

# FICTION

## **Sir Francis Bacon, Essays, "Of Truth" and "Of Marriage and the Single Life"**

Genre: Philosophical essays on the model of those by Montaigne, but also influenced by the attitudes of Machiavelli and the Roman historians, whose guarding of their own personas Bacon imitated.

Form: Prose. Isn't that easy! But actually he uses some notable prose strategies that deserve comment. Balance and opposition are the most common strategies he uses to achieve both the appearance of balance and the concealment of his own opinions under the cloak of the opposing alternatives. He also is an adept wielder of other writers' opinions, as in his use of Pilate, Augustine, Lucretius, and Montaigne in "Of Truth."

Characters: The aforementioned "authorities" operate as occasional characters in his prose, as well as offering him the chance to display his learning.

### Summary:

"*Of Truth*" raises the interesting problem of our difficulty in defining lies, especially when we consider theology as a view with a higher and more profound standard of truth than mere mortal philosophy. More dangerously, he speculates "A mixture of a lie doth ever add pleasure" (1259). When moving into ordinary language of "civil business" (see the preface regarding his career!), he turns openly censorious of lies, even though such a world is obviously full of them.

"*Of Marriage and Single Life*" considers "wives" and children (assuming his readers are male) and balances their advantages against their disadvantages in such a way that it's difficult to decide whether marriage is a good or a bad idea. Bad marriages, however, he suggests can be analyzed more easily by their effects upon the women in them.

## **Thomas More - UTOPIA**

Thomas More is traveling in the Low Countries when he sees his friend, Peter Giles. Giles introduces him to a well-traveled friend of his, Raphael Hythloday.

Raphael speaks of many countries and their policies and laws, and freely criticizes the laws of their own countries. When More asks him why he doesn't join the King's services as a counselor, Raphael says he is happy with his way of life. Furthermore, he does not think his services would be appreciated, as his ideas are very different from the ideas of those around him. Raphael gives an account of a meeting at Cardinal Morton's house, and then hypothesizes about what would happen if he were to express his opinion in other meetings. He then begins speaking of a country, Utopia, which he thinks is ruled very well and is a perfect country.

More begs Raphael to speak more of Utopia, and he does. He first tells of their towns, which are all as identical as possible, and have a maximum of 6,000 families. He then speaks of their magistrates, who are called Philarchs, and are chosen every year by thirty families. An Archphilarch overlooks every ten Philarchs. The Utopians' manner of life is unusual, as gold is of no value, and everything is therefore free. Also, they spend their lives in the city and in the suburbs, living in each place for two years at a time. Laws dictate that they are not to travel without a 'passport', which can only be obtained from the Prince and states where and for how long they are allowed to travel.

Slaves and marriages are spoken of next. Prisoners of war are not taken as slaves, unless they fought in the battles; women are not to be married before eighteen, and men before twenty-two. Sexual encounters before marriage are prohibited, as are polygamy and adultery. There are no lawyers in Utopia, as everybody defends himself or herself in court.

Their military discipline is such that everyone trains for the army on a daily basis, however, the Utopians prefer to hire armies rather than to let their own people go to war, and as money does not matter much to them they can do this without much discomfort. Women are encouraged to join their husbands at war.

Religion is the last topic that is spoken of, and there are many religions in Utopia, as people are free to practice whatever they believe. However, the law states that they must all believe in one Divine Being and that they are forbidden to believe that the human's soul dies with his body. Raphael speaks of the way the country and the people deal with the issues and problems associated with each of these topics, and how we could learn from them and their wisdom.

When Raphael finishes his descriptions, More has further questions and thoughts. However, he does not voice them, as it is apparent that Raphael is tired. The only thing he does say is that he wishes their governments would adapt some of Utopia's rules, but he sees little hope of this happening.

## **Daniel Defoe: Robinson Crusoe**

Young Robinson Crusoe told his parents that he wished more than anything else to go to sea. His father bitterly opposed the idea, and warned his son that "if I did take this foolish step, God would not bless me - and I would have leisure hereafter to reflect upon having neglected his counsel, when there might be none to assist in my recovery." These words proved prophetic.

