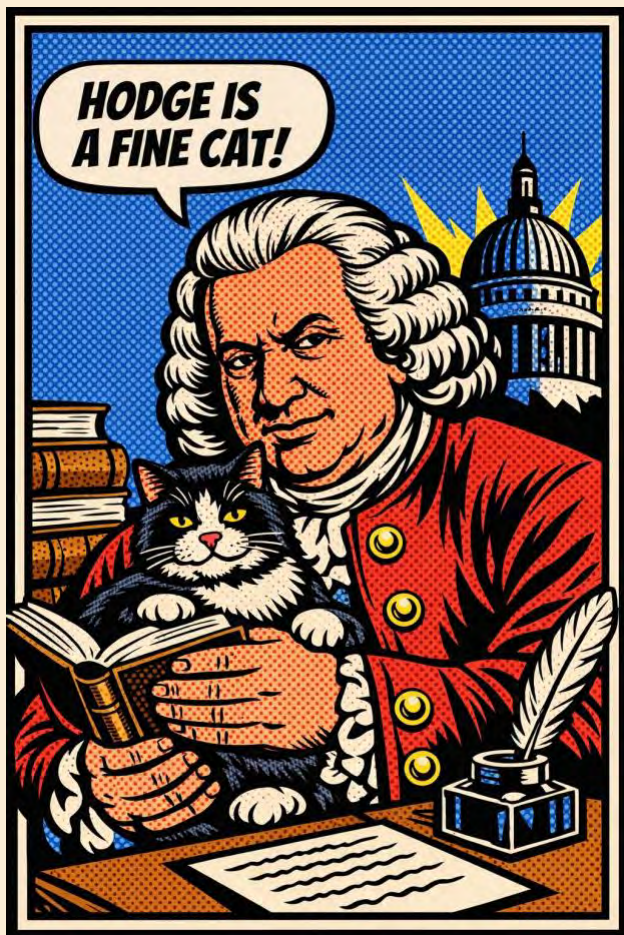


JOHNSONIAN NEWS LETTER



“I never shall forget the indulgence
with which he treated Hodge, his
cat.” – Boswell



Johnsonian News Letter

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A New Era for the JNL

Sharp-eyed readers may notice that this issue of the JNL looks a little different. This is the first issue we have put out in collaboration with our new publishing partner, Northwestern University Libraries (NUL).

When I took over as editor of the JNL about two years ago, I transitioned the publication to a digital format and set up a WordPress website for our archive. I have been adding new issues to this website as we produce them. This seemed an adequate approach for the short term. My top priorities were to reduce production expenses and keep the JNL going. However, I knew from the outset that I also wanted to look into a possible publishing partnership for the future.

In the Fall of 2025, I met with about a dozen academics who edit niche scholarly publications that are more or less analogous to the JNL and talked with them about how they produce and publish issues. After considering many possibilities, I decided that the best overall option for the JNL would be to partner with Northwestern University Libraries (NUL), which recently began publishing open access scholarly journals on its website. (I should clarify that we have entered into a partnership with Northwestern University Libraries, not Northwestern University Press.)

NUL began hosting and publishing journals recently, in large part because the cost of periodicals has been rising sharply in recent years. University libraries now spend millions of dollars each year to get access to journals that are bundled and sold by corporate publishers. The cost of periodicals has risen so sharply that university libraries have started to set up alternative avenues for academic publishing.

NUL offers web hosting and publishing for scholarly journals, but only for open-access journals edited by scholars associated with Northwestern. The JNL had already gone to an open access format, and I have been teaching at Northwestern recently, so the JNL met both basic requirements. We decided to sign on with NUL in the Spring of 2026.

I believe this partnership will be useful for the JNL in several ways.

- NUL will set up a new archive for the JNL, which will eventually replace the current archive. The old archive was fragile: it could have popped out of existence at any moment if I stepped out in front of a car or failed to pay renewal fees. The new archive will offer much better prospects for stability and longevity.
- NUL will begin assigning DOI identifier numbers to JNL content, which will make it easier to locate issues and articles on the web. The current plan is to assign one DOI *per issue* for the early issues of the JNL (which are mostly “narrated” by a single voice, like an old-fashioned evening news broadcast) and one DOI *per article* for articles published after the format change that took place when Stuart Sherman began editing the JNL in 1990.
- Going forward, NUL will ensure that JNL articles are added to various indices and bibliographic databases. As a result, it should be significantly easier for scholars to find notes and articles published in the JNL.
- The JNL will once again enjoy an affiliation with a prestigious American university. (At various times in the past, it has been affiliated with Columbia University, the University of Chicago, and Vassar College.)
- The JNL will be brought into alignment with publishing standards for open access journals. For example, we are making adjustments to the way images are presented, formatted, and captioned to ensure that image descriptions are available for disabled readers.

What won’t change is the editorial focus of the journal. We will continue to focus on Johnson, the writers he read, the people he interacted with, and the writers who have written about him.



Matthew M. Davis



A Much Bigger Bibliography of Johnsonian Studies

JACK LYNCH[†]

My latest project began as an experiment to find out whether the current generation of so-called artificial intelligence – the generative AI provided by large language models – could do anything useful for a fairly traditional scholar of eighteenth-century studies. It can be found on [my website](#).

Though I once had a hand in what was then known as humanities computing, and is now known as digital humanities, I haven't kept up. I know today's digital tools can do impressive things, but most of those things don't appeal to me. I'm not interested in coding, distant reading, network analysis, or visualization tools. I also have no desire, for reasons both practical and principled, to have AI write anything for me that I intend to present as my own. Nor do I want AI to do the hard work of reading for me. Engagement with texts is, at least in the kind of scholarship I want to do, irreplaceable, and I don't want proxies for texts. But if AI tools can bring me closer to texts I should read, particularly by sorting through the vast amount that's been published, then they may have real value.

This curiosity prompted me to return to a project I began in the previous millennium, an enumerative bibliography of scholarship related to Johnson that continued the series of bibliographies by James L. Clifford, Donald J. Greene, and John A. Vance between 1951 and 1987. The latest of those bibliographies covered up to the year 1985, so I began collecting citations from 1986 and later. My first contribution took the form of a long article in the pages of *The Age of Johnson* 10 (1999); the following year it appeared as a standalone *Bibliography of Johnsonian Studies, 1986–1998*, from AMS Press. Not long after that I made the whole thing available on the World Wide Web, and I kept it up to date through the mid-2010s.

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But life got busy as I was dragged into university administration. The regular updates slowed, then eventually stopped altogether. Last year, though, I decided it was time to bring the old project up to date. I turned to all the library databases I had access to and downloaded citations to the last decade's worth of scholarly books and articles on Johnson — more than 1,500 of them.

The first question was how to integrate these new items into my larger bibliography. I relied on the citation manager Zotero, which I've been using to keep track of scholarly sources for some time. It's freeware, available for Windows, Mac, Linux, and mobile devices; it's easy to search and it can produce bibliographies in dozens of formats. Getting the new material into Zotero was easy: library databases spit out files in .bib (BibTeX) format, which is easily read by citation managers, so I quickly built a Zotero database containing the new records. But the old bibliography had been assembled by hand, as it were, and it resisted easy translation into consistent records. Free-form information, not divided into clearly demarcated fields, is a nightmare for databases, which struggle to distinguish chapters from articles, book series from journals, and volume numbers from issue numbers.

That was the first challenge I set for AI. I fed Google's Gemini a portion of my online bibliography and instructed it to convert it into .bib files I could import into Zotero. It obliged. It took a few tries to get everything right, but in the end it did an impressive job, saving me dozens of hours of tedious data entry. The 3,000 items in my old bibliography joined the 1,500 from new sources, I weeded out the duplicates, and it was up to date.

But why stop with my own bibliography? I got my hands on PDFs of the Clifford, Greene, and Vance bibliographies and asked Gemini to give them the same treatment as mine. The 5,500 items in those bibliographies (without any of the compilers' commentary) became .bib records and joined the 4,500 records in my database. And why stop with Johnson? I had always limited my coverage to items of specifically Johnsonian interest, including items related to James Boswell and Hester Lynch Piozzi only when they also touched on Johnson. This time, though, I expanded my scope: everything I was able to find related to Johnson, Boswell, or Piozzi made it in. The Boswellian bibliographies of Brown and Cochrane got the same treatment as Clifford, Greene, and Vance. There is no comparable bibliography of Piozzi, but I collected everything I could and integrated

that as well. The result was an omnibus bibliography of more than 10,000 items of Johnsonian, Boswellian, and Piozzian publications from 1738 to 2026.

