

## *Prefaces*

A PREFACE, being the entrance to a book, should invite by its beauty. An elegant porch announces the splendour of the interior. I have observed, that ordinary readers skip over these little elaborate compositions. The ladies consider them as so many pages lost, which might better be employed in the addition of a picturesque scene, or a tender letter to their novels. For my part I always gather amusement from a preface, be it awkwardly or skilfully written; for dulness, or impertinence, may raise a laugh for a page or two: A preface is frequently a superior composition to the work itself; for, long before the days of Johnson, it had been a custom with many authors to solicit for this department of their work the ornamental contribution of a man of genius. Cicero tells his friend Atticus, that he had a volume of prefaces or introductions always ready by him to be used as circumstances required. These must have been like our periodical essays. A good preface is as essential to put the reader into good humour, as a good prologue is to a play, or a fine symphony to an opera, containing something analogous to the work itself; so that we may feel its want as a desire not elsewhere to be gratified. The Italians call the preface *La salsa del libro*, the sauce of the book, and if well seasoned it creates an

appetite in the reader to devour the book itself. A preface badly composed prejudices the reader against the work. Authors are not equally fortunate in these little introductions; some can compose volumes more skilfully than prefaces, and others can finish a preface who could never be capable of finishing a book.

On a very elegant preface prefixed to an ill-written book, it was observed that they ought never to have *come together*; but a sarcastic wit remarked that he considered such *marriages* were allowable, for they were *not of kin*.

In prefaces an affected haughtiness or an affected humility are alike despicable. There is a deficient dignity in Robertson's; but the haughtiness is now to our purpose. This is called by the French "*La Morgue littéraire*," the surly pomposity of literature. It is sometimes used by writers who have succeeded in their first work, while the failure of their subsequent productions appears to have given them a literary hypochondriasm. Dr. Armstrong, after his classical poem, never shook hands cordially with the public for not relishing his barren labours. In the *preface* to his lively "Sketches" he tells us, "he could give them much bolder strokes as well as more delicate touches, but that he *dreads the danger of*

*writing too well*, and feels the value of his own labour too sensibly to bestow it upon the *mobility*." This is pure milk compared to the gall in the *preface* to his poems. There he tells us, "that at last he has taken the *trouble to collect them!* What he has destroyed would, probably enough, have been better received by the *great majority of readers*. But he has always *most heartily despised their opinion*." These prefaces remind one of the *prologi galeati*, prefaces with a helmet! as St. Jerome entitles the one to his Version of the Scriptures. These *armed prefaces* were formerly very common in the age of literary controversy; for half the business of an author consisted then, either in replying, or anticipating a reply, to the attacks of his opponent.

Prefaces ought to be dated, as these become, after a series of editions, leading and useful circumstances in literary history.

Fuller with quaint humour observes on INDEXES— "An INDEX is a necessary implement, and no impediment of a book, except in the same sense wherein the carriages of an army are termed *Impedimenta*. Without this, a large author is but a labyrinth without a clue to direct the reader therein. I confess there is a lazy kind of learning which is *only Indical*; when scholars (like adders which only bite the horse's heels) nibble

but at the tables, which are *calces librorum*, neglecting the body of the book. But though the idle deserve no crutches (let not a staff be used by them, but on them), pity it is the weary should be denied the benefit thereof, and industrious scholars prohibited the accommodation of an index, most used by those who most pretend to contemn it."