'd it, they were no ways capable of Judging of either the Sense, Language, or Beauty of any one Paragraph; and what is still worse, these ignorant Slanderers of writings frequently take what other Persons report for Authority, who know as little, or perhaps are more Ignorant than themselves, so little Regard have they to the Reputation of an Author.

And sometimes you'll find a pert Bookseller give himself the Airs of Judging a Performance so far, as to Condemn the Correctness of what he knows nothing of these there's a pretender to Authorship in the City, who Rules the young Fry of Biblioples about the Royal-Exchange.

But the Booksellers in general, (tho' they commonly Judge of the Goodness of writings, by the greatness of the Sale,) are Very sensible that their greatest Security in respect to the Performance of any Work, is the Qualification of the Person that Composes it, the Confidence they can repose in him; his Capacity, Industry and Veracity; And the Author's Reputation is so far concern'd in a Performance, which he owns that the Bookseller will sooner rely upon that, than his own Judgment.

To descend still to a lower Order of Criticks, you'll find very few Coffee-Houses in this opulent City without an illiterate Mechanick, Commenting upon the most material Occurrences, and Judging the Actions of the greatest Councils in Europe, and rarely a Victualing House, but you meet with a Tinker, a Cobler, or a Porter, Criticizing upon the Speeches of Majesty, or the writings of the most celebrated Men of the Age.

This is entirely owing to Party, and there is such a Contagion diffuses it self thro' the greatest Part of the world at this Time,

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that it is impossible for a Man to acquire a universal Character in Writing, as it is inconsistent for him to engage in Writings for both Parties at one and the same Time, (whatever he may do alternately) without which such a Character is not attainable; and these contending Parties carry Things to that Extremity, that they'll by no means allow the least Merit in the most perfect Author, who adheres to the opposite Side; his Performances will be generally unheeded, if not blasted, and frequently damn'd, as if, like Coelus, he were capable of producing nothing but Monsters; he shall be in all Respects depress'd and debas'd, at the same time an illiterate Scribler, an auspicious Ideot of their own (with whose Nonsense they are never sated) shall be extoll'd to the Skies: Herein, if a Man has all the Qualifications necessary in Poetry, as an Elegance of Style, an Excellency of Wit, and a Nobleness of Thought; were Master of the most surprizing Turns, fine Similies, and of universal Learning, yet he shall be despis'd by the Criticks, and rang'd amongst the damn'd Writers of the Times.

The Question first ask'd is, whether an Author is a Whig or a Tory; if he be a Whig, or that Party which is in Power, his Praise is resounded, he's presently cried up for an excellent Writer; if not, he's mark'd as a Scoundrel, a perpetual Gloom hangs over his Head; if he was Master of the sublime Thoughts of Addison, the easy flowing Numbers of Pope, the fine Humour of Garth, the beautiful Language of Rowe, the Perfection of Prior, the Dialogue of Congreve, and the Pastoral of Phillips, he must nevertheless submit to a mean Character, if not expect the Reputation of an Illiterate.

Writings for the Stage are of late so very much perverted by the Violence of Party, that the finest Performance, without Scandal, cannot be supported; Shakespear and Ben Johnson, were they, now living, would be wholly at a Loss in the Composure of a Play suitable to the Taste of the Town; without a promiscuous heap of Scurrility to expose a Party, or, what is more detestable, perhaps a particular Person, no Play will succeed, and the most execrable Language, in a Comedy, produc'd at this Time, shall be more applauded than the most beautiful Turns in a Love for Love: Such are the Hardships a Dramatick-Poet has to struggle with, that either Obscenity, Party, or Scandal must be his Theme, and after he has performed his utmost in either of these ways, without a powerful Interest, he'll have more Difficulty in the bringing his Play upon the Theatre than in the Writing, and sometimes never be able to accomplish it.

These are the Inconveniencies which Writers for the Stage labour under, besides 'tis observable, that an obsequious prolifick Muse generally meets with a worse Reception than a petulant inanimate Author; and when a Poet has finished his Labours, so that he has brought his Play upon the Stage, the best Performance has oftentimes the worst Success, for which I need only instance Mr. Congreve's Way of the World, a Comedy esteem'd by most Persons capable of judging, no way inferior to any of his other Performances.