The youthful Crusoe set out on his first voyage, with little knowledge about the perils of a sailor's life. In telling later about the tremendous storm in which his ship was caught, he remarked, "It was my advantage, in one respect, that I did not know what they meant by 'founder,' till I inquired." So ill and afraid was he during this first harrowing crisis, that he vowed never again to leave solid ground if he was blessed enough to escape drowning. But once safe on shore he found his old longing resurfacing, and Robinson took sail aboard another ship. Alas, the ill-fated vessel was captured by Turkish pirates. Crusoe managed to avoid capture and made off in a small craft. Together, he and a young companion navigated along the coast of Africa, where they were pursued by both wild beasts and natives. A Portuguese ship finally rescued them and they sailed for Brazil.

In the new land Crusoe established a prosperous sugar plantation. But again a feeling of lonely dissatisfaction overcame him: "I lived just like a man cast away upon some desolate island, that had nobody there but himself."

Then came an offer from some planters for Crusoe to act as a trader on a slave ship bound for Africa. But this voyage also met disaster: fierce hurricanes wrecked the ship, drowning everyone aboard except Robinson, who was finally tossed up on a desolate beach. A subsequent storm washed the ship's wreckage close to shore and Crusoe constructed a raft to haul most of its supplies to land, where he stored them in a makeshift tent. After a few days, he climbed a hill and discovered that he was on what he assumed to be an uninhabited island. On his thirteenth day there, still another storm pushed the ship wreck back out to sea, where it sank, leaving him with no reminder of civilization.

Crusoe soon discovered that goats inhabited the island, and began domesticating some of them to provide himself with meat, milk, butter and cheese. Near the entrance of the cave where he stored his provisions taken from the ship, he painstakingly built a well-fortified home. After crafting a table, a chair and some shelves, Crusoe also began keeping a calendar and a journal.

Over the next few months, an earthquake and a hurricane damaged his supply cave, and though he still spent most of his time at his coastal home, in case a ship should happen by, he decided to erect an additional inland shelter.

Later, during a brief but raging fever, the adventurer was confronted by a terrifying apparition, who announced, "Seeing all these things have not brought thee to repentance, now thou shalt die!" Remembering the advice of his father, Crusoe commenced to pray and to read from the Bible. In a strangely inverted search, he began to seek deliverance from his sins rather than from his adverse situation.

In a small valley on the island, Crusoe found an abundance of wild grapes, lemons, limes and other fruits and vegetables. From the grapes he made raisins, which became a favorite staple food. In his wanderings he also caught a parrot, whom he taught to speak. With a few grains of rice and barley from the bottom of one of the ship's sacks, the sailor planted what would become large fields of grain. For several years he experimented with making bread and weaving baskets.

One of Crusoe's biggest frustrations was the lack of bottles or jars in which to cook or store food. Over time, he succeeded in making clay containers and even fired some pots that were solid enough to hold liquids. After four years on the island, he was a changed man: "I looked now upon the [civilized] world as a thing remote, which I had nothing to do with, no expectation from, and indeed no desires about.. ."

Crusoe dedicated his entire fifth year as a castaway to building and inventing. He constructed a "summer home" on the far side of the island; he fabricated for himself a suit made from skins, as well as an umbrella; he fashioned a small canoe in which he traveled around the island. And so the years passed in solitude.

One day, in his fifteenth year on the island, Crusoe spied a human footprint in the sand. When he finally summoned the courage to measure it against his own foot he found the strange print to be much larger..... Fear of danger is ten thousand times more terrifying than danger itself," he declared. Still, for safety, he built a second wall around his home and fit it with six muskets.

Once, while exploring, Crusoe came upon a beach spread with human bones. He quickly abandoned the area, and for the next two years he stayed close to home, never fired a gun, and avoided making fires.

Twenty-four years had passed when one night Crusoe heard gun fire. And in the morning he spied a ship's hull impaled on the rocks. Then he saw something that sent shivers down his spine - about 30 cannibals on the beach, enjoying a gruesome feast. Robinson shot at them, killing some and driving the others away. He rescued one of their native prisoners and named his new companion Friday, for the day upon which he was delivered. Friday proved to be strong, loyal and intelligent, though Crusoe still had cause to worry - Friday was also a bit cannibalistic. Crusoe began introducing Friday to his mode of living, especially hoping to turn him to Christianity. Friday managed to learn English quite well, and was pleased to answer his benefactor's questions concerning the surrounding islands and their inhabitants. Crusoe discovered that his island must be near Trinidad.

