

Novel Definitions

An Anthology of
Commentary on the Novel,
1688-1815

Edited by
Cheryl Nixon



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53. George Canning, *The Microcosm*, No. 26 (May 14, 1787)

[Canning* positions the novel as revised romance, explaining how characters and situations in the latter are recycled in the former. Canning also warns against giving *Tom Jones** (1749), a novel which features an imperfect hero, to young readers.]

Fabula nullius veneris, sine pondere, et arte. HOR³
A silly story, without weight, or art.

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- 1 Constitution or habit of mind, temperament (OED).
 - 2 Possibly a paraphrase of a passage from Tobias Smollett's* *Ferdinand Count Fathom** (1753): "For the seeds of virtue are seldom destroyed at once: even amidst the rank productions of vice, they regeminate to a sort of imperfect vegetation, like some scattered hyacinths shooting up among the weeds of a ruined garden, that testify the former culture and amenity of the soil" (Chapter 34, 255).
 - 3 Horace,* *Ars poetica* (*Art of Poetry*), 320. Canning's translation is accurate.

NOVEL-WRITING has by some late authors been aptly enough styled the younger sister of ROMANCE. A family likeness indeed is very evident; and in their leading features, though in the one on a more enlarged, and in the other on a more contracted scale, a strong resemblance is easily discoverable between them.

An eminent characteristic of each is Fiction; a quality, which they possess, however, in very different degrees. The Fiction of ROMANCE is restricted by no fetters of reason, or of truth; but gives a loose to lawless imagination, and transgresses at will the bounds of time and place, of nature, and possibility. The fiction of the other on the contrary is shackled with a thousand restraints; is checked in her most rapid progress by the barriers of reason; and bounded in her most excursive flights by the limits of probability.

To drop our metaphors: we shall not indeed find in NOVELS, as in ROMANCES, the Hero sighing respectfully at the feet of his mistress, during a ten years courtship in a wilderness; nor shall we be entertained with the history of such a tour, as that of *Saint George*,¹ who, mounting his horse one morning at *Cappodocia*, takes his way through *Mesopotamia*, then turns to his right into *Illyria*, and so by way of *Greece* and *Thracia*, arrives in the afternoon in *England*. To such glorious violations as these of time and place, ROMANCE writers have an exclusive claim. NOVELISTS usually find it more convenient to change the scene of courtship from a des[e]rt to a drawing-room; and far from thinking it necessary to lay a ten years siege to the affections of their heroine, they contrive to carry their point in an hour or two; as well for the sake of enhancing the character of their hero, as for establishing their favorite maxim of *love at first sight*; and their Hero, who seldom, extends his travels beyond the turnpike-road, is commonly content to chuse the safer, through less expeditious, conveyance of a post-chaise,² in preference to such a horse as that of *Saint George*.

But, these peculiarities of absurdity alone excepted, we shall find, that the NOVEL is but a more modern modification of the same ingredients which constitute the ROMANCE; and that a *recipe* for the one may be equally serviceable for the composition of the other.

A ROMANCE (generally speaking) consists of a number of strange events, with a Hero in the middle of them; who, being an adventurous Knight, wades through them to one grand design, namely, the emancipation of some captive Princess, from the oppression of a merciless Giant; for the accomplishment of which purpose he must set at nought the incantations of the caitiff magician; must scale the ramparts of his castle; and baffle the vigilance of the female dragon, to whose custody his Heroine is committed.

1 The patron saint of England (d. 303), known for his chivalric valor most notably in the legend of his rescue of a princess by slaying a dragon.

2 A horse-drawn, usually four-wheeled carriage used for carrying mail and passengers (OED).

Foreign as they may at first sight seem from the purposes of a NOVEL, we shall find, upon a little examination, that these are in fact the very circumstances, upon which the generality of them are built; modernized indeed in some degree by the trifling transformations of merciless Giants into austere Guardians, and of she-dragons into Maiden Aunts. We must be contented also that the Heroine, though retaining her tenderness, be divested of her royalty; and in the Hero we must give up the Knight-errant for the accomplished Fine Gentleman.

Still, however, though the performers are changed, the characters themselves remain nearly the same. In the Guardian we trace all the qualities which distinguish his ferocious predecessor; substituting only, in the room of magical incantations, a little plain cursing and swearing; and the Maiden Aunt retains all the prying vigilance, and suspicious malignity; in short, every endowment, but the claws, which characterize her romantic counterpart. The Hero of a NOVEL has not indeed any opportunity of displaying his courage in the scaling of a rampart, or his generosity in the deliverance of enthralled multitudes; but as it is necessary that a Hero should signalize himself by both these qualifications, it is usual to manifest the one by climbing the garden wall, or leaping the park-paling in defiance of "*steel-traps and spring-guns*;" and the other, by flinging a crown to each of the post-boys, on alighting from his chaise and four.¹

In the article of *interviews*, the two species of composition are pretty much on an equality; provided only, that they are supplied with a "*quantum sufficient*"² of moonlight, which is an indispensable requisite; it being the etiquette for the Moon to appear particularly conscious on these occasions. For the adorer, when permitted to pay his vows at the shrine of his Divinity, custom has established in both cases a pretty universal form of prayer.

