

**THE BRITISH NOVELISTS.
WITH AN ESSAY AND
PREFACES, BIOGRAPHICAL
AND CRITICAL, VOL. XXVI**

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The British novelists. With an essay and prefaces, biographical and critical, Vol. XXVI by Anna Laetitia Barbauld

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ANNA LAETITIA BARBAULD

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BY
MRS. BARBAULD.

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1810.

THE
HISTORY OF
R A S S E L A S,

PRINCE OF ABISSINIA.

BY SAMUEL JOHNSON, LL. D.

ALMORAN

AND

H A M E T.

AN

ORIENTAL TALE.

BY DR. HAWKESWORTH.

JOHNSON,

HERCULES, it is said, once wielded the distaff; and the Hercules of literature, Dr. Johnson, has not disdained to be the author of a novel. To say the truth, nothing which he has written has more the touch of genius than *Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia*: nor do any of his performances bear stronger marks of his peculiar character. It is solemn, melancholy and philosophical. The frame of the story is an elegant and happy exertion of fancy. It was probably suggested to his mind from recollections of the impression made upon his fancy by a book which he translated when he first entered on his literary career, namely, *Father Lobo's Account of a Voyage to Abyssinia*.

In that country, it is said, the younger branches of the royal family, instead of being sacrificed, as in some of the Eastern monarchies, to the jealousy of the reigning sovereign, are secluded from the world in a romantic and beautiful valley, where they are liberally provided with every thing that can gratify their tastes or amuse their solitude. This recess, which Dr. Johnson calls *the happy valley*, he has described with much richness of imagination. It is represented as being shut in by inaccessible mountains, and only to be entered through a cavern closed up with massy gates of iron, which were thrown

open only once a year, on the annual visit of the emperor. At that time artists and teachers of every kind, capable of contributing to the amusement or solace of the princes, were admitted; but once admitted, they were immured for life with the royal captives. Every charm of nature and every decoration of art is supposed to be collected in this charming spot, and that its inhabitants had been, in general, content with the round of amusements provided for them, till at length Rasselas, a young prince of a sprightly and active genius, grows weary of an existence so monotonous, and is seized with a strong desire of seeing the world at large. In pursuance of this project, he contrives to dig a passage through the mountain, and to escape from this paradise with his favourite sister Nekayah and her attendant, and the philosopher who had assisted them in their enterprise, and who, being previously acquainted with the world, is to assist their inexperience. They are all equally disgusted with the languor of sated desires and the inactivity of unvaried quiet, and agree to range the world in order to make their *choice of life*.

The author, having thus stretched his canvass, proceeds to exhibit and to criticize the various situations and modes of human existence; public life and private; marriage and celibacy; commerce, rustic employments, religious retirement, &c., and finds that in all there is something good and something bad—that marriage has many pains, but celibacy has no pleasures; that the hermit cannot secure himself from vice, but by retiring from the exercise of virtue; that

shepherds are hoors, and philosophers—only men. Unable to decide amidst such various appearances of good and evil, and having seen enough of the world to be disgusted with it, they end their search by resolving to return with the first opportunity in order to end their days in the happy valley; and this, to use the author's words in the title of his last chapter, is "the conclusion, in which nothing is concluded."

Such is the philosophic view which Dr. Johnson and many others have taken of life; and such indecision would probably be the consequence of thus narrowly sifting the advantages and disadvantages of every station in this mixt state, if done without that feeling reference to each man's particular position, and particular inclinations, which is necessary to incline the balance. If we choose to imagine an insulated being, detached from all connexions and all duties, it may be difficult for mere reason to direct his choice; but no man is so insulated: we are woven into the web of society, and to each individual it is seldom dubious what *he* shall do. Very different is the search after abstract good, and the pursuit of what a being born and nurtured amidst innumerable ties of kindred and companionship, feeling his own wants, impelled by his own passions, and influenced by his own peculiar associations, finds best for *him*. Except he is indolent or fastidious, he will seldom hesitate upon his choice of life. The same position holds good with regard to duty. We may bewilder ourselves in abstract questions of general good, or puzzle our moral sense with imagi-

nary cases of conscience; but it is generally obvious enough to every man what duty dictates to him, in each particular case, as it comes before him.

The proper moral to be drawn from *Rasselas* is, therefore, not that goods and evils are so balanced against each other that no unmixed happiness is to be found in life,—a deduction equally trite and obvious; nor yet that a reasoning man can make no choice,—but rather that a *merely* reasoning man will be likely to make no choice,—and therefore that it becomes every man to make early that choice to which his particular position, his honest partialities, his individual propensities, his early associations impel him. Often does it happen that, while the over-refined and speculative are hesitating and doubting, the plain honest youth has secured happiness. Without this conclusion, the moral effect of the piece, loaded as it is with the miseries of life, and pointing out no path of action as more eligible than another, would resemble that of *Candide*, where the party, after all their adventures, agree to plant cabbages in their own garden; but the gloomy ideas of the English philosopher are softened and guarded by sound principles of religion.

Along with Voltaire, he strongly paints and perhaps exaggerates the miseries of life; but instead of evading their force by laughing at them, or drawing from them a satire against Providence, which *Candide* may be truly said to be, our author turns the mind to the solid consolations of a future state: “All,” says he, “that

virtue can afford is quietness of conscience, and a steady prospect of a future state: this may enable us to endure calamity with patience, but remember that patience must suppose pain."

Such is the plan of this philosophical romance, in the progress of which the author makes many just strictures on human life, and many acute remarks on the springs of human passions; but they are the passions of the species, not of the individual. It is life, as viewed at a distance by a speculative man, in a kind of bird's-eye view; not painted with the glow and colouring of an actor in the busy scene: we are not led to say, "This man is painted naturally," but, "Such is the nature of man." The most striking of his pictures is that of the philosopher, who imagined himself to have the command of the weather, and who had fallen into that species of insanity by indulging in the luxury of solitary musing, or what is familiarly called castle-building. His state is strikingly and feelingly described, and no doubt with the peculiar interest arising from what the author had felt and feared in his own mind; for it is well known that at times he suffered under a morbid melancholy near akin to derangement, which occasionally clouded his mighty powers; and no doubt he had often indulged in these unprofitable abstractions of thought, these seducing excursions of fancy.

The following remark ought to startle those who have permitted their mind to feed itself in solitude with its own creations and wishes. "All power of fancy over reason is a degree of insanity; but while this power is such as we can