A Choice of Actors, next to Interest and Popularity, is the greatest Advantage to a new Play: If a Stage-Poet has the Misfortune not to have a sufficient Influence over the Managers of the Theatres to make a Nomination, his Performance must very much suffer; and if he cannot entirely Command his Theatre, and Season for bringing it on, it will be perfectly slaughter'd; and a certain Theatre has lately acquir'd the Name of a Slaughter-House, but whether more for the Stupidity of its Poets than its Actors, I do not pretend to determine; but certain it is, that Acting is the Life of all Dramatick-Performances. And tho' an indifferent Play may appear tolerable, with good Acting, it is impossible a bad one can afford any Entertainment, when perform'd by an incompleat Set of Comedians.

In respect to Writings in general, there is an unaccountable Caprice in abundance of Persons, to Condemn or Commend a Performance meerly by a Name. The Names of some Writers will effectually recommend, without

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making an Examination into the Merit of the work; and the Names of other Persons, equally qualified for Writing, and perhaps of greater Learning than the Former, shall be sufficient to Damn it; and all this is owing either to some lucky Accident of writing apposite to the Humour of the Town, (wherein an agreeable Season and a proper Subject are chiefly to be regarded) or to Prejudice, but most commonly the Former.

It is a Misfortune to Authors both in Prose and Verse, who are reduc'd to a Necessity of constant writing for a Subsistence, that the numerous Performances, publish'd by them, cannot possibly be so correct as they might be, could more Time be afforded in the Composure. By this Means there is sometimes just room for Criticism upon the best of their Productions, and these Gentlemen, notwithstanding it be never so contrary to their Inclinations, are entirely oblig'd to prostrate their Pens to the Town, as Ladies of Pleasure do their Bodies; tho' herein, in respect to Party, it is to be observ'd, that a Bookseller and an Author may very well be allow'd occasionally to be of either Party, or at least, that they should be permitted the Liberty of Writing and Printing of either Side for Bread, free from Ignominy; and as getting Money is the chief Business of the World, so these Measures cannot by any means be esteem'd Unjust or Disreputable, with regard to the several ways of accumulating Wealth, introduc'd in Exchange-Alley, and at the other End of the Town.

It is a common Practice with some Persons in the world, either to prefix the Name of a Mecenas in the Front of their Performances, or to obtain recommendatory Lines from some Person of excellency in Writing, as a Protection against Criticism; and there is nothing more frequent than to see a mean Performance (especially if it be done by a Man of Figure) with this Guard.

'Tis true, the worst Performances have the greatest occasion of these Ramparts, but then the Person who takes upon him to Recommend, must have such an absolute Authority and Influence over the generality of Mankind, as to silence all Objections, or else it will have a contrary Turn, by promoting a Criticism as well upon the Author as upon himself; for which Reason it is very hazardous for a Person in a middle Station (tho' he have never so great a Reputation in Writing) to engage in the Recommendation of the Writings of others.

The severe Treatment which the brightest Men of the Age have met with from the Criticks, is sufficient to deter all young Gentlemen from entering the Lists of Writing; and was not the world in general more good-natur'd and favourable to youthful Performances than the Criticks, there would be no such thing as a Succession of Writings; whereas, by that Means, and his present Majesty's Encouragement, Literature is in a flourishing Condition, and Poetry seems to improve more at this Time than it has done in any preceding Reign, except that of King Charles II. when there was a Rochester, a Sidley, a Buckingham, &c. And (setting aside Party) what the world may hope from a generous Encouragement of polite Writing, I take to be very conspicuous from Mr. Pope's Translation of Homer, notwithstanding the malicious and violent Criticisms of a certain Gentleman in its Disfavour.

In the religious Controversy of late depending, Criticisms have been carried to that height, that some Persons have pretended to fix false Grammer on one of the most celebrated Writers perhaps at this Time in Europe, but how justly, I leave to the Determination of those who have perused the Bishop's incomparable Answer; but admitting his Lordship had permitted an irregularity of Grammer to pass unobserv'd [typo for "unobserv'd"?], he is not the first of his Sacred Character that has done it, and small Errors of this kind are easily looked over, where the Nominative Case is at a distance from the Verb, or a Performance is done in haste, the Case of the Bishop against so many powerful Adversaries. Besides, it is apparent and well known, that a

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certain Person [Mr. Lessey, now with the Chevalier.] in the world, who has a very great Reputation in Writing, never regards the strict Rules of Grammar in any of his Performances.

