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Poems

Poems and fables

Gay, John

Edinburgh, 1773

Fable X

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F A B L E X.

The ELEPHANT and the BOOKSELLER.

THE man who, with undaunted toils,
 Sails unknown seas, to unknown foils,
 With various wonders feasts his sight :
 What stranger wonders does he write !
 We read, and in description view
 Creatures which Adam never knew :
 For, when we risk no contradiction,
 It prompts the tongue to deal in fiction.
 Those things that startle me or you,
 I grant are strange ; yet may be true.
 Who doubts that elephants are found
 For science and for sense renown'd ?
 Borri records their strength of parts,
 Extent of thought, and skill in arts ;
 How they perform the law's decrees,
 And save the state the hangman's fees ;
 And how by travel understand
 The language of another land.
 Let those who question this report,
 To Pliny's ancient page resort.
 How learn'd was that sagacious breed !
 Who now (like them) the Greek can read !

As one of these, in days of yore,
 Rummag'd a shop of learning o'er ;

VOL. II.

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Not, like our modern dealers, minding
 Only the margin's breadth and binding;
 A book his curious eye detains,
 Where, with exactest care and pains,
 Were ev'ry beast and bird portray'd,
 That e'er the search of man survey'd.
 Their natures and their powers were writ,
 With all the pride of human wit.
 The page he with attention spread,
 And thus remark'd on what he read.

Man with strong reason is endu'd;
 A beast scarce instinct is allow'd.
 But let this author's wit be try'd,
 'Tis plain that neither was his guide.
 Can he discern the diff'rent natures,
 And weigh the pow'r of other creatures,
 Who by the partial work hath shown
 He knows so little of his own?
 How falsely is the spaniel drawn!
 Did man from him first learn to fawn?
 A dog proficient in the trade!
 He the chief flatt'rer nature made!
 Go, man, the ways of courts discern,
 You'll find a spaniel yet might learn.
 How can the fox's theft and plunder
 Provoke his censure, or his wonder?
 From courtiers tricks, and lawyer's arts,
 The fox might well improve his parts.
 The lion, wolf, and tyger's brood,
 He curses, for their thirst of blood:
 But is not man to man a prey?
 Beasts kill for hunger, men for pay.

The bookfeller, who heard him speak,
 And saw him turn a page of Greek,
 Thought, what a genius have I found!
 Then thus address'd with bow profound,

Learn'd Sir, if you'd employ your pen
 Against the senseless sons of men,
 Or write the history of Siam,
 No man is better pay than I am;
 Or, since you're learn'd in Greek, let's see
 Something against the Trinity.

When wrinkling with a sneer his trunk,
 Friend, quoth the elephant, you're drunk;
 E'en keep your money, and be wise:
 Leave man on man to criticise;
 For that you ne'er can want a pen
 Among the senseless sons of men.
 They unprovok'd will court the fray;
 Envy's a sharper spur than pay.
 No author ever spar'd a brother;
 Wits are game-cocks to one another.

F A B L E XI.

The PEACOCK, the TURKEY, and the GOOSE.

IN beauty faults conspicuous grow;
 The smallest speck is seen on snow.

E 2