The next step was seeking out older items that had escaped the attention of earlier bibliographers, including myself. A great deal of old material has been cataloged in recent decades, including countless eighteenth- and nineteenth-century newspapers and magazines. I pulled it all together, converted it to .bib files, and watched as the Zotero database grew.

The result is a bibliography of more than 27,500 items, including around 2,300 books and pamphlets, 2,700 book chapters, 5,800 newspaper articles, 1,200 magazine articles, and 14,700 journal articles, of which about 6,700 are book reviews. About 1,700 come from the eighteenth century, 4,100 from the nineteenth, 16,400 from the twentieth, and 5,200 from the first quarter of the twenty-first. They range in length from a three-line letter to the editor to the three million words of Johnson's *Dictionary*.

A bibliography of this size has obvious advantages, but the needle-in-a-haystack problem is real: how are we supposed to know what's *in* those 27,500 items? Some are helpfully titled — we have a pretty good idea of what kinds of information we'll find in an article titled "Was Dr. Johnson a Smoker?" or "A Copy of Shakespeare's Works Which Formerly Belonged to Dr. Johnson." But what to do with the many hundreds with titles like "Boswell Up-to-Date," "Dr. Johnson Discomfited," "The Greatest Thinkers," or "Anecdote of Dr. Johnson"? What to do, heaven help us, with the 250 items titled simply "Dr. Johnson," or the 450 titled "Samuel Johnson"? They've been sitting in libraries, indexed but presumably unread, for generations. How many contain things we might care to consult?

Clifford, Greene, and Vance addressed this problem with a numerical taxonomy of their own devising: heading 1 covered "Bibliography"; heading 2 was "Editions"; heading 3 was "Biography," with "Boswell" getting his own heading 4; and so on. Some top-level headings have subheadings, so under category 1 ("Bibliography") we find 1/1 ("Johnson's Writings"), 1/2 ("Writings about Johnson"), 1/3 ("Books Owned by Johnson"); under 10 ("General Comment") came 10/1 ("Johnson as Critic"), 10/2 ("Johnson as Biographer"), 10/3 ("Johnson as Conversationalist"), and so on. In each of these categories, individual items — books, chapters, articles, reviews — were numbered sequentially by date of publication: under 11/8 ("Women and Marriage") came 11/8:1, W. H. Craig's *Dr. Johnson and the Fair Sex*

(1895), then 11/8:2, G. Valbert's "Le docteur Samuel Johnson et les femmes" (1896), and so on, right up to 11/8:20, R. P. Rama's "Johnson and Rousseau on the Woman Question" (1985).

It's not a bad system. If I'm seeking commentary on *Taxation No Tyranny*, I can browse category 20, "Political and Economic Writings and Views"; if I come across a reference to William B. Todd's "Concealed Editions of Samuel Johnson" (1953) and want to know what it's about, I can look up Todd's name in the Clifford-Greene index and discover it belongs to category 20, and is therefore about the political writings. But the system was, inevitably, limited. Clifford and Greene, for instance, classify Louis Kronenberger's "Johnson and Boswell" and Charles Whibley's "Samuel Johnson: Man of Letters" under the heading 10/6, "General Assessments of Johnson and Miscellaneous Comment," but that's hardly informative; it tells us only that they're among the 396 items too miscellaneous to appear anywhere else. The categories also showed their age: it felt positively condescending to put serious modern scholarship from the 1990s under "Johnson's Views: Women and Marriage." And as scholarship in the 1980s and '90s moved away from studies of single works and single authors, it became increasingly difficult to slot books and articles into any categories at all.

In my late-'90s contribution to the series, therefore, I reluctantly decided to forgo the taxonomy, convinced there was a limit to how much useful work the catchall category 10/6 could do. I decided that the basic search functions provided by web browsers would do at least some of the work of classification: a search for "Rambler" or "Thraliana" or "Jacobit_" would let users find things likely to be of interest. Whenever possible, if authors provided abstracts or publishers provided blurbs, I transcribed them. And sometimes I added very brief abstracts or descriptions of my own composition to the online bibliography. I curtly described Freya Johnston's superb *Samuel Johnson and the Art of Sinking, 1709–1791* (2005) as "A learned meditation on Johnson's interest in 'littleness.'" To John Geirland, "Doctor Feelgood: Stricken by 'Vile Melancholy,' the 18th-Century Critic and Raconteur Samuel Johnson Pioneered a Modern Therapy," published in *Smithsonian* magazine in 2007, I appended, "A brief biographical overview, with an argument that SJ's attempts to ward off his melancholy anticipated modern cognitive-behavioral therapy." It wasn't much, but it was something.

But with 27,500 items, including large numbers from unscholarly sources like newspapers and magazines, the problem becomes much more acute. Not nearly enough of the titles were usefully descriptive, only a tiny number have authorial abstracts, and there was simply no way I could hope to read and summarize 27,500 items. (Have I read 27,500 scholarly books and articles in my life?) And so I again turned to Google's Gemini. I fed it PDFs of publications and asked for summaries. At first I considered using it to extract just some searchable keywords, but I was unhappy with the results. In the end I decided that abstracts would be more useful.

It took a lot of effort to get useful abstracts out of Gemini. My concern was always to produce an easily searchable description that could tell a scholar enough about a source to decide whether it's worth consulting it. Eventually I settled on a set of prompts that yielded abstracts I liked, and I applied it to all the electronic texts I could get my hands on. At times it felt a bit like a digital assembly line — downloading books and articles by the hundred, feeding them into Gemini for abstracting, pasting the generated abstracts into Zotero — but I was able to do it in the spare time of a few months. The sheer volume made it time-consuming, but each individual item went quickly: it might take just twenty or thirty seconds to abstract a scholarly article and copy the abstract into Zotero. The result is a little more than 24,000 abstracts — that is, around 87 percent of the 27,500 items in the bibliography come with automatically generated abstracts. (The remaining 13 percent are not in any electronic form I had access to.)

I should emphasize that these generated abstracts are really abstracts, not evaluations. They've been done almost entirely without my intervention. They're machine-generated, and because they merely reprocess the authors' words, they can offer no opinions on whether the argument's sound. An article can be entirely wrongheaded, poorly written, and backed up by terrible evidence; it will not be called out, just dutifully summarized. That's probably just as well, because I don't think we should trust AI for judgments quite yet.

I recognize that many are not merely skeptical of AI tools but openly hostile to them on multiple grounds, and the industry's contempt for intellectual property is high on many people's lists. I therefore set the software not to use any material I provided for its own training purposes, and not to retain anything I had uploaded — it's all treated as confidential. Though I suspect the software has already been trained on everything I have access to, I've not fed the AI beast on modern Johnsonian scholarship.

Those skeptical about AI are always quick to ask: are the abstracts any good, and how can I know that? I freely admit I haven't read more than a tiny fraction of them. But I tested the system on my own writing, and on works I know intimately, and found Gemini generally did a pretty good job of summarizing. Sometimes it misses nuances, and it's immune to irony. But most of the abstracts are good enough.

So-called AI "hallucinations" are, of course, a real danger. AI, notoriously eager to please, churns out nonsense when it doesn't have good answers. But I discovered that, while hallucination is all too common when you ask it about the world at large, it's rare when you provide it with text and ask for a summary. Only a few times did I catch Gemini making outlandish mistakes, and they were almost always because I had inadvertently failed to provide it with the necessary text. I came across an article from 1916, for instance, called "Where Johnson Made a Blunder." It's about his disapproval of Robert Mayhew's designs for Westminster Bridge, and the *Westminster Gazette* thought, in retrospect, it was an obvious blunder. But, because the OCR in the library database had gone wrong, the text I fed to Gemini contained the title but was missing the text of the article. When asked to summarize an article called "Where Johnson Made a Blunder" with no additional information, Gemini dutifully obliged with an abstract of 125 words on famous mistakes in the *Dictionary* (*pastern*, *windward* and *leeward*, and so on). It was a pure digital fantasia. I happened to catch that one, but I'm sure others have slipped past me. Still, I consider them a small price to pay for reasonably accurate summaries of far more books and articles than any human could hope to read. The point, after all, is not to take the place of the original publications, but to point scholars toward them.

