

Daniel Defoe's proposal for an Academy

From *An Essay upon Projects*, published in 1697. In this transcription, I have kept the spelling, punctuation, and capitalization of the original printing.

Of ACADEMIES.

We have in *England* fewer of these than in any part of the World, at least where Learning is in so much esteem. But to make amends, the two great Seminaries we have, are without comparison the *Greatest*, I won't say the *Best*, in the World; and tho' much might be said here concerning Universities in general, and Foreign Academies in particular, I content my self with noting that part in which we seem defective. The *French*, who justly value themselves upon erecting the most Celebrated Academy of *Europe*, owe the Lustre of it very much to the great Encouragement the Kings of *France* have given to it. And one of the Members making a Speech at his Entrance, tells you, *That 'tis not the least of the Glories of their Invincible Monarch, to have engross'd all the Learning of the World in that Sublime Body.*

The peculiar Study of the Academy of *Paris*, has been to Refine and Correct their own Language; which they have done to that happy degree, that we see it now spoken in all the Courts of *Christendom*, as the Language allow'd to be most universal.

I had the Honour once to be a Member of a small Society, who seem'd to offer at this Noble Design in *England*. But the Greatness of the Work, and the Modesty of the Gentlemen concern'd, prevail'd with them to desist an Enterprize which appear'd too great for Private Hands to undertake. We want indeed a *Richlieu* to commence such a Work: For I am persuaded, were there such a *Genius* in our Kingdom to lead the way, there wou'd not want Capacities who cou'd carry on the Work to a Glory equal to all that has gone before them. The *English* Tongue is a Subject not at all less worthy the Labour of such a Society than the *French*, and capable of a much greater Perfection. The Learned among the *French* will own, That the Comprehensiveness of Expression is a Glory in which the *English* Tongue not only Equals but Excels its Neighbours; *Rapin*, *St. Evremont*, and the most Eminent *French* Authors have acknowledg'd it: And my Lord *Roscommon*, who is allow'd to be a good Judge of *English*, because he wrote it as exactly as any ever did, expresses what I mean in these lines;

“For who did ever in French Authors see
“The Comprehensive English Energy?
“The weighty Bullion of one Sterling line,
“Drawn to French Wire wou'd through whole Pages shine.

“And if our Neighbours will yield us, as their greatest Critick has done, the Preference for Sublimity and Nobleness of stile, we will willingly quit all Pretensions to their Insignificant Gaiety.

'Tis great pity that a Subject so Noble shou'd not have some as Noble to attempt it: And for a Method, what greater can be set before us, than the Academy of

Paris? Which, to give the *French* their due, stands foremost among all the Great Attempts in the Learned Part of the World.

The present King of *England*, of whom we have seen the whole World writing *Panegyrics* and *Encomiums*, and whom his Enemies, when their Interest does not silence them, are apt to say more of than our selves; as in the War he has given surprizing Instances of a Greatness of Spirit more than common; so in Peace, I dare say, with Submission, he shall never have an Opportunity to illustrate his Memory more, than by such a Foundation. By which he shall have Opportunity to darken the Glory of the *French* King in Peace, as he has by his daring Attempts in the War.

Nothing but Pride loves to be flatter'd, and that only as 'tis a Vice which blinds us to our own Imperfections. I think Princes as particularly unhappy in having their Good Actions magnify'd, as their Evil Actions cover'd: But King *William*, who has already won Praise by the Steps of dangerous Virtue, seems reserv'd for some Actions which are above the Touch of Flattery, whose Praise is in themselves.

And such wou'd this be: And because I am speaking of a Work which seems to be proper only for the Hand of the King himself, I shall not presume to carry on this Chapter to the Model, as I have done in other Subjects. Only thus far;

That a society be erected by the King himself, *if his Majesty thought fit*, and composed of none but Persons of the first Figure in Learning; and 'twere to be wish'd our Gentry were so much Lovers of Learning that Birth might always be join'd with Capacity.

The Work of this Society shou'd be to encourage Polite Learning, to polish and refine the English Tongue, and advance the so much neglected Faculty of Correct Language, to establish Purity and Propriety of Stile, and to purge it from all the Irregular Additions that Ignorance and Affectation have introduc'd; and all those Innovations in Speech, if I may call them such, which some Dogmatic Writers have the Confidence to foster upon their Native Language, as if their Authority were sufficient to make their own Fancy legitimate.

By such a Society I dare say the true Glory of our *English* Stile wou'd appear; and among all the Learned Part of the World, be esteem'd, as it really is, the Noblest and most Comprehensive of all the Vulgar Languages in the World.

Into this Society should be admitted none but Persons Eminent for Learning, and yet none, or but very few, whose Business or Trade was Learning: For I may be allow'd, I suppose, to say, We have seen many great Scholars, meer Learned Men, and Graduates in the last Degree of Study, whose *English* has been far from Polite, full of Stiffness and Affectation, hard Words, and long unusual Coupling of *Syllables* and Sentences, which sound harsh and untuneable to the Ear, and shock the Reader both in Expression and Understanding.

In short, There should be room in this Society for neither *Clergyman*, *Physician*, nor *Lawyer*. Not that I wou'd put an Affront upon the Learning of any of those Honourable Employments, much less upon their Persons: But if I do think that their several Professions do naturally and severally prescribe Habits of Speech to them peculiar to their Practice, and prejudicial to the study I speak of, I believe I do them no wrong. Nor do I deny but there may be, and now are among some of all those Professions, Men of Stile and Language, great Masters of *English*, whom few men will undertake to Correct; and where such do at any time appear, their extraordinary Merit shou'd find them a Place in this Society; but it shou'd be rare, and upon very extraordinary Occasions, that such be admitted.

I wou'd therefore have this Society wholly compos'd of Gentlemen; whereof Twelve to be of the Nobility, if possible, and Twelve Private Gentlemen, and a Class

of Twelve to be left open for meer Merit, let it be found in who or what sort it would, which should lye as the Crown of their Study, who have done something eminent to deserve it. The Voice of this Society should be sufficient Authority for the Usage of Words, and sufficient also to expose the Innovations of other mens Fancies; they shou'd preside with a Sort of Judicature over the Learning of the Age, and have liberty to Correct and Censure the Exorbitance of Writers, especially of Translators. The Reputation of this Society wou'd be enough to make them the allow'd Judges of Stile and Language, and no Author wou'd have the Impudence to Coin without their Authority. *Custom*, which is now our best Authority for Words, wou'd always have its Original here, and not be allow'd without it. There shou'd be no more occasion to search for Derivations and Constructions, and 'twould be as Criminal then to *Coin Words as Money*.

The Exercises of this Society wou'd be Lectures on the *English* Tongue, Essays on the Nature, Original, Usage, Authorities, and Differences of Words, on the Propriety, Purity, and *Cadence of Stile*, and of the Politeness and *Manner* in Writing; Reflections upon Irregular Usages, and Corrections of Erroneous Customs in Words; and in short, every thing that wou'd appear necessary to the bringing our *English* Tongue to a due Perfection, and our Gentlemen to a Capacity of Writing like themselves; to banish Pride and Pedantry, and silence the Impudence and Impertinence of Young Authors, whose Ambition is to be known, tho' it be by their Folly.