One day in the course of their conversation, Friday told Robinson about seventeen white men who were held prisoner on his home island, survivors of a shipwreck. If Crusoe rescued them, they might be the key to his return to the civilized world. But before the two men could finish constructing a canoe to reach the captives, another group of cannibals arrived. This time Crusoe and Friday were able to save two of their prisoners from the cooking pot; a Spaniard, and another islander - who turned out to be Friday's father.

After assuring Crusoe that the other Spanish and Portuguese prisoners would willingly follow the English castaway in an escape attempt, the Spaniard returned to the island with Friday's father to explain the plan and have the men sign an oath of allegiance.

While they were gone, an English ship anchored near the island and eleven men came ashore, three of them - the ship's captain, his mate, and a passenger - as prisoners of mutineers. Crusoe and Friday killed the most belligerent of them, and the others turned themselves over to Crusoe, swearing loyalty. With control of the ship, Crusoe prepared to return to England. Some of the mutineers, however, chose to remain on the island rather than return to England and hang.

Though Crusoe hated to leave the island before the return of the Spaniard and Friday's father, he sailed with the ship and arrived in England on June 11, 1687, thirty-five years after his earlier visit. Finding two sisters and two children of a brother still living, he decided to sail on to Lisbon to learn what had become of his Brazilian plantation. Friday, "in all these ramblings [proved] a most faithful servant on all occasions."

Surprisingly, Crusoe's holdings had been well-managed by his friends - in fact, they had earned him a small fortune. He generously gave portions of his profit to charity as well as to his family and others.

In Lisbon, Crusoe, apprehensive about traveling back to England by sea, organized a party of men to travel overland as far as the Channel. After many difficult adventures in the Pyrenees, and, as usual, with a great deal of luck, the company reached England.

Finally home, the wanderer married and had two sons and a daughter. But alas, Crusoe's wife died and he was compelled to join one of his nephews on a voyage to the East Indies. Miraculously, this ship sailed safely. Crusoe revisited his island, where he found that the Spaniards and the English mutineers had taken native wives. After hearing a full account of what had happened since his departure, he left supplies, furnished the islanders with a carpenter and a smith, and divided the island among them.

The ship then sailed around the Cape of Good Hope and on to China. On an overland trip through Siberia and on back to England, Crusoe had many more encounters. Ultimately, Robinson Crusoe, after a total of 54 years abroad, returned home, an old, weathered man, and lived out his remaining days in peace, never to take to the sea again.

### **Samuel Richardson: Pamela/Clarisa**

Richardson's literary career began after he was in his fifties and well-established as a printer, when two booksellers proposed that he should compile a volume of model letters for unskilled letter writers. While preparing this, Richardson became fascinated by the project, and a small sequence of letters from a daughter in service, asking her father's advice when threatened by her master's advances, formed the germ of *Pamela; or Virtue Rewarded* (1740-41). *Pamela* was a huge success and became something of a cult novel. By May 1741 it reached a fourth edition and was dramatized in Italy by Goldoni, as well as in England.

Richardson's other most popular work, also regarded today as his best work, is *Clarissa or, the History of a Young Lady*, published in 1747- 8. This novel is a tragic story of a girl who runs off with her seducer, but is later abandoned.

Richardson's novels were enormously popular in their day. Although he has been accused of being a verbose and sentimental storyteller, his emphasis on detail, his psychological insights into women, and his dramatic technique have earned him a prominent place among English novelists.