The resulting bibliography, with its 27,500 items and 24,000 abstracts, is vast. The full text is around 3.6 million words, which makes it about as long as the *Dictionary*, the *Rambler*, and the *Idler* put together, pretty much everything Johnson published in the 1750s. That makes it far too long ever to appear in print. I've put the entire thing up as a single web page, but web browsers strain under its weight. Much better than using the web page is to download the databases from which it was generated — they're linked at the top of the web page — and to use Zotero or another citation management system. The databases include a few things not visible on the web page, including the reference numbers from the bibliographies by Clifford, Greene, Vance, and Cochrane, and sometimes provide additional

information about later publications. Zotero makes it easy to pull up every item that contains a reference to the *Harleian Miscellany*, every newspaper article that mentions the Inner Temple, or every biographical item that touches on Wales.



Figure 1: This screenshot of Zotero shows the AI-generated abstract for “Johnson’s Dictionary,” a 1997 article by Robert DeMaria, Jr.

There’s one more experimental element to the project. Out of curiosity I took the entire bibliography, all 3.6 million words of it, and fed it back into another AI tool by Google, NotebookLM (LM for *language model*). This works like a typical AI chatbot, but with a crucial difference: it draws its answers only from a library of texts the user provides. It becomes, in other words, an expert on the subject of its database. This makes it possible for anyone to ask plain-language questions about the bibliography itself, things that go beyond what can be accomplished even in a fairly complex database search. Zotero can instantly tell me which items mention *Troilus and Cressida*, but is at a loss with questions like “In which twentieth-century dramas does Johnson appear as a character?”

NotebookLM, though, is excellent at this. Ask it a question about a topic addressed in the bibliography and the abstracts, and it produces a pretty good answer. “Describe the trajectory of S.C. Roberts’s interest in Johnson over the course of his career.” “How do Scottish and English newspapers differ in their response to the discovery of the Boswell papers?” “What effect did second-wave feminism have on the study of

Piozzi?” Its greatest strength is generalizing: ask it, “What were the major trends in Johnsonian scholarship in the early 1980s?” and it’ll tell you about the conferences and publications for the bicentenary, the questioning of Boswellian authority, the focus on Johnson’s legal thought and his devotion to social reform and humanitarianism, the introduction of post-structural theory to eighteenth-century studies, and so on. Ask it, “Give examples of people invoking Johnson’s authority to address political questions in their own day,” and it starts with Wesley’s republishing *Taxation No Tyranny* during the American Revolution, continues through Thomas Gisborne and William Wilberforce’s abolitionist invocations of the argument for Joseph Knight, the use of Johnson as a champion of Irish independence by followers of Charles Stewart Parnell, the rival citations of Johnson on women’s rights and capabilities by suffragists and anti-suffragists, a Great Depression–era quotation from the *Journey to the Western Islands* about how the “rage of trade” would collapse once all nations became traders, the warning in *Rasselas* that teaching men to fly would allow “northern savages” to drop destruction from “an army sailing through the clouds” that became disturbingly relevant during the Blitz... The answers are all drawn from the bibliography, and every assertion, nearly every sentence, is backed up with one or more links to the relevant scholarship.

The bibliography is, inevitably, a work in progress, and I expect to continue tinkering. I hope people find it useful, and I welcome additions, corrections, and reactions of all kinds.



Richard Savage's Tragedy of Sir Thomas Overbury: Johnson's Critique and the Manuscript Revision

ROY RASMUSSEN[†]

Richard Savage's contemporaries praised the quality of his writing, as did Samuel Johnson. In his *Life of Savage*, Johnson described Savage as "a man whose writings entitle him to an eminent rank in the classes of learning," and praised especially the quality of *The Wanderer*, *The Bastard*, *The Triumph of Health and Mirth*, and the last of the *Volunteer Laureat* poems. Nearly 300 years after his death, however, Savage is known far less for his own writing than as the subject of Johnson's *Life of Savage*. Johnson's portrait of Savage is psychologically perceptive, sympathetic, and compelling, but it has had the paradoxical effect of making Savage's actual literary output difficult to approach on its own terms. Scholars have been irresistibly drawn to the narrative of disenfranchised aristocracy that Savage pushed, with varying degrees of explicitness, throughout his career, and, as a result, what little interest Savage's work garners nowadays remains largely biographical in orientation.

The Bastard and *The Volunteer Laureat* poems are works whose literary interest is nearly inseparable from the public identity they construct. Savage's other poetry returns more indirectly (but persistently) to themes of exclusion, neglected merit, and dispossessed identity. In these works, the author keeps his sense of injury continuously before his readers. The result is that Savage's works have rarely received sustained critical examination independent of the life that produced them. They are treated as evidence *about* Savage, rather than as works of art in their own right.

[†] Roy Rasmussen received a Ph.D. from the University of Oregon in 1982, with a dissertation on Richard Savage's *Tragedy of Sir Thomas Overbury*. He then worked for many years in the computer industry. In this piece he returns to his earlier research.

Savage's dramatic works present a partial exception to this pattern. The *Tragedy of Sir Thomas Overbury*, Savage's most sustained literary effort, does not advance his biographical claims directly — apart from a conspicuous declaration on the title page — and might therefore seem available for evaluation on other grounds.¹ That it has not received such examination is the consequence of several obstacles, some of which Johnson's own account makes clear. Johnson records Savage's deep dissatisfaction with the 1724 version of the play — a dissatisfaction strong enough to prompt a resolution to rewrite the tragedy entirely.² For later readers, this presents a substantial problem: the author himself regarded the 1724 version as inadequate. He began a revision and substantially completed it; however, he was stranded in Bristol and unable to return to London to see the revised play produced. He died in Bristol, in debtors' prison, in August of 1743.

The manuscript of Savage's rewritten play eventually passed into the hands of William Woodfall, whose 1777 Covent Garden production, together with the edition he published that same year, presented a version of the revision. In an "Advertisement" prefixed to the 1777 edition, Woodfall noted that the revised play required additional editorial intervention before it could be brought to the stage. Without access to the manuscript itself, no reliable assessment of Savage's actual revision was possible for many years. The combined effect of the author's dissatisfaction with the original play, the uncertainty surrounding Woodfall's adaptation, and the long inaccessibility of the manuscript discouraged sustained critical inquiry.

1. The title page of the 1724 edition of the *Tragedy of Sir Thomas Overbury* presents Savage's most explicit public assertion to date: "Written by RICHARD SAVAGE, Son of the Late Earl Rivers." However, the play itself advances no such claim.

2. *Life of Savage*, 105.

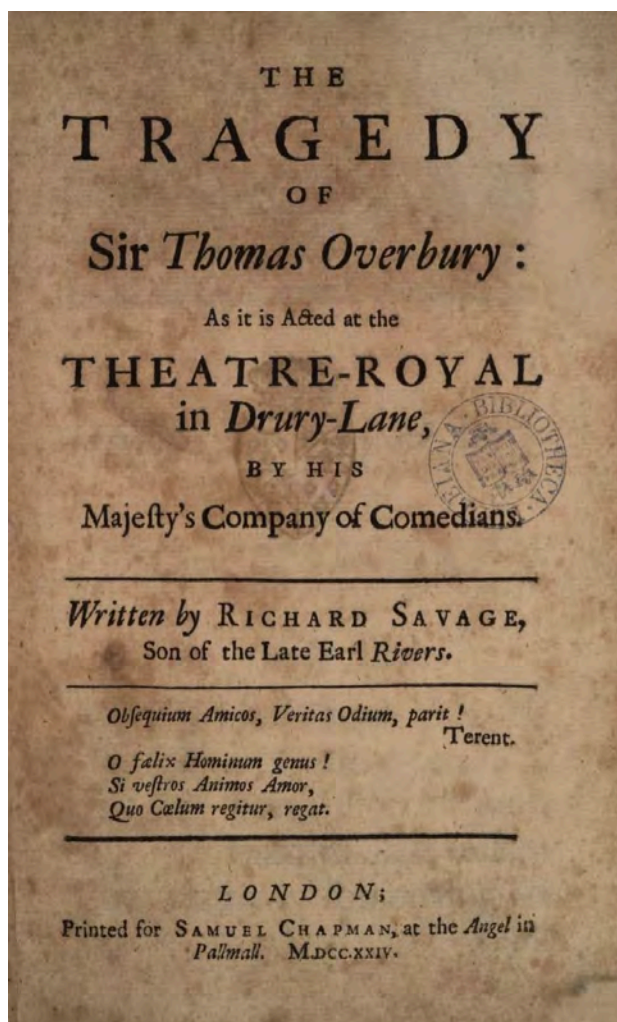


Figure 1: The title page of the 1724 edition of *Sir Thomas Overbury* includes features Savage's version of his parentage.