Thus far the writers of NOVEL and ROMANCE seem to be on a very equal footing; to enjoy similar advantages, and to merit equal admiration. We are now come to a very material point, in which ROMANCE has but slender claims to comparative excellence; I mean, the choice of *names* and *titles*. However lofty and sonorous the names of *Amadis* and *Orlando*; however tender and delicate may be those of *Zorayda* and *Roxana*, are they to be compared with the attractive alliteration, the seducing softness, of *Lydia Lovemore*, and *Sir Harry Harlowe*; of *Frederic Freelove*, and *Clarissa Clearstarch*?³ Or can the simple "*Don Belianis, of Greece*,"* or the "*Seven*

1 I.e., the hero displays his courage by climbing a garden wall or leaping over a park fence made of pales (or stakes), and displays his generosity by flinging coins to the postilions manning his horses or the boys who deliver letters and newspapers.

2 Latin: "Sufficient quantity."

3 Names invented here to mimic characters in real romance and novel titles. For example, Richardson's* well-known heroine Clarissa Harlowe clearly inspires "Sir Harry Harlowe" and "Clarissa Clearstarch."

Champions of Christendom,¹ trick out so enticing a title page, and awaken such pleasing expectations, as the "*Innocent Adultery*," the "*Tears of Sensibility*," or the "*Amours of the Count de D*****, and L—y —?" [...]

In painting the scenes of *low life*, the NOVEL again enjoys the most decisive superiority. ROMANCE indeed sometimes makes use of the grosser sentiments, and less refined affections of the *Squire* and the *Confidant*, as a foil to the delicate adoration, the platonic purity, which marks the love of the Hero, and suits the sensibility of his Mistress. But where shall we find such a thorough knowledge of nature, such an insight into the human heart, as is displayed by our NOVELISTS; when, as an agreeable relief from the insipid sameness of polite insincerity, they condescend to pourtray in coarse colours, the workings of more genuine passions in the bosom of *Dolly*, the dairy-maid, or *Hannah*, the house-maid?

When on such grounds, and on a plan usually very similar to the one I have here endeavoured to sketch, are founded by far the greater number of those NOVELS, which crowd the teeming catalogue of a circulating library; it is to be wondered at, that they are sought out with such avidity, and run through with such delight, by all those (a considerable part of my fellow-citizens) who cannot resist the impulse of curiosity, or withstand the allurements of a title-page? Can we be surprised, that they look forward, with expecting eagerness, to that inundation of delicious nonsense, with which the press annually overflows; replete as it is with stories without invention, anecdotes without novelty, observations without aptness, and reflections without morality?

Under this description come the generality of these performances. There are no doubt, a multitude of exceptions. The paths which a *Fielding** and a *Richardson* have trodden, must be sacred. Were I to profane these by impertinent criticism, I might with justice be accused of avowed enmity to wit; of open apostasy from true feeling, and true taste.

But let me hope to stand excused from the charge of presumption, if even here I venture some observations, which I am confident must have occurred to many; and to which almost every-body, when reminded of them, will be ready to give a hearty concurrence.

Is not the novel of *Tom Jones*,* however excellent a work in itself, generally put too early into our hands, and proposed too soon to the imitation of children? That it is a character drawn faithfully from Nature, by the hand of a master, most accurately delineated, and most exquisitely finished, is indeed indisputable. But is it not also a character, in whose shades the lines of right and wrong, of propriety and misconduct, are so intimately blended, and softened into each other, as to render it too difficult for the indiscriminating eye

¹ Richard Johnson's *The Most Famous History of the Seven Champions of Christendom* (1596-97). This real title, along with *Don Belianus*, is contrasted with invented titles that, again, evoke and mock those of eighteenth-century novels.

of childhood to distinguish between rectitude and error? Are not its imperfections so nearly allied to excellence, and does not the excess of its good qualities, bear so strong an affinity to imperfection, as to require a more matured judgment, a more accurate penetration, to point out the line where virtue ends, and vice begins? The arguments urged in opposition to this are, that it is a faithful copy of Nature.—Undoubtedly it is—but is Nature to be held up to the view of childhood, in every light, however unamiable; to be exhibited in every attitude, however unbecoming? The Hero's connexion with *Miss Seagrim*,¹ for instance, and the supposed consequences of it are very natural no doubt; are they therefore objects worthy of imitation? But that a Child must admire the character, is certain; that he should wish to imitate what he admires, follows of course; and that it is much more easy to imitate faults, than excellences, is an observation too trite, I fear, not to be well founded. A character virtuous and amiable in the aggregate, but vicious in particular parts, is much more dangerous to a mind, prone to imitation, as that of youth naturally is, than one wicked and vicious in the extreme. The one is an open assault of an avowed enemy, which every one has judgment to see, and consequently fortitude to resist; the other is the treacherous attack of an insidious invader; who makes the passions his agents to blind the judgment, and bribes the understanding to betray the heart.—Such is the character of *Jones*. [...] I cannot hesitate a moment to consider that "faultless monster," *Sir Charles Grandison*,* whose insipid uniformity of goodness it is so fashionable to decry, far the more preferable to be held up to a child, as an object of imitation. The only objection urged to this is, that *Grandison* is too perfect to be imitated with success. And to what does this argument amount? truly this it tends to prove, that an imitator cannot come up to his original; consequently the surest way to become a *Jones*, is to aim at being a *Grandison*: for according to that argument, let a man rate his virtue at the highest price, and the natural bias of his passions will make him bate² something of his valuation.—Hence therefore the character of *Grandison* is assuredly the proper pattern of the two. [...]

54. Robert Alves, "A Parallel between History and Novel writing," *Sketches of a History of Literature* (1794)

[Although the novel is a "private" form of history, Alves* writes in the eighth "Literary Essay" of his collection, he encourages readers to reject the "whipt sillabub" of romance for the solid "roast beef" of history.]

¹ Promiscuous character in Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749), with whom the eponymous hero engages in an illicit sexual affair.

² To lower, decrease, diminish (OED).