It is a Satisfaction to Authors of tender Date, to see their Superiors thus roughly handled by the Criticks; a young Writer in Divinity will not think his Case desperate, when the shining Bangor has met with such malevolent Treatment; neither must a youthful Poet be uneasy at a severe Criticism, when the Great Mr. Addison, Rowe and Pope have been treated with the utmost Scurrility.

These Men of Eminence sitting easy with a load of Calumny, is a sufficient Consolation to Inferiors under the most despicable Usage, and there is this satisfactory Reflection, that perhaps the most perfect Work that ever was compos'd, if not so entirely correct, but there may be some room for Criticism by a Man of consummate Learning; for there is nothing more common than to find a Man, (if not wholly blind) over opiated in respect to his own Performances, and too exact in a Scrutiny into the Writings of others.

The ill Nature attending Criticism I take to be greater now than in any Age past; a Man's Defects in Writing shall not only be expos'd, but all the personal Infamy heap'd upon him that is possible; his Descent and Education shall be scandaliz'd, (as if a fine Performance was the worse for the Author's Parentage) his good Name villified, a History of the Transactions of his whole Life, and oftentimes a great deal more, shall be written, as if the were a Candidate setting up in a Borough for Member of Parliament, not an airy[?] or loose Action shall be omitted, and neither the Sacred Gown, nor the greatest Dignity shall be exempted; but there is this Consideration which sways the sensible part of Mankind, viz. a Man of Excellency in Writing his being generally a Person of more Vivacity than the common Herd, and consequently the more extraordinary Actions in him are allowable; yet, nevertheless, I think it consistent with Prudence for an Author, when he has the good fortune to compose a Piece, which he's assur'd will occasion Envy and Criticism, to write his own Life at the same Time with it, tho' it be a little extravagant and the method is unusual, to prevent an ill-natur'd doing thereof by the Hand of another Person.

According to the old Maxim, Get a Reputation, and lye a Bed, not to mention how many lye a Bed before they can attain it, according to the humorous Turn of the late ingenious Mr. Farquhar; but there's at this Time a greater necessity for a Man to be wakeful, when he has acquir'd a Reputation, than at any Time before; he'll find abundantly more difficulty attend the Securing than the Attaining of the greatest Reputation; he'll meet with Envy from every Quarter; Malice will pursue him in all his undertakings, and if he makes any manner of Defence, he cannot commence it too soon, tho' it is not always prudential to shew an open Resentment, even to the utmost ill Treatment.

If a Man be so considerable as to be thought worthy of Criticism, a luducrous Reprimand is always preferable to a serious Answer; returning Scurrility with Comic-Satyr will gaul an ill-natur'd Adversary beyond any Treatment whatsoever; his Spleen will encrease equal to any Poison, his Rage keep within no Bounds, and at length his Passion will not only destroy his own Performance, but himself likewise: And this I take to be natural in our modern Criticks.

The Business of these Gentlemen is to set the ignorant Part of Mankind right, In correcting the Errors of pretending Authors, and exposing of Impositions, whereby who has Learning and Merit, and who has not, may be so apparent, that the world may not misplace their Favour; but unless they do it with more Impartiality, Temper and Candour than of late, they may, with equal prospect of Success, endeavour to turn the current of the Thames, as to pervert the Humour of this good-natur'd Town.

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I presume to present them with these two Verses:

_The learned Criticks learn not to be Civil,
In Spite and Malice personate the Devil._

Having now dispatch'd the two first Subjects of my Essay _(viz.)_ The Usefulness of Writing, and Criticism, I come to my last Head, the Qualification of Authors.

I am not of the Opinion of a great many Persons in the World, that a Poet is entirely born such, and that Poetry is a particular Gift of Heaven, not but I confess there is a great deal in natural Genius, which I shall mention hereafter:

It is consistent with my Reason, that any Man having a share of Learning, and acquainted with the Methods of Writing, may by an assiduous Application, not only write good Poetry, but make a tollerable Figure in any sort of Writings whatsoever; and herein I could give numerous Instances of Authors who have written all manner of Ways with success. Neither can I acquiesce in the common Notion, that the Person who begins most early in Poetry always arrives to the greatest Perfection; for, in my Opinion, it is a Matter of no great difficulty, for a Person of any Age, before his Vivacity is too much abated, and Fire exhausted, to commence a Poet; the great Mr. Dryden not beginning to write 'till he was above the Age of 30; and I doubt not but a great many Persons have lost themselves for want of putting their Genius's to the Trial, and making particular Writings their particular Studies.