Johnson's critical remarks on the play in his *Life of Savage* pose the questions I undertake to answer in this article. Johnson approves of the subject as well suited to the stage, but he expresses reservations about the historical events being "perhaps not far enough removed from the present Age, to admit properly the Fictions necessary to complete the Plan."³ Johnson later records Savage's resolution to write an entirely new tragedy on the Overbury story, but he had no means of determining whether

3. *Life of Savage*, 21.

Savage succeeded in improving the play. What made the Overbury story suitable in Johnson's view, and what did its historical proximity cost the play? What weaknesses did Savage himself identify in the original version, and how successfully was he able to address them in his revision? Examination of the manuscript alongside the 1724 printed edition allows these questions to be considered directly, focusing the inquiry on Savage's dramatic ambitions and the extent to which the revision fulfilled them.

This article examines the 1724 *Tragedy of Sir Thomas Overbury* as a dramatic work in its own right, describes the nature of the manuscript revisions, assesses the revision's achievements and its limitations and shortcomings, and evaluates the relationship between Savage's manuscript and Woodfall's 1777 edition. It is, to the best of my knowledge, the first critical examination of the play since Woodfall's own remarks accompanying the 1777 edition, and the first account of the manuscript revision based upon direct examination of the manuscript itself.⁴

The Overbury Scandal

Sir Thomas Overbury — courtier, poet, and victim of one of the most sensational court intrigues of the Jacobean era — was born in Warwickshire in 1581, educated at Oxford, and admitted to the Middle Temple. During a visit to Edinburgh in 1601, he met Robert Carr, then a page to the Earl of Dunbar, and the two formed a friendship that would shape both their fates.

4. The present article draws upon and extends the findings of the author's doctoral dissertation: Roy Rasmussen, "A Critical Edition of Richard Savage's *Tragedy of Sir Thomas Overbury*," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Oregon, 1982, available through ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/303071017>, which constitutes the first such examination. The present study is based upon direct examination of the manuscript while it formed part of the Donald and Mary Hyde Collection. The manuscript is now housed at the Houghton Library, Harvard University.



Figure 2: Engraving of Sir Thomas Overbury, Knight, Age 32, c.1615-16; public domain, Wikipedia.

When James I came to London in 1603, Carr quickly became his favorite, rising rapidly in wealth and influence. Overbury attached himself to Carr by 1605, offering political counsel that the personable but poorly educated Carr needed. Each man had something the other needed: Carr had the King's favor; Overbury had much greater political intelligence.

Into this arrangement came Frances Howard, daughter of the Earl of Suffolk. In 1606, at thirteen, she was married to Robert Devereux, third Earl of Essex, in a match engineered by the King to reconcile two rival noble families. Immediately after the nuptials, Essex went abroad to continue his studies, leaving Frances at court, where she allegedly took up with Prince Henry before setting her sights on Carr. Overbury initially assisted

the affair, composing love letters for the inarticulate Carr — partly out of loyalty, partly, it was said, out of spite toward the Howards.

When Essex returned in 1609, his wife refused to consummate the marriage. After three years of domestic stalemate, Frances began pursuing a divorce on grounds of nullity, backed by Carr and her great-uncle, the Earl of Northampton. The King was persuaded to support the divorce, and Essex, humiliated, eventually cooperated.

Overbury became the obstacle. Recognizing that the marriage would consolidate Howard power at court and diminish his own, he advised Carr against it in increasingly intemperate terms. He also composed a poem, *The Wife*, ostentatiously defining ideal womanhood — a transparent attack on Frances's character. The poem only deepened the rift between Carr and Overbury, and Carr resolved to remove him.

The King, resentful of Overbury's influence over his favorite, was persuaded to offer Overbury a diplomatic posting to Russia. Carr — by then Viscount Rochester — advised Overbury to refuse the post, knowing that doing so would result in Overbury's arrest. When Overbury refused, he was arrested, on April 21, 1613, and committed to the Tower as a close prisoner. While Northampton and Carr appear to have intended only to sideline Overbury until after the Essex divorce, the Countess had a more ambitious scheme. Through her friend, Anne Turner, she engaged an apothecary to supply poisons and had a trusted associate installed as Overbury's under-keeper. The poisons were administered slowly over several months and produced a gradual decline. Overbury died on September 14, 1613, eleven days before the divorce was granted. The marriage of Carr — now Earl of Somerset — and Frances followed at Christmas, with the King presiding.



Figure 3: Robert Carr and Frances Howard, Earl and Countess of Somerset, after a contemporary engraving. Wikimedia Commons.

Overbury's death went largely unremarked until Somerset began losing favor to the rising George Villiers two years later. An investigation was then launched, and in 1615 the four principal conspirators were tried, convicted, and hanged. The Countess pleaded guilty at her own trial and was eventually pardoned. Somerset, convicted on thinner evidence, refused to seek intercession from the now-powerful Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, and waited until 1625 for his pardon. The couple lived out their days in obscurity. One question was never resolved: the precise extent to which Northampton and Somerset had known of, or participated in, the murder plot itself.⁵

5. This summary derives principally from Beatrice White's *Cast of Ravens: The Strange Case of Sir Thomas Overbury* (New York: George Braziller, 1965), whose collection and analysis of primary sources established the scholarly foundation for subsequent studies of the Overbury affair. For more recent reconsiderations of the scandal and of Frances Howard's representation, see David Lindley, *The Trials of Frances Howard: Fact and Fiction at the Court of King James* (London: Routledge, 1993), and Alastair Bellany, *The Politics of Court Scandal in Early Modern England: News Culture and the Overbury Affair, 1603–1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

The 1724 Version: Johnson's Assessment and Savage's Alterations

Sir Thomas Overbury was by 1723 sufficiently removed from living memory to make his story available to the stage, though Johnson doubted whether the distance was yet sufficient for an audience to accept comfortably “the Fictions necessary to complete the Plan.” The story offered a playwright elements that Johnson found “well adapted to the Stage”: powerful passions, court intrigue, a virtuous protagonist destroyed by forces beyond his control, and a villainous female with considerable dramatic potential.

Savage recognized both the theatrical opportunity and its limitations. The historical events were too intricately woven — too dependent on the gradual unfolding of political circumstance — to be transferred to the stage without substantial alteration. His solution to this problem is revealing, and Johnson's brief acknowledgment that Savage found it necessary to depart from the historical record opens the most productive critical questions the 1724 text raises: not whether Savage altered the facts, but how he did so, and to what purpose.

Johnson's observation that Savage's subject was a story well adapted to the stage is a useful starting point for criticism, for it directs attention to what Savage saw in the Overbury material and how effectively he shaped it for dramatic presentation. The differences between the historical record and Savage's 1724 version fall into three broad categories: 1. changes in the sequence of events, 2. the invention of fictitious characters, and 3. the assignment of fictitious motives to historical characters.

The most immediately obvious of Savage's departures from the historical record is his decision to begin the play with the Somerset marriage already accomplished. Historically, Overbury's opposition to that marriage was the cause of his imprisonment; by presenting the marriage as a *fait accompli*, Savage compresses months of turmoil into a single moment of dramatic discovery, when Overbury returns from a brief absence to find his friend already married to the woman he had warned him against. The compression serves several purposes. It allows Savage to present Overbury as one whose wise counsel has been foolishly disregarded rather than as an active and sometimes indiscreet meddler in his friend's affairs, and it shifts the focus from the circumstances of his imprisonment to the sinister plot to murder him. The result is a protagonist whose virtue is demonstrated

in the context of the scene rather than through dialogue, and a plot that moves more directly toward its tragic conclusion.