### **Jonathan Swift: Gulliver's Travels**

Published in his sixtieth year, *Gulliver's Travels* is the most famous example of Jonathan Swift's satirical works and was the only one he received payment for (£200) since most of his works were vehemently and dangerously political, and were published anonymously or under one of his many pen-names. Following the success of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* in 1719, Swift was inspired to write a similarly sober document of fiction spoken as truth to make the reader reconsider the accepted state of the world. Although Swift seems to have been writing the book from 1720 onwards, it was only completed and published in 1726. Lemuel Gulliver, a ship's surgeon, tells the story of his shipwreck on the island of Lilliput. Here people are six inches rather than six feet tall and as such their actions, debates and pageantry seem utterly ridiculous. Their fatuous political arguments (should an egg be broken at the big or small end?) mock the English political and religious debates of Swift's time. On his 'travels', Gulliver meets various other strange humanoids: the extremely tall people of Brobdingnag and later the useless scientists and philosophers of Laputa and Lagado who spend their time trying to extract sunshine from cucumbers while failing to do anything worthwhile. Glubbudbrib and Luggnagg present Gulliver with more intriguing insights still. In the final section of the book, Gulliver meets the Houyhnhnms who are horses empowered with reason, simplicity and dignity and the Yahoos who look like humans but live revolting lives of vice and brutality. Gulliver and the reader get to see the human race through a series of curved mirrors therefore and return to the real world somewhat disgusted. However, despite its dark themes, the book was an immediate success and has remained a favourite with adults who enjoy the satire and children who like the adventuring (or perhaps it is the other way around).

### **Henry Fielding: Joseph Andrews**

In *Joseph Andrews*, Fielding the author, magistrate, and moralist refuses to accept much of what he sees around him; in Book III, he states that his purpose is "to hold the glass to thousands in their closets, that they may contemplate their deformity, and endeavour to reduce it." But just as Fielding excludes the burlesque, which makes up the entirety of *Shamela*, from his "sentiments and characters" in *Joseph Andrews*, so too does he progress beyond a mere criticism of the "ridiculous" to a positive statement and portrayal of the values in which he believed. We find that we are no longer merely laughing at people and situations, but also laughing with them; we are taking delight, rather than laughing in scorn. Our sense of delight at the close of *Joseph Andrews* is in no sense destructive, but represents one of the many aspects of this book which can be considered under such headings as form, characterization, style, and moral tone.

*Joseph Andrews* is a picaresque novel of the road; the title page tells us that it was "Written in Imitation of the Manner of CERVANTES, Author of Don Quixote." Despite its looseness of construction, however, *Joseph Andrews* does make a deliberate move from the confusion and hypocrisy of London to the open sincerity of the country; one might perhaps apply Fielding's

own words in a review he wrote of Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote*: ". . . here is a regular story, which, though possibly it is not pursued with that epic regularity which would give it the name of an action, comes nearer to that perfection than the loose unconnected adventures in *Don Quixote*; of which you may transverse the order as you please, without an injury to the whole."

This journey is undertaken in more than a simply geographical sense. Fielding takes his characters through a series of confusing episodes, finally aligning them with their correct partners in an improved social setting, from which the most recalcitrant characters are excluded; the characters, for the most part, have all measured and achieved a greater degree of self-knowledge. Thus the marriage of Fanny to a more experienced Joseph takes place in an ideal setting--the country--and is facilitated by the generosity of an enlightened Mr. Booby. Lady Booby, unchanged and unreformed, returns to London, excluding herself from the society which Fielding has reshaped.

It is often the business of comedy to correct excess, and Fielding has not spared the devious practices of a lawyer Scout, or the boorish greed of a Parson Trulliber. But his comedy includes a sense of delight, and the order into which he molds Joseph Andrews is a positive affirmation of the qualities of love, charity, and sincerity, expressed by Adams, Joseph, and Fanny.

It is the active virtue (in Adams' case, it is flawed by just the right amount of vanity and inconsistency) of Adams, Joseph, and Fanny that redeems this book from the flock of hypocrites that peoples its pages.

Indeed, Fielding explains in his preface that he has made Adams a clergyman "since no other office could have given him so many opportunities of displaying his worthy inclinations." It is important we realize that despite Joseph and Fanny remaining types, as do all the other characters, Adams emerges as an individual. He is a positive force not only as a clergyman who puts his principles of charity into practice, but as a man who applies himself to Aeschylus for comfort, as well as to his pipe and ale, manages to confront the physical obstacles of the world in the most awkward ways, prides himself rather too much as a teacher of Latin and as a writer of sermons, and takes people absolutely at face value. He not only fits into the positive side of Fielding's comic pattern, but emerges as a "round" and fully developed character who reinforces his goodness by his humanity.

The other characters are "flat"; they are types, rather than individuals, and are depicted by an emphasis on a single characteristic; greediness sums up Mrs. Tow-ouse, while Mrs. Slipslop comes to life through her malapropisms. "I describe not men, but manners; not an individual, but a species," Fielding states in Book III, Chapter 1; portraying people as types enables him to include them more easily in his comic visions; we can more easily survey the eccentricities of the rest of the species, using our detachment (Adams' detachment) to place and criticize them.