Their is no Practice more frequent than for an Author to misapply his Genius; and there is nothing more common than for a Man, after numerous Trials in almost all sorts of Authorship, to make that his favourite Writing which he is least capable of performing; and too frequently Authors use their Genius's as Parents do their Children, place them to such Businesses as make the most considerable Figure in the world, without consulting their Qualifications.

There are many other Faults equal to these, as where Authors, through overmuch Timerity, or too great Opinion of their own Performances, permit their Writings to pass with egregious Errors; and I take it to be equally pernicious for a Man to be too diffident of his own Performances, as it is to be presuming: There are likewise some Gentlemen, who (by a lazy Disposition, or through over much Haste, an impatience in dispatch to gain an early Reputation) commit Blunders almost to their immediate Ruin; but many of these Errors are commonly excus'd in an Author by a condescending Printer, who is oblig'd to take the Errata upon himself.

In Prose a slight Examination of a Performance may suffice, but in Poetry it cannot be too often repeated; and in this way of Writing, haste is attended with a fatal Consequence. To compose your Lines in perfect Harmony, of easy flowing Numbers, fine Flights and similies, and at the same Time retain a strong Sense, which make Poetry substantially Beautiful, is a work of Time, and requires the most sedate Perusals: And though some Persons think, giving Poetry the Character of easy Lines to be a Disgrace, it is rightly considered the greatest Reputation and Honour they can do it; the utmost Difficulty attending this easy Writing, and there are very few Persons that can ever attain it.

But to leave these general Observations, I proceed to my Point in Hand, the Qualification of Authors; Though I shall first take Notice, that the Business of every Author is to please and inform his Readers; but how difficult it is to please, through the prevalence of Parties, Envy and Prejudice needs no Illustration, and some Persons in the World are so very perverse and obstinate, that they will not be inform'd by a Person they entertain no good Opinion of. For writing

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Prose a Man ought to have a tollerable Foundation of Learning, at least to be Master of the Latin Tongue, to be a good Historian, and to have a perfect Knowledge of the world; and besides these Qualifications, in Poetry as I have before observ'd, a Writer should be Master of the most refin'd and beautiful Language, surprizing Turns, fine adapted Similes, a sublimity of Thought, and to be a Person of universal Learning: Though I have often observ'd, both in Prose and Verse, that some Persons of strong Genius, well acquainted with the world, and but of little Learning, have made a better Figure in some kinds of Writings, than Persons of the most consummate Literature, not bless'd with natural Genius, and a Knowledge of Mankind.

The preference of Genius to Learning, is sufficiently Demonstrated in the Writings of the Author of the True born English Man; (a Poem that has Sold beyond the best Performance of any Ancient or Modern Poet of the greatest Excellency, and perhaps beyond any Poetry ever Printed in the English Language) This Author is Characteriz'd as a Person of little Learning, but of prodigious Natural Parts; and the immortal Shakespear had but a small share of Literature: It is likewise worthy Observation, that some of our most entertaining Comedies, Novels and Romances have been written by the fair Sex, who cannot be suppos'd to have Learning in any Degree equal to Gentlemen of a University Education. And in North Britain where Literature shines amongst the Persons of middle Station, an Ounce of Natural Parts, (speaking in a common way of Comparison) is Esteem'd of greater Value, than a Pound of Learning.

A Person of Learning without Genius and Knowledge of the world, is like an Architect's Assistant, whose only Business is to Draw the Draught or Model of a Pile of Building; he's at a loss in the Materials necessary for compleating the Structure, tho' he can Judge of its Beauty when Perfected; and may be compared to a Man that has the theory in any Art or Science, but wants the Practice.

And a meer Scholar is the most unacceptable Companion upon Earth: He is Rude in his Manners, Unpolish'd in his Literature, and generally Ill-Natur'd to the last Degree; he's Company for a very few Persons, and Pleasing to None; his Pride exalts him in Self-Opinion beyond all Mankind: And some of the sucking Tribe of Levi, think the Gown and Cassock alone, Merit a Respect due to the greatest Personages, and that the broad Hat with the Rose should be Ador'd, tho' it covers a thick and brainless Skull.