The invention of two fictitious characters, Isabella and Cleora, allows Savage to develop Overbury's character more fully and to manage the flow of information about the Countess's machinations. Isabella is Overbury's love. She provides a moral counterweight to the Countess — the one virtuous, reasoned, and constant, the other conniving and self-interested — and gives Overbury a gentler, more sympathetic dimension that his scenes with Somerset and Northampton alone could not supply. Without her, Savage would run the risk of presenting a protagonist so uncompromisingly virtuous as to seem remote from ordinary human experience. The other fictitious character, Cleora, serves two purposes. Isabella's virtuous character is largely revealed through dialogue with Cleora, and Cleora functions also as a plot convenience, providing a means by which information about the Countess's machinations reaches Isabella, and through her to Somerset, at a crucial moment in the action.

The invented motives reveal even more of Savage's dramatic instincts. In the 1724 version, Northampton's grounds for revenge are relatively schematic — Overbury's interception of his treasonous letters to the court of Rome and Northampton's subsequent exile from court, both attributed to Overbury's interference — and his villainy is correspondingly straightforward.⁶ In the revision, Savage alters this, making Northampton the prime mover in the plot to murder Overbury and grounding his villainy in personal injury. As a villain bent on revenge, Northampton is made more believable; he has personal incentives for his part in the murder of Overbury. The historical Northampton seems to have been, at least initially, ignorant of the Countess's plot to poison Overbury. By making him the prime mover in the plot, Savage gives his antagonist a psychological plausibility that a villain motivated by pure political ambition rarely achieves on stage.

Savage also reshapes the Countess's motivations, going well beyond the historical record. By beginning the play with the Somerset marriage already in place, Savage must invent a more plausible reason for the

6. Both motives were invented by Savage. The historical Northampton remained Lord Privy Seal until his death in June of 1614 and was never exiled from court. While Northampton was documented as a recipient of Spanish pensions (White, 85), Savage's substitution of Rome for Spain intensifies the suggestion of Catholic treachery for dramatic effect. Overbury had no known role in exposing those connections.

Countess to seek revenge against Overbury, and he does this by suggesting that the Countess had improperly offered herself to Overbury, who had refused her advances. In this way, Savage gives the Countess a stronger reason to seek revenge, and Overbury's virtue is underlined by his refusal to compromise his standards.

With Somerset, Savage faced a different challenge. If Somerset is to be worthy of the friendship of one so wise and virtuous as Overbury, he cannot maliciously play a part in bringing harm to his friend. Consequently, Savage presents Somerset as a victim, along with Overbury, of the machinations of his two villains, Northampton and the Countess. Somerset is presented as a man whose jealousy is too easily inflamed by the suggestion that Overbury has his own duplicitous motives for keeping Somerset and the Countess apart.

The Tragedy of Sir Thomas Overbury belongs to the tradition of heroic tragedy that had dominated the English stage in the age of Dryden and his contemporaries in the decades following the Restoration. By 1723, the genre had largely run its course, but its conventions remained sufficiently established to shape what a playwright working with historical material of this kind could reasonably attempt. Chief among those conventions was the requirement of an exemplary protagonist — a figure whose virtue is established beyond question and whose suffering is consequently the work of external forces rather than internal failing. The genre had little room for the fatal flaw that gives the greatest English tragedies their power, and a playwright who presents a protagonist suffering without contributing to his own ruin risks evoking pity rather than identification — a less compelling dramatic response.⁷

Overbury as Savage presents him in both versions of the play is such a figure. Wise, constant, and morally unimpeachable, he is brought to ruin entirely by the malice of the Countess and the machinations of Northampton. This is historically defensible, and it is consistent with Savage's evident intention to present Overbury as a model of heroic virtue. But it is also a source of dramatic limitation that no amount of rewriting could entirely overcome, since it is built into the story's moral premise.

7. These observations on heroic tragedy are based on John Harold Wilson, *A Preface to Restoration Drama* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968). See also Eugene M. Waith, *Ideas of Greatness: Heroic Drama in England* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), and J. Douglas Canfield, *Heroes and States: On the Ideology of Restoration Tragedy* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000).

What the revision could address — and does address, with varying success — are the specific weaknesses that made the original play's dramatic machinery less credible than the story required.

The Manuscript Revision

The manuscript upon which this study is based — forty-five folio leaves and two quarto leaves, the text written on both sides of each leaf — is the only extant literary manuscript of its author.⁸ Johnson reports that Savage's dissatisfaction with the 1724 version was sufficiently strong that he "resolved to write a second tragedy upon the story of Sir Thomas Overbury, in which he preserved a few lines of his former play, but made a total alteration of the plan, added new incidents, and introduced new characters; so that it was a new tragedy, not a revival of the former."⁹ That resolution, and the manuscript it produced, provide the most direct evidence we have of how Savage understood the defects of the earlier version and what he believed a fully realized treatment of the Overbury story might achieve.

The manuscript evidence complicates Johnson's account in one important respect. It reveals that Savage worked closely from a copy of the 1724 printed edition, copying out passages of dialogue before revising them. This is evidence that this "new tragedy," whatever Savage's intentions, did not begin from nothing. The greatest concentration of rejected readings appears in the first and last acts, suggesting that Savage was least certain how to begin and how to end his new version. What the manuscript evidence most clearly reveals, however, is that Savage was less concerned with plot than with dialogue intended to clarify character motivation, especially in the cases of Somerset and Northampton.

One of the problems in the 1724 version lies in Somerset's characterization, and it is most clearly visible in the scene in which the Countess turns him against Overbury. She accuses Overbury of having sought to supplant Somerset in her affections, and of having resorted to force and slander when his efforts failed:

8. "A Critical Edition," 40.

9. *Life of Savage*, 105.

He told me you were false! — designing! — jealous! —
Try'd every Art of Treachery to supplant you;
And when he found his Wiles were unsuccessful,
Attempted Force, and threaten'd me with Slander.
(II.iv.209–212)

Somerset is initially reluctant to accept the allegation:

Force! — Slander! — thou hast warm'd me — think
once more.
He cou'd not be so base.
(II.iv.213)

However, his resistance collapses within a dozen lines. The Countess begins to swear an oath confirming her accusation, Somerset stops her mid-oath, and his capitulation is complete:

Thou need'st not speak — I said I would believe thee.
(II.iv.239)

Somerset has abandoned his faith in a man he has known and trusted for years on no stronger evidence than his wife's word, delivered on their wedding day. The motivation is thin, and the speed of Somerset's conversion from loyal friend to vengeful enemy registers as a failure of characterization that weakens the entire subsequent action.

Savage appears to have recognized this, and the revision's treatment of the same scene shows him working directly to fix the problem. The accusation is essentially unchanged, and Somerset's initial resistance is the same. However, where the 1724 Somerset capitulates and accepts the Countess's unsupported word, the revised Somerset makes a four-word demand that transforms the scene's dramatic logic: "Give me some Proof" (II.iv.302).

The proof the Countess supplies in the revision is both more dramatically satisfying and more tragic in its implications. Northampton produces letters — purloined from Isabella, to whom Overbury had written them, but "undirected," meaning her name does not appear in their salutations. Their shape of letter, character of style, and similitude of hand are Overbury's beyond question. Somerset reads genuine expressions of love written by his friend to the woman he truly loves (Isabella) and interprets them, as the Countess intends, as evidence of treachery toward himself. The letters

that prove Overbury's constancy and virtue become the instrument of his destruction. Only when he has read them and confirmed their authenticity does Somerset break: "He's false, false, false — Curse on all treach'rous Friends!" (II.iv.313)

The Somerset of the later version is betrayed by evidence, not credulity. His abandonment of Overbury is not a failure of judgment but the consequence of a carefully constructed deception. This makes him, as Savage intended, a victim of the plot alongside Overbury rather than its unwitting architect. The scene consequently acquires considerably greater tragic weight, and the improvement represents precisely the kind of dramatic intelligence the revision at its best displays.