There are two important points to be made about Fielding's method of characterization. First, when asked about the province of the novel as a genre, most people would probably reply in terms of "the real, the actual, and the everyday." Consider what Fielding does. All of the characters in *Joseph Andrews*, with one exception, reveal themselves in a realistic and vividly portrayed setting. The exception, of course, is Parson Adams, who exists in the same world, but does not relate to it and, in this way, he becomes a positive force. It is the task of the novelist to convey the actual flavor of life, but there is a place for idealism as well as realism. Just as Fielding's control gives an order to the fragments of real life, so Adams' naiveté and

innocence add an extra dimension to the strong sense of actuality conveyed in Joseph Andrews.

The second point concerns the idea of appearance. In real life we must always judge people by externals; the novel, however, offers an extra dimension. In the novel, we can penetrate the facades and see what people are really thinking, whereas in real life we have only the evidence of their words and actions. This is not a process in which Fielding indulges himself, however; his dramatic instinct often has his characters confront each other in much the same way that they might in real life. The characters may be deceived by or mistaken about each other, but the theme of appearance versus reality is communicated to the reader.

Fielding clearly shows us how difficult it is to penetrate through the trappings to the heart of man. Although Fielding's description of his work as a "comic romance" or "comic epic-poem in prose" introduces the elements of parody and burlesque, certain qualities of the epic itself, and romance, do

inject themselves into Joseph Andrews. These are the qualities of imagination, idealism, and a happy conclusion, all of which serve to underscore Fielding's purpose in writing this book. In his preface, Fielding is careful to disassociate himself from the "productions of romance writers," yet it must be admitted that the end of Joseph Andrews, with its accounts of gypsies and changeling babies, has certain elements of the fairy tale come true. In fact, Fielding's achievement is to superimpose this positive act of imagination on the raw material of the very real world. His achievement, in Samuel Johnson's words, "may be termed, not improperly, the comedy of romance, and is to be conducted nearly by the rules of comic poetry," terms remarkably similar to Fielding's own. This "comedy of romance" requires, Johnson claims, "together with that learning which is to be gained from books, that experience which can never be attained by solitary diligence, but must arise from general converse and accurate observation of the living world." It is this combination of the raw and the refined, of the real and the ideal, that Fielding has created in his "comic epic-poem in prose."

Fielding maintains a positive outlook in the book, emphasizing charitable and virtuous action. Adams is a pugilistic parson, and both he and Joseph always act on their beliefs, defending them by force if necessary. Adams is offended by the insipid Methodist doctrine of faith against good works; to him, human beings distinguish themselves by what they do: "a virtuous and good Turk, or heathen, are more acceptable in the sight of their Creator than a vicious and wicked Christian, though his faith was as perfectly orthodox as St. Paul's himself." In a similar vein, Fielding advocates through Joseph a degree of control. Joseph's self-restraint contrasts with Lady Booby's turbulent passion, on which her reason has little effect. But Fielding's treatment is always warm; Lady Booby, for example, is not savagely condemned; Fielding's reason is not Swift's. In Joseph Andrews, Fielding has written with both his head and his heart; he has refused some things and assented warmly to others so that the positive delight which we take in a book that admittedly has echoes of Shamela shows how far he has traveled in his literary craft.

## **Laurence Sterne: Tristram Shandy**

The action covered in Tristram Shandy spans the years 1680-1766. Sterne obscures the story's underlying chronology, however, by rearranging the order of the various pieces of his tale. He also subordinates the basic plot framework by weaving together a number of different stories, as well as such disparate materials as essays, sermons, and legal documents. There are, nevertheless, two clearly discernible narrative lines in the book.