But these are a few only; there are great Numbers of the Clergy who deserve the utmost Respect, and are justly paid more than they desire; and no Person can have a greater Regard for that sacred Body than my self, as I was not only intended for a Clergyman, but have several Relations now in being of that venerable Order; Tho' I am oblig'd to take Notice, that the Authors of the Gown in general, treat the world with greater Insolence and Incharity, than any Lay-Persons whatsoever.

There's nothing more frequent, than to find the writings of many of our Modern Divines, not only Stiff and Harsh, but full of Rancour, and to find an easy Propensity and Complaisance in the writings of the Laity; a Gentleman without the Gown commonly writes with a genteel Respect to the world, abundance of good Temper and a condescension Endearing; when a brawny Priest, shall shew a great deal of Ill-nature, give indecent Reflections, and affrontive Language, and oftentimes be Dogmatical in all his Performances.

Whether this be owing more to Pride, than a want of an Easy, Free, and polite Conversation, I do not take upon me to Determine; but I believe it must be generally Imputed to the Former, as it cannot be suppos'd, that either of the Universities, are at any time without a polite Converse; tho' I take leave to observe, that there is a great deal of difference between a finish'd Oxonian, and a sprightly Senator.

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This is Demonstrated in the Speeches from Time to Time, made in the Senate and the Synod; the Stile and Composure of the one, is no way to be compar'd to the other, tho' the Sense be equally strong; there's an Elegancy and Beauty of Expression in the Former, not to be met with in the Latter, Oratory no where to be exceeded, and an Affluence of words not to be met with in any other Speeches whatsoever; and I believe it must be generally allow'd that there is a very great difference in the common Conversation, (particularly in point of Manners) of the Members of those August Assemblies.

A good Conversation is the greatest Advantage an Author can possibly Enjoy, by a variety of Converse, a Man is furnish'd with a perpetual Variety of Hints, and may acquire a greater Knowledge on some Subjects in the space of a few Minutes, than he can attain by Study, in a Succession of Weeks, (tho' I must allow Study to be the only Foundation for Writing) 'twas owing to a good Conversation, that those Entertaining Papers the Tatlers were publish'd by Sir Richard Steel, the Examiner carried on by Mr. Oldsworth; and 'tis impossible a perfect good Comedy can be written by any Person, without a constant Resort to the best Conversation, whereby alone a Man will be Master of the best Thoughts.

In short, Conversation is the Aliment of the Genius, the Life of all airy Performances, as Learning is the Soul; the various Humours of Mankind, upon all Occasions, afford the most agreeable Subjects for all sorts of Writings, and I look upon any Performance, tho' done by a Person celebrated for writing, without the use of Conversation, in some measure incomplete.

If an Author be inclin'd to write for Reformation of Manners, let him repair to St. Pauls or Westminster-Abbey, and observe the indecent Behaviour of multitudes of Persons, who make those Sacred Places Assignations of Vice; if you are inclin'd to lash the Follies and Vanities of the fair Sex, retire to the Tea Table and the Theatre; if your Business be to compose a Sermon, or you are engag'd in Theological Studies, resort to Child's Coffee-House in St. Paul's Church-Yard; if you are desirous to depaint the Cheat and the Trickster, I recommend ye to the Royal-Exchange and the Court End of the Town; and if you would write a Poem in imitation of Rochester, you need only go to the Hundreds of Drury, and you'll be sufficiently furnish'd with laudable Themes.

But Converse at home falls infinitely short of Conversation abroad, and the Advantages attending Travelling are so very great, that they are not to be express'd; this finishes Education in the most effectual manner, and enables a Man to speak and write on all Occasions with a Grace and Perfection, no other way to be attain'd. The Travels of a young Gentleman have not only the effect of transplation of Vegetables, in respect to the encrease of Stature, but also the Consequence of the most beautiful Pruning. How much the Gentlemen of Scotland owe their Capacities to Travelling, is very obvious, there being no Person of Quality in that Kingdom but expends the greatest part of his Fortune in other Countries, to reap the Benefit of it in personal Accomplishments; and a greater Commendation than this to the Scots is, the bestowing the best of Literature upon all manner of Youth educated amongst them.