Savage's handling of Northampton in the manuscript illustrates both the ambition of his rewriting and one of its characteristic tensions. The scene in which Northampton reveals his passion for Isabella to Elvis — whose name in the 1724 text is Elloways — opens with Elvis dismissing female intelligence in terms of studied contempt. Northampton immediately objects: "Not Isabella thus." What follows is a portrait of Isabella that sits unexpectedly in the mouth of the play's chief villain:

So perfect fram'd
With native Candour and with native Judgment;
Her Mind, intent on Books, gain'd modest Wisdom,
Ever self-diffident; Her Heart caught Virtue;
Her Tongue strong Reason to defend that Virtue,
And soft Persuasion to make Foes its Friends.
Her fair Department has unstudied Graces;
Such, genuine Nature meant the softer Sex;
When She endued it with unconscious Beauty,
Combin'd with sweet Simplicity of Manners.
(I.i.84–93)

Northampton's admiration is presented without irony. He confirms not only that he loves Isabella, but that she knows his passion and despises him for it, and yet he continues to love her still — sentiments that belong less to a conventional villain than to a man capable of genuine feeling and aesthetic appreciation for virtue.

Savage is working here against his own dramatic purposes. A Northampton capable of this degree of emotional and moral perception

is more interesting than the comparatively schematic villain of the 1724 version, but also less convincing as the prime mover of a murder plot. The inconsistency is unintentionally ironic, never fully resolved, and reflects one of the revision's characteristic tendencies: Savage's ambition outruns his execution, and his attempt to deepen characterization produces complexities the play's structure cannot entirely absorb.

In spite of some changes in motivation and the complication of the plot, most of the revision is incidental and intended either to improve the quality of the verse or to heighten the emotional appeal of the play. One notable difference is that Savage frequently completes lines that appear as hemistiches in the 1724 version, extending them to full pentameter lines in the manuscript version. Savage also attempts to increase the emotional effects of Overbury's murder by giving him a lengthy soliloquy in the last act in which he contemplates the meaning of life and death, the vanity of human wishes, and the importance of living life virtuously. But manuscript evidence shows that Savage had a difficult time devising a context for such contemplations, for Overbury goes to the Tower without fear, secure in his faith that his virtue will keep him from harm. The soliloquy, well-intentioned as an attempt to deepen the protagonist's interiority, introduces an inconsistency that was not present in the earlier version.

A study of Savage's manuscript reveals that, though the tragedy was improved in a number of ways, the product falls short of Savage's intentions, for the rewritten play still follows the broad outlines of the original in plot, characterization, and motivation, and does not differ from the original nearly enough for it to be considered a "new" tragedy, at least not in the sense that Johnson describes in the *Life of Savage*. Nevertheless, Savage does expand and replace many passages, complicates the relationship between Overbury and Isabella, and increases the total length of the play by more than forty percent.

Woodfall and the 1777 Production

Johnson reports that one of Savage's objectives in rewriting *Sir Thomas Overbury* was "to extinguish the memory of the first tragedy, which he could only do by writing one less defective upon the same story."¹⁰ However, it seems doubtful that the revision would have achieved

10. *Life of Savage*, 106.

this objective had Savage been able to return to London and put it on the stage in the 1740s. Though the play yielded William Woodfall hundreds of pounds when he produced it at Covent Garden, it did so only after Woodfall and his associates rigorously pruned Savage's manuscript revision. In the "Advertisement" to his edition of the revision, Woodfall asserts that he "discovered a great many beauties" in Savage's manuscript, "surrounded by almost as many defects." He goes on to explain his conservative intentions in altering the manuscript:

The alterations have been made with the greatest deference to the Manuscript of the Author; additions were avoided as much as possible, and it has been the chief aim of the Editor, by necessary transpositions and abridgments, to make SAVAGE mend himself.¹¹

A comparison of the manuscript and Woodfall's edition reveals that Woodfall's description of his editorial practices is accurate: he limited his emendations of the text to omissions, transpositions, and a few small additions. Woodfall had the help of David Garrick and George Colman in preparing the reworked play, but it is impossible to determine the extent to which each contributed to the revision of Savage's revision. Nor can we assign particular alterations to any one of the three, for they made few if any alterations to the manuscript itself. The emendations are not systematic, and are concerned mostly with shortening the play, returning it to approximately the same length as the first version.

The prologue Richard Brinsley Sheridan wrote for the Woodfall production is worth pausing over, for it makes Savage's biographical situation — his poverty, his neglect, his illegitimacy — central to the production's appeal. The Muse who "stalk'd by her poor, neglected poet's side" through want, despair, imprisonment, and death, who "with hands convuls'd, still wove this tragic wreath," is an explicit invocation of Savage's life as the frame within which the play is to be received.¹² Sheridan is asking the audience to bring their knowledge of Johnson's *Life of Savage* to the theatre with them — to see the play through the biography. It is worth noting that

11. William Woodfall, "Dedication," *Sir Thomas Overbury: A Tragedy* (London, 1777). The dedication and advertisement are reproduced in "A Critical Edition," appendix B, 371–75, which also contains a fuller discussion of Woodfall's editorial practices.

12. Richard Brinsley Sheridan, "Prologue," in William Woodfall, ed., *Sir Thomas Overbury: A Tragedy* (London, 1777). The prologue is reproduced and discussed in "A Critical Edition," appendix B, 376–78.

the 1777 production was put on the stage by Colman and Garrick, who were members of the Club, and by Sheridan, whom Johnson proposed for membership in March of the same year. This means that the 1777 production was closely connected to Johnson's immediate circle. Unfortunately, Johnson's own response has gone unrecorded.¹³

The most striking of Woodfall's additions to Savage's text comes in the Countess's final scene, in which, following Overbury's death, she rages across the stage, on the verge of insanity, and speaks a dozen or so frantic lines before her final exit. Nothing in Savage's manuscript anticipates or calls for this kind of theatrical sensationalism. It was, however, likely what audiences expected in 1777, and it points unmistakably toward the melodramatic conventions that would dominate the stage in the following century.

The Woodfall production of *Sir Thomas Overbury* proved to be a successful business venture. It was shown twelve times at Covent Garden in 1777 — a substantial run for the time. The production also prompted, whether by coincidence or design, two printed editions of Woodfall's version of the play and two editions of Savage's collected works that same year. Whether Savage's revision would have been as successful without Woodfall's emendations is a matter of speculation, but both Garrick and Colman felt a need for pruning, and as practicing managers of the two leading theatres in late eighteenth-century England, they were much more qualified than Savage to assess the potential in dramatic productions. But that the play was revived at all, and that it did well as entertainment for the playgoers of his own age, is remarkable. These facts tend to confirm Savage's conviction that he was working on a project worthy of his efforts.

Conclusion

Johnson's remarks in the *Life of Savage* on the *Tragedy of Sir Thomas Overbury* — his approval of the subject as suited to the stage, his reservations about the historical proximity of the events, and his account of Savage's dissatisfaction with the 1724 version and subsequent rewrite — provided the impetus for this investigation. Those questions remained unresolved for the better part of three centuries, largely because the man-

13. *Dictionary of Irish Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), s.v. "Sheridan, Richard Brinsley."

uscript that might answer them was beyond reach. Examination of that manuscript alongside the 1724 printed edition allows us to address them directly, if not always in the terms Savage himself would have wished.

The revision is a genuine improvement on the 1724 text in several important respects. Somerset's presentation is more credible, and his betrayal of Overbury is motivated by evidence rather than credulity. The relationship between Overbury and Isabella is more fully realized, and the lovers' separation and reunion adds an emotional dimension the earlier play lacks. Northampton's villainy is grounded in personal motive rather than pure political calculation, even if the attempt to deepen him produces a character whose appreciation for virtue sits uneasily with his role as a murderer. These are real achievements, and they confirm that Savage's instinct about the original play's weaknesses was sound.

However, the revision falls short of Savage's stated intention to produce an entirely new tragedy. It follows the broad outlines of the original too closely in plot and characterization to be considered a new work in the sense Johnson describes, and some of Savage's attempts at improvement introduce inconsistencies not present in the first version. Woodfall recognized this when he found it necessary to prune the manuscript substantially before it could be brought to the stage. Even then, with the assistance of Garrick and Colman, it required the addition of sensational effects that point toward a theatrical taste Savage himself would not have anticipated.

At the time of completing the *Life of Savage*, Johnson could not have known what Savage's revised manuscript contained. Examination of the manuscript reveals not the entirely new tragedy Savage promised, but something more interesting — the record of a writer working seriously and ambitiously on a project he cared about deeply, in circumstances that made sustained creative work difficult. Savage did not live to see his revised version staged, and what Woodfall made of it in 1777 was something rather different from what Savage intended. Yet the play reached the stage, was presented twelve times, and prompted renewed interest in Savage's collected works, confirming that his belief in the value of the project was not without foundation.



