

NOTE FROM INSTRUCTOR: If you are not familiar with Samuel Johnson, you will probably have little understanding of this essay. Learning about Johnson's life and works is a worthwhile pursuit. Start here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_Johnson

SAMUEL JOHNSON ON THE SUBJECT OF PEDANTRY

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*Quo virtus, quo ferat error. HOR. De Ar. Poet. 308.
Now say, where virtue stops, and vice begins?*

AS any action or posture, long continued, will distort and disfigure the limbs; so the mind likewise is crippled and contracted by perpetual application to the same set of ideas. It is easy to guess the trade of an artizan by his knees, his fingers, or his shoulders: and there are few among men of the more liberal professions, whose minds do not carry the brand of their calling, or whose conversation does not quickly discover to what class of the community they belong.

These peculiarities have been of great use, in the general hostility which every part of mankind exercises against the rest, to furnish insults and sarcasms. Every art has its dialect, uncouth and ungrateful to all whom custom has not reconciled to its sound, and which therefore becomes ridiculous by a slight misapplication, or unnecessary repetition.

The general reproach with which ignorance revenges the superciliousness of learning, is that of pedantry; a censure which every man incurs, who has at any time the misfortune to talk to those who cannot understand him, and by which the modest and timorous are sometimes frightened from the display of their acquisitions, and the exertion of their powers.

The name of a pedant is so formidable to young men when they first sally from their colleges, and is so liberally scattered by those who mean to boast their elegance of education, easiness of manners, and knowledge of the world, that it seems to require particular consideration; since, perhaps, if it were once understood, many a heart might be freed from

painful apprehensions, and many a tongue delivered from restraint.

Pedantry is the unseasonable ostentation of learning. It may be discovered either in the choice of a subject, or in the manner of treating it. He is undoubtedly guilty of pedantry, who, when he has made himself master of some abstruse and uncultivated part of knowledge, obtrudes his remarks and discoveries upon those whom he believes unable to judge of his proficiency, and from whom, as he cannot fear contradiction, he cannot properly expect applause.

To this error the student is sometimes betrayed by the natural recurrence of the mind to its common employment, by the pleasure which every man receives from the recollection of pleasing images, and the desire of dwelling upon topics, on which he knows himself able to speak with justness. But because we are seldom so far prejudiced in favour of each other, as to search out for palliations, this failure of politeness is imputed always to vanity; and the harmless collegiate, who, perhaps, intended entertainment and instruction, or at worst only spoke without sufficient reflection upon the character of his hearers, is censured as arrogant or overbearing, and eager to extend his renown, in contempt of the convenience of society and the laws of conversation.

All discourse of which others cannot partake, is not only an irksome usurpation of the time devoted to pleasure and entertainment, but what never fails to excite very keen resentment, an insolent assertion of superiority, and a triumph over less enlightened understandings. The pedant is, therefore, not only heard with weariness, but malignity; and those who conceive themselves insulted by his knowledge, never fail to tell with acrimony how injudiciously it was exerted.

To avoid this dangerous imputation, scholars sometimes divest themselves with too much haste of their academical formality, and in their endeavours to accommodate their notions and their style to common conceptions, talk rather of any thing than of that which they understand, and sink into insipidity of sentiment and meanness of expression.

There prevails among men of letters an opinion, that all appearance of science is particularly hateful to women; and that therefore, whoever desires to be well received in female assemblies, must qualify himself by a total rejection of all that is serious, rational, or important; must consider argument or criticism, as perpetually interdicted; and devote all his attention to trifles, and all his eloquence to compliment.

Students often form their notions of the present generation from the writings of the past, and are not very early informed of those changes which the gradual diffusion of knowledge, or the sudden caprice of fashion, produces in the world. Whatever might be the state of female literature in the last century, there is now no longer any danger lest the scholar should want an adequate audience at the tea-table; and whoever thinks it necessary to regulate his conversation by antiquated rules, will be rather despised for his futility than caressed for his politeness.

To talk intentionally in a manner above the comprehension of those whom we address, is unquestionable pedantry; but surely complaisance requires, that no man should, without proof, conclude his company incapable of following him to the highest elevation of his fancy, or the utmost extent of his knowledge. It is always safer to err in favour of others than of ourselves, and therefore we seldom hazard much by endeavouring to excel.

It ought at least to be the care of learning, when she quits her exaltation, to descend with dignity. Nothing is more despicable than the airiness and jocularly of a man bred to severe science, and solitary meditation. To trifle agreeably is a secret which schools cannot impart; that gay negligence

and vivacious levity, which charm down resistance whenever they appear, are never attainable by him who, having spent his first years among the dust of libraries, enters late into the gay world with an unpliant attention and established habits.

It is observed in the panegyrick on Fabricus the mechanist, that, though forced by publick employments into mingled conversation, he never lost the modesty and seriousness of the convent, nor drew ridicule upon himself by an affected imitation of fashionable life. To the same praise every man devoted to learning ought to aspire. If he attempts the softer arts of pleasing, and endeavours to learn the graceful bow and the familiar embrace, the insinuating accent and the general smile, he will lose the respect due to the character of learning, without arriving at the envied honour of doing any thing with elegance and facility.

Theophrastus was discovered not to be a native of Athens, by so strict an adherence to the Attick dialect, as shewed that he had learned it not by custom, but by rule. A man not early formed to habitual elegance, betrays, in like manner, the effects of his education, by an unnecessary anxiety of behaviour. It is as possible to become pedantick, by fear of pedantry, as to be troublesome by ill-timed civility. There is no kind of impertinence more justly censurable than his who is always labouring to level thoughts to intellects higher than his own; who apologizes for every word which his own narrowness of converse inclines him to think unusual; keeps the exuberance of his faculties under visible restraint; is solicitous to anticipate inquiries by needless explanations; and endeavours to shade his own abilities, lest weak eyes should be dazzled with their lustre.