The first is the plot sequence that includes Tristram's conception, birth, christening, and accidental circumcision. (This sequence extends somewhat further in Tristram's treatment of his "breeching," the problem of his education, and his first and second tours of France, but these events are handled less extensively and are not as central to the text.) It takes six volumes to cover this chain of events, although comparatively few pages are spent in actually advancing such a simple plot. The story occurs as a series of accidents, all of which seem calculated to confound Walter Shandy's hopes and expectations for his son. The manner of his conception is the first disaster, followed by the flattening of his nose at birth, a misunderstanding in which he is given the wrong name, and an accidental run-in with a falling window-sash. The catastrophes that befall Tristram are actually relatively trivial; only in the context of Walter Shandy's eccentric, pseudo-scientific theories do they become calamities. The second major plot consists of the fortunes of Tristram's Uncle Toby. Most of the details of this story are concentrated in the final third of the novel, although they are alluded to and developed in piecemeal fashion from the very beginning. Toby receives a wound to the groin while in the army, and it takes him four years to recover. When he is able to move around again, he retires to the country with the idea of constructing a scaled replica of the scene of the battle in which he was injured. He becomes obsessed with re-enacting those battles, as well as with the whole history and theory of fortification and defense. The Peace of Utrecht slows him down in these "hobby-horsical" activities, however, and it is during this lull that he falls under the spell of Widow Wadman. The novel ends with the long-promised account of their unfortunate affair.

### **Tobias Smollet: Roderick Random / Humphrey Clinker**

*Roderick Random*: This book is a great deal of fun to read. It is lively, witty and amusing, as well as strikingly modern in displaying the vicissitudes of fortune in the character Roderick. These vagaries of fortune, from penury, to wealth, from imprisonment, to landed gent are also reflected in the vagaries in the moods virtues (or lack thereof) in our title character, thus lending Roderick, for most of the book, a three-dimensional aspect and not simply another cardboard cutout for an 18th century picaresque.-But the book does have its faults, particularly as we draw to what we foresee will be the inevitable end. It's just too pat for many modern readers to swallow. Or at least it is for this one. The Oxford edition's notes, while helpful in places, especially with nautical turns of phrase, and for those with a scholarly interest in the location of certain streets in the London in Smollet's day etc tend to become rather annoying at times, almost to the point of insulting the well-read reader's intelligence. Many times I found myself saying, "As if I could not have figured that out on my own from the context!" The book, not surprisingly, is at its best when it is at its most autobiographical and descriptive, particularly the passages of Roderick's first sea voyage. One of my favourite passages that illustrates the lively vitality and humour of both the character and the work comes when Roderick, feared to be dying of typhoid fever, is visited by a priest to make a last confession:

""Without doubt, you have been guilty of numberless transgressions, to which youth is subject, as swearing, drunkenness, whoredom, and adultery; tell me therefore, without reserve, the particulars of each, especially the last, that I may be acquainted with the true state of your conscience...."

Roderick, a thoroughgoing, Scottish Ant-Papist will have none of it and soon recovers.

I am reminded of Joseph Conrad's short story "Youth" which I recommend to all who enjoy this book. - But, in the end, Conrad's story is the philosophically deeper and more true-to-life narrative than this one.-Again, the ending, for this reader, was just too pat and soppy. I am not

trying to be a "spoiler" here and ruin the reading of the book and imperiling this review, by telling you potential readers what it is. You don't need me for that. You will have figured it out about a hundred pages before the end. And, for the record, I believe that this misguided idea of not being able to include the reviewer's analysis of a book's ending seriously handicaps the reviewer as well as insults the reader's intelligence.

*The Expedition of Humphrey Clinker* is a picaresque novel that was written towards the very end of the temperamental Smollett's life and published shortly before his death in 1771. It is now regarded as his most accomplished novel, and is not coincidentally also his most mellow in outlook. His other novels and travel writing display a general hostility towards man and his actions, particularly when foreigners are involved. Here, the hostility exists between the characters that write the letters that make up the novel: primarily Matthew Bramble, Jerry Melford (his nephew), Lydia (his niece), Tabitha (his sister) and Tabitha's servant Winifred Jenkins. All have distinctive writing styles, in particular Winifred who writes with the strange but just comprehensible idiolect of an illiterate. The characters travel variously in Gloucester, London and areas of Scotland such as the filthy Edinburgh and the more acceptable Glasgow. Various characters are met, including the now-reformed Count Fathom from a previous Smollett adventure and there are numerous absurd and remarkable happenings such as disputes leading to duels, imprisonment, failed romances, jealousy and an inconveniently overturned carriage. The novel satirises the society of the late eighteenth century to great effect and held together with Smollett's characteristically coarse sense of humour - usually at the expense of his characters and the stereotypes they represent.