Interview with Composer Judith Bingham

Matthew M. Davis: Judith, thank you for agreeing to field some questions!

Judith Bingham: My pleasure!

MMD: So my sources tell me you have recently written and published several original pieces of music that have to do with our man Samuel Johnson. Can you tell us a little about these compositions and also how you got drawn into writing music about Johnson?

JB: I was introduced to the world of Samuel Johnson by Alan Gibbins, who is the Treasurer of the Johnson Society in London. He lives in a stunning Queen Anne house in West Malling, Kent, where Johnson once stayed *en route* for somewhere, and he has a first edition of the *Dictionary*, which I started to leaf through when I was staying with him once — back in 2014, I think. He and his wife have commissioned three pieces from me, two of which are Johnson related.

[*Strange Words*](#) (Edition Peters, 2020), for tenor and cello, features definitions of words by Johnson and snippets from the works of William Blake. The idea was that Blake and Johnson might have passed each other in the street, though they never actually met. I take words like *fantasy* and *mystery* and show how differently each man explored the word.

In 2023 I wrote [*Hodge: Dr. Johnson's Cat*](#) (Composers Edition, 2023). It's for a tenor vocalist or speaker and a clarinettist. It's taken partly from Boswell's record of his meeting with Rousseau, but includes various other comments about Hodge, and cats in general. I wanted to show how Boswell could be quite rude about Johnson when he was not in his company. He talked about his antipathy to cats when he visited the philosopher Rousseau on his death bed.

[*Seven Short Prayers*](#) (Edition Peters, 2025) is a series of short anthems, with four prayers by Johnson and three by Jane Austen. Again, this is about two people who could have met but didn't. Jane Austen was a big fan of Johnson's. The piece was commissioned by Kalmar Cathedral in Sweden.

It's a connected piece, but the seven prayers can also be performed separately.

All these pieces, in one way or another, are London pieces — I have lived in London for 55 years and have written quite a lot of pieces about the city, historically speaking. I love thinking about famous people who might have passed each other in the street without realising.



Figure 1: Judith Bingham

MMD: Is there a way to listen to performances of any of these pieces? Are there any recordings available online?

JB: There's [a recording of *Strange Words*](#) with Tenor James Gilchrist and Cellist Alice Neary. There's also [a recording of *Hodge*](#), with Gilchrist and Clarinettist Robert Plane. *Seven Short Prayers* hasn't been recorded yet, but the Austen settings are slated to be recorded by Canterbury Cathedral in June of 2026.

MMD: When and how did you first become interested in music?

JB: I was always musical, always interested. When I was eighteen months old, my mother wrote to a magazine to ask if it was unusual for child that age to be able to sing perfectly in tune, and right through my childhood I was asked to sing for people, though it terrified me. (I was very shy.) I climbed up on the piano stool as soon as I could, and my father taught

me to play. Through his record collection I learned the standard European repertoire. He didn't really like contemporary music — Sibelius was about as modern as he got. I used to listen to classical music on the radio — on what used to be called the BBC Third Programme, now Radio 3. Through that I heard a lot of contemporary classical music.

MMD: When and how did you begin to *compose* music?

JB: According to my mother, I was three, but I don't remember. I made things up at the piano and enjoyed having my own secret musical world. I started writing things down when I was ten or eleven. I was never encouraged or given any special teaching as a child. In those days, the fifties and sixties, in the north of England, the idea of a girl becoming a classical composer was laughable, unheard of. I taught myself by listening and playing. Berlioz was a formative influence through the sixties. Reading the scores of his music was intensely inspirational.

MMD: I'd be interested to know how Hodge the Cat became the star of that one piece. That cat must have a great publicist. I mean, Boswell didn't even like cats, and Johnson is on record as saying he had other cats he liked better than Hodge, but two hundred and forty years have passed and we are still talking about Hodge! There can't be many cats who have been dead that long but are still being celebrated in statues and musical compositions.

JB: There is a feeling from Boswell that he rather despised Johnson's love of cats. It certainly sounds as if he was allergic — although that word doesn't show up in dictionaries until 1906! I was reading about Boswell going round Europe and how he met Rousseau, despite Rousseau trying to avoid him. Rousseau asked him, "Are you a cat man or a dog man," and Boswell said he preferred dogs. It's interesting to me that Boswell met Casanova a couple of times and disliked him. I'd quite like to write a piece about that, as I've already written one piece about Casanova. Boswell and Casanova were both gentlemen adventurers, and we know so much about eighteenth-century society because of both of them.

MMD: In *Seven Short Prayers*, you juxtapose prayers by Johnson and prayers by Jane Austen. Could you explain what made you pair those two writers? It seems to me Austen's prayers sound quite different from Johnson's. Do the two of them balance each other out somehow?

JB: Yes, the difference in the spiritual approach was marked. Johnson seems really penitential and thinks himself inferior, spiritually. His prayers are full of self-loathing and they were written for him to read out in church. But Jane Austen seems more interested in getting us all to be nicer, there's a feeling of a village community. But both Johnson and Austen use quite plain language, which appealed to me, and I tried to match the music to that.

MMD: Tell us a little about how you compose — and when Johnson comes into the process. What comes first, the music or the words? Do you sit down saying, “Now I will write something on Samuel Johnson”? Or do you write various bits of music and then decide “this piece reminds me of Johnson”?

JB: This is hard to explain. I always write to commission — that is my main source of income. Commissions always come with a brief — the event, the theme of the event, the types of instruments or singers, the length of the piece, there's nearly always quite a few things you have to take into account. Alan and Mary Gibbins wanted pieces to celebrate the arrival of their grandchildren, and the pieces were performed in their sitting room — a place where Johnson and possibly the painter Turner would have sat — and there would be children there. But the piece also has to have a future! It's a large but not huge room — they managed to get 60 people in there, standing up, with the children sitting on the floor at the front. So there's no room for a lot of musicians, and no room for large instruments — piano, for example. Alan was very keen for me to reference Johnson in some way, and I had spent some time looking at his first edition and really enjoying the definitions, which as you know, tell you something about Johnson. I thought with *Strange Words* that I would contrast Johnson's attempt to pin down the essential meaning of a word with Blake's more poetic approach. I put together a text, and the writing of the music took about a month, I think. But you start thinking about the piece while you're writing the previous piece — this is called pre-composition! Writing something that will repay several hearings means I have to put a lot of effort and layers of meaning into the music, and it has to be perfect.

MMD: I'm a fan of blues music, but when I go to concerts I get worried — because there is usually nobody under the age of 60 in the audience. I worry that there won't be any listeners left in twenty-five years. I've heard people express similar concerns about classical music. Is the audience for

classical music aging? Are young listeners coming on board? Are you concerned about the future of classical music?

JB: People used to worry about ageing audiences when I was young. It has struck me since that classical music tends to appeal more to older people. Often people come to classical in their thirties or forties, wanting more than pop music has to give. Sometimes they hear something at a wedding or a funeral, or they have a child who is part of a choir. Their love of the music comes in sideways. So I don't worry about grey-haired audiences. They are appreciative and thoughtful. Musicians spend a lot of time, more than you might think, trying to draw young people into classical music. Sometimes, the first time a young person hears an orchestra it is through film music, but I also think (it was like this with the Johnson pieces), that sitting right by someone who is playing a cello or a harp, it's entrancing for a young person. They can't believe someone is actually producing music in front of them, and that can lead somewhere. Still though, the best way to get children interested is if they hear music at home. Pop music is, in my opinion (feel free to disagree) corrupting to young minds, and classical music can seem too much like hard work. I really regret the rise of pop music in the world; it has spoiled a lot of indigenous music, as well. Hobby horse! I'll stop now.

MMD: Have you got any more Johnson-inspired or C18-inspired music in the works?

JB: There are plans to write something about Fanny Burney at some point, and I'll always come back to Blake. It depends what I get commissioned to do. There's no predicting it.