Whilst the Men of Quality here very often neglect giving their Children the common and necessary Learning, and too frequently entrust their Education with lazy, ignorant, and incogitant Tutors, not to mention the Supineness of Schoolmasters in general throughout England; the North-Britains labour in this Particular indefatigably, as they are very sensible that Learning is the greatest Honour of their Country, and the ancient Britains come so near the Scots, that amongst the common Persons, in some Parts of Wales, you may meet with a Ploughman that speaks tollerable Latin, and a Mason, like the famous Ben Johnson, with his Horace and a Trowel.

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The want of a generous Education is an irretrieveable Misfortune, and the Negligence of an Inspector of the Literature of Youth ought to be unpardonable; how many Persons of Distinction have curs'd their aged Parents for not bestowing on them a liberal Education? And how many of the Commonalty have regretted the mispending of the precious Time of Youth? A Man arriv'd to Maturity has the Mortification of observing an Inferior in Circumstances superior in Literature, and wants the Satisfaction of giving a tollerable Reason for any Thing he says or does, or in any respect to judge of the Excellency of others; and, in my Opinion, a generous Education, with a bare Subsistence only, is to be preferr'd to the largest Patrimony, and a want of Learning.

Without Education it is impossible to write or Read any Thing distinctly; without a frequent turning of the Dictionary, no Person can be compleat in the _English_ Language, neither can he give words their proper Accent and Pronunciation, or be any ways Master of Elocution; and a Man without Learning, though he appears tollerable in Conversation, (which I have known some Persons do by a constant enjoyment of good Company, and a strength of Memory) is like an _Empirick_, that takes Things upon trust: And whenever he comes to exercise the Pen, that the Subject is uncommon, and Study is requir'd, you'll find him oftentimes not capable of writing one single Line of Senfe, and scarcely one word of _English_. And, on the other Hand, I have known some Persons who could talk Latin very fluently, who have us'd Phrases and Sentences perpetually in that Language, in Conversation, vulgar and deficient in the Mother-Tongue, and who have written most egregious Nonsense; from whence it is evident, that Writing is the only Test of Literature.

I have a little deviated from my Subject, in pursuing the Rules and Advantages of Education, which I take to be of that universal good Tendency, that they are acceptable in any Performance whatsoever: I shall offer nothing farther, but conclude this Essay with the following Particulars; that besides the Qualifications already mention'd, it is as necessary for a fine Writer to be endued with Modesty as for a beautiful Lady; that good Sense is of equal Consequence to an Author, as a good Soil for the Culture of the most noble Plants; that a Person writing a great deal on various Subjects, should be as cautious in owning all his Performances, as in revealing the Secrets of his most intimate Friend; and in respect to those Gentlemen, who have made no scruple to prostitute their Names, the following Similie may be judg'd well adapted:

_As Musick soft, by constant use is forc'd
Grows harsh, and cloy, becomes at length the worst,
The Harmony amidst Confusion lost:
So finest Pens, employ'd in writing still
Lose Strength and Beauty as the Folio's fill._

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3. _Letter to A.H. Esq.; concerning the Stage_ (1698), and Richard Willis' _Occasional Paper No. IX_ (1698). (OUT OF PRINT)
4. _Essay on wit_ (1748), together with Characters by Flecknoe, and Joseph Warton's _Adventurer_ Nos. 127 and 133. (OUT OF PRINT)
5. Samuel Wesley's _Epistle to a Friend Concerning Poetry_ (1700) and _Essay on Heroic Poetry_ (1693).
6. _Representation of the Impiety and Immorality of the Stage_ (1704) and _Some Thoughts Concerning the Stage_ (1704).

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7. John Gay's _The Present State of wit_ (1711); and a section on wit from _The English Theophrastus_ (1702).
8. Rapin's _De Carmine Pastoralī_, translated by Creech (1684).
9. T. Hanmer's (?) _Some Remarks on the Tragedy of Hamlet_ (1736).
10. Corbyn Morris' _Essay towards Fixing the True Standards of wit, etc._ (1744).
11. Thomas Purney's _Discourse on the Pastoral_ (1717).
12. Essays on the Stage, selected, with an Introduction by Joseph wood Krutch.

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17. Nicholas Rowe's _Some Account of the Life of Mr. William Shakespear_ (1709).

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18. Aaron Hilt's Preface to *_The Creation_*; and Thomas Brereton's Preface to *_Esther_*.

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19. Susanna Centlivre's *_The Busie Body_* (1709).
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23. John Dryden's *_His Majesties Declaration Defended_* (1681).
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