## DRAMA

### **Ben Jonson: Volpone**

Jonson thought that the poet had a moral function to educate, and the purpose of *Volpone* is to teach lessons about greed. The topic is quite serious, although this is comedy, and there are many moments of humor in the play, especially when Volpone is feigning illness and lies disguised. This play is, in many ways, a play within a play. Volpone and Mosca are actors playing roles throughout, but they are also directors leading the three fortune hunters, Corvino, Voltore, and Corbaccio, through their performances. Jonson differed from other playwrights of the period in that he did not use old stories, fables, or histories as the sources for his plays. Instead, Jonson used a plot "type" as the source for most of his plays. In *Volpone*, the plot is the familiar one of a swindle. The action is set in Venice, which many Englishmen thought was a center of debauchery and sin. Jonson's characters are not well defined, nor do they have any depth. Instead, they are "types" familiar to the audience: the dishonest lawyer, the jealous old husband married to a beautiful young girl, and the miserly old man who cannot be satisfied until he can amass even more money.

### **Cyril Tournier: The Revenger's Tragedy**

The play is a disturbingly macabre yet gruesomely funny tale of sex, lust, rape, incest, revenge and other family values. *The Revenger's Tragedy* is a comedy in which you will not know who is the goodie and who is the badie, but all will be punished as they deserve.

## **John Webster: The White Devil**

The Duke of Brachiano is consumed with a violent passion for Vittoria Cormbona. But there is a bit of a problem there in that he is married and so is she. But this seems of little consequence to him, as he enlists the help of his servants/friends/even her brother(!), and has his wife and her husband done away with under some very suspicious circumstances. Vittoria gets blamed for it, and even though there is no real evidence against her, Cardinal Monticelso condemns her to a "convent for penitent whores." Brachiano intercepts a letter meant for Vittoria, that gets him good and jealous and so he hurriedly elopes with her. About this time, Cardinal Monticelso is elected Pope and about the first thing he does is excommunicate Vittoria and Brachiano, [who have since moved to Padua.] Francisco, Locovico and Gasparo supposedly go to work for Brachiano, but what they really do is poison then strangle him, to revenge the death of (his wife) Isabella. They tell him this while he is dying, BTW. That done, they move on to Vittoria and stab her.

## **William Congreve: The Way Of The World**

The plot of "Way" is so complex that it may be partly to blame for the play's lack of critical success when Congreve first put it on. However, once mastered, the play begins to shed a glorious light upon the contemporary issues of courtship, truthfulness, and testing the quality of one's prospective mate and allies. It's also enormously funny and prophetic (like Petulant, the would-be society man, Lucienne Goldberg [Linda Tripp's "literary agent" and wiretapping guru] liked to have herself paged at trendy Washington restaurants in order to create the impression she was "in demand" among the fashionable set). Therefore, I lay out for you the basic lineaments of the plot. The real stuff of this play is in its conversation.

Lady W. resists Mirabell's marriage to her niece, Millamant, because Mirabell has toyed with Lady W's affections, and has married off her daughter, his former mistress, to the notorious rake, Fainall.

Mirabell plots to "marry" Lady W. to "Sir Rowland" (his servant, Waitwell), which appeals to her vanity and to her desire for revenge. "Sir Rowland" is rumored to be Mirabel's uncle, a man who hates M. and who could, by having a male child of his own, disinherit Mirabell in M's father's will. IT's a rumor Mirabell started himself, and he takes great pains to make sure it's spreading in his interrogation of Petulant in Act I. Mrs. Fainall's aids M. in this fiction because she is disgusted with her husband's unfaithfulness with Mrs. Marwood.

Mrs. Marwood sees Mrs. Fainall plotting with Foible, and tells Lady W. that Sir Wilfull Witwoud (Lady W's cousin) would make a good and safe match for Millamant. Millamant's inheritance will not allow her to refuse a reasonable match proposed by her guardian, Lady W. Also, all of that forfeited inheritance will go from Lady W's niece, Millamant, to Lady W's daughter, Mrs. Fainall, whose fortunes are controlled by her husband (who would then give it to Mrs. Marwood, she thinks (see Act 2, Scene 3 [1927])). Mrs. Marwood, is motivated to aid Fainall, though she hates him, because she has been offended by Millamant's careless taunts about her age and by overhearing Mrs. Fainall plotting with Foible.

Mrs. Marwood tells Fainall he now can divorce Mrs. Fainall (jealously presuming Mrs. F. is having an affair with Mirabell). Fainall foils the match Lady Wishfort plans between Millamant and Sir Wilfull by getting the knight drunk.

In Act V, Fainall springs his trap, demanding Lady W's estate, his wife's estate (Mrs. Fainall), and half of Millamant's inheritance (Lady W's niece) in return for Fainall's not charging his wife with adultery. Mrs. Fainall dares them to attempt prosecution because she has proof of innocence, but Mrs. Marwood convinces Lady W. that the press coverage of the trial would humiliate the family.

Lady W offers Mirabell Millamant's hand in return for helping her escape (saving W's and M's fortunes, but apparently leaving Mrs. F. in deep trouble).

Mirabell reveals that Mrs. Fainall, before her marriage, had signed all her possessions over to him to prevent their falling into Fainall's hands. Thus, Fainall has nothing to sue for.

### **Oliver Goldsmith: She Stoops To Conquer**

#### *Prologue*

Mr. Woodward, a contemporary comic actor, walks on stage weeping at the death of comedy. His last hope is that Goldsmith's play will make him laugh and revive the comic arts. (This prologue was written by the era's foremost actor and producer, David Garrick).

#### *Act I, Scene i*

Mr. Hardcastle has selected for his daughter's husband someone neither have met, the son of his old friend, Sir Charles Marlow. Kate fears she will not like him because her father described him as handsome but reserved.

#### *Act I, Scene ii*

At the Three Pigeons Tavern, Hardcastle's stepson, Tony Lumpkin, sings with his drinking buddies. The landlord interrupts, saying that two London gentlemen have lost their way. As a joke, Tony tells the men, Marlow and Hastings, that they remain far from their destination, Hardcas.....

... Kate and Tony don't get married at the end.

### **Richard Brinsley Sheridan: The School for Scandal**

THE middle-aged and wealthy bachelor, Sir Peter Teazle, has married the young and comely daughter of a country squire. The fashionable society of which Lady Teazle through through her marriage becomes a part, occupies itself mainly with malicious gossip whose arrows no one, however chaste, can completely escape. By far the most dangerous of these backbiting cliques is the one led by Lady Sneerwell.

This lady is attempting through lies and letters written by the forger, Snake, to break up the love affair between Charles Surface and Sir Peter's ward, Maria, hoping to get Charles for herself. To this end she has joined forces with Charles' brother, Joseph, a hypocritical youth who enjoys an excellent reputation in contrast to his brother's wild and extravagant habits. Joseph has his eye on the fortune that will one day come to Maria and is backed in his suit by Sir Peter who has been utterly fooled by the young man's righteous exterior. Maria sees through Joseph, however, and turns a cold ear in spite of her guardian's expressed wishes.

Meanwhile Sir Oliver Surface arrives unexpectedly from Australia. He hears such conflicting reports of his nephews and prospective heirs that he decides to look them over before he makes his arrival known. He approaches Charles in the guise of a money lender and in the famous "auction" scene buys the family portraits. Throughout the transaction he is impressed with Charles' high sense of honor and obligation to those less fortunate. When he approaches Joseph as a poor relation begging help, Joseph is revealed in his true colors.

Now gossip has linked Lady Teazle's name with that of Charles Surface, but in reality she has been indulging for fashion's sake in an affair with Joseph. The rumors about Lady Teazle and

Charles come at last to Sir Peter's ears and, much distressed, he goes to Joseph's apartment to consult with him. Lady Teazle, who is enjoying a tryst with Joseph, sees Sir Peter's arrival and hastily hides behind a screen. Sir Peter, in turn, hides in a closet, when Charles unexpectedly arrives. The latter inadvertently reveals Lady Teazle behind the screen and Sir Peter, coming out of his closet, revises his estimate of Joseph.

Lady Teazle throws herself on Sir Peter's mercy with the frank confession that she was pretending to an affair because it was the fashion, but admits that her only real interest is in her own husband. Sir Oliver, meanwhile, has rounded up Snake, the forger. His confession brings about a reconciliation between Charles and Maria, and Sir Peter gladly withdraws his objections to this match.