The 31st Annual Seminar of the Johnson Society of Australia

PAUL TANKARD[†]

This year's annual seminar, the 31st, of [the Johnson Society of Australia \(JSA\)](#), was held in rather adverse circumstances. Four of the longtime stalwarts of the society were unable to attend or to take their customary roles in the organization of the event. However, twenty-five people – mostly society members but also a number of guests – gathered on 4 July 2026 at the Kathleen Syme Centre in suburban Melbourne for a pleasant and successful day of convivial discussion.

In the absence of other executive members of the committee, the Society's Treasurer Ian Hansen opened the seminar, observing that he embarked on his career as an accountant precisely to avoid public speaking. Due to the absences, only four of the originally scheduled six presentations could be given. However, these more than fully occupied our time and interest.

Dr. Constance de Silva (Monash University) spoke on "Women and the Idea of Madness" in Johnson's time. She argued that, despite the ethos of the Enlightenment, ideas about mental health were dominated by misguided pre-scientific medical beliefs. Women were regarded as particularly fragile and subject to unsoundness of mind, and there was more space allocated for women than men in eighteenth-century madhouses. Connie considered etymological entries from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, in particular the expression *female weakness*, and showed how the words *peculiar* and *nervous* were originally used in a positive sense, but, when used in reference to women, shifted to negative senses.

Kate Burridge, Professor of Linguistics (Monash University) and scholar of lexicography, gave a lively talk, "Phantoms of the Dictionary: From Johnson to the Digital Age," in which she explored a variety of the ways in which non-existent words and false definitions appear in

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dictionaries and sometimes come into actual use. She discussed ghost words, etymologies, back formations, folk etymologies, inkhorn terms, mountweazels and other curiosities. On her quest for ghost words in Johnson's *Dictionary*, she didn't uncover any hidden treasures beyond the usual suspects, *foupe* and *adventine*. On the contrary, she applauded Johnson's spirited ghost-busting initiatives.

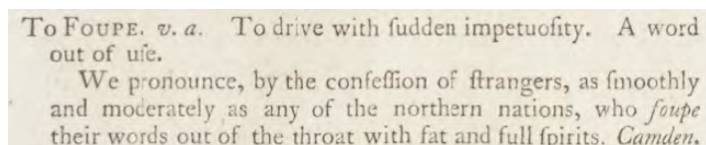


Figure 1: Johnson included the ghost word *foupe* in the *Dictionary* because he misread the long “s” in William Camden’s historical work *Britannia* and thus mistook *soupe* (meaning a swoop) for *foupe*.

Associate Professor Paul Tankard of the University of Otago gave an overview of his recent research into Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*, in which he investigated aspects of the great book that are often overlooked and unread, and for which Boswell is given insufficient credit. Although only twenty-two when he met Johnson, Boswell already knew Johnson’s writings across their range. Whilst we value the *Life of Johnson* for its unique account of Johnson as a conversationalist, Boswell never forgets the great writer: he identifies many of Johnson’s minor works and expands the canon of his prose writings, proposes to edit his poetry, gives a solid literary authority for his biographical method, and provides extensive historical and critical commentary on Johnson’s major writings.

Noting that the seminar was being held on American Independence Day, Peter Hardie delivered a paper provocatively titled, “Johnson vs. the ‘Drivers of Negroes’.” Peter described Britain’s legal arrangements with its thirteen American colonies and explained the war in North America between the British and French colonists by way of background to Johnson’s pro-government pamphlet *Taxation No Tyranny*. Johnson’s hostility to the American colonists was given force by his abhorrence of slavery, but Peter also showed its intellectual roots in Johnson’s anonymous contributions to the Vinerian law lectures by his friend Sir Robert Chambers.

It is hoped all these papers will be published, in time, in the *Papers of the JSA*.

There was a play being rehearsed in the room next door to our venue, from which various whoops and yowls emanated periodically throughout the day. Despite these distractions, the varied pleasures of the seminar were sufficient to dissipate (at least for the moment) a certain degree of anxiety about the Society's continued viability. A brief, belated Annual Meeting for 2025 was held immediately the talks finished, at which a clutch of new people volunteered to serve on the JSA committee, and a newish era was tentatively signaled by enthusiasm for the proposal to adjust the name of the Society to the Johnson Society of Australasia (thus formally extending our coverage across the Tasman Sea, whilst preserving our initials).

The day's programme finished slightly early, and 15 or so people made their way to the nearby Clyde Hotel, where conversation continued happily for another couple of hours.



A Singular Letter from my Library: James Boswell to Ralph Churton, April 5, 1792

LOREN ROTHSCILD[†]

Matt Davis encouraged me to send in a note on an item in my library that might be of special interest to JNL readers. I have selected a signed, autograph letter Boswell wrote to the Rev. Ralph Churton, dated April 5, 1792. Boswell's letter, written in response to a letter from Churton, is recorded as entry 271 in my recently published book, *The Age of Johnson: The Library of Loren and Frances Rothschild*.

Although several topics are discussed in the correspondence between Churton and Boswell, the main topics of interest are Johnson's depression, or as it was then called, "morbid melancholy," Boswell's own depression, and Boswell's responses to criticisms of his *Life of Johnson*.¹

Ralph Churton (1754-1831) was born in the parish of Malpas, in Cheshire, in 1754. He was orphaned in his childhood, but Dr. Thomas Townson (1715-1792), the rector of Malpas, thought him a promising young man and volunteered to pay for half the costs of his education. Churton entered Brasenose College, Oxford, in 1772 and took B.A. (1775) and M.A. degrees (1778). He became a fellow of Brasenose and a clergyman in the Church of England. In 1785 he was chosen to give the Bampton lectures at Oxford.² In 1792 he was presented with the rectory of Middleton Cheney in Northamptonshire.

[†] Loren Rothschild is a long-time member of the Johnsonians, a member of the board of editors of the Yale edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, and the author of the recently published *The Age of Johnson: The Library of Loren and Frances Rothschild* (London: Kulturalis Press).

1. Another important letter by Boswell, this one to Bishop Percy, dated May 10, 1791, sheds further light on Boswell's response to criticism of his *Life of Johnson*. For details, see entry 270 in my book.

2. Churton's lectures were subsequently published as *Eight Sermons on the Prophecies Respecting the Destruction of Jerusalem: Preached before the University of Oxford in the Year 1785* (Oxford, 1785).

In May of 1791, Thomas Dilly published the first edition of Boswell's *Life of Johnson*. Rev. Churton read the first edition and thought well of it. He was, however, concerned that Johnson's gloomy reflections on life might have a discouraging effect on readers, and he wrote to Boswell to encourage him to address this issue. On March 9, 1792, he sent Boswell a letter and a packet of material relating to the *Life*. Churton began his letter, by inserting a transcript of a letter he had written to a friend.³

Last week, I was reading the second volume of Boswell's *Johnson*, with increasing esteem for the worthy authour, and increasing veneration of the wonderful and excellent man who is the subject of it. The writer throws in, now and then, very properly some serious religious reflections; but there is one remark, in my mind an obvious and just one, which I think he has not made, that Johnson's "morbid melancholy," and constitutional infirmities, were intended by Providence, like St. Paul's thorn in the flesh,⁴ to check intellectual conceit and arrogance; which the consciousness of his extraordinary talents, awake as he was to the voice of praise, might otherwise have generated in a very culpable degree. Another observation strikes me, that in consequence of the same natural indisposition, and habitual sickliness, (for he says he scarcely passed one day without pain after his twentieth year,) he considered and represented human life, as a scene of much greater misery than is generally experienced. There may be persons bowed down with affliction all their days; and there are those, no doubt, whose iniquities rob them of rest; but neither calamities nor crimes, I hope and believe, do so much and so generally abound, as to justify the dark picture of life which Johnson's imagination designed, and his strong pencil delineated.

This I am sure, the colouring is far too gloomy for what I have experienced... [H]uman life, as far as I can perceive from experience or observation, is not that state of constant wretchedness which Johnson always insisted it was; which

3. *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, ed. G. B. Hill and L. F. Powell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934), 4:300-2.

4. In 2 Corinthians, 12:7ff, Paul states that a "thorn in the flesh" was given to him in order to keep him from becoming conceited.

misrepresentation, (for such it surely is,) his Biographer has not corrected, I suppose, because, unhappily, he has himself a large portion of melancholy in his constitution, and fancied the portrait a faithful copy of life. (*Life*, 4:300-301)

Churton then continued in his own voice:

I have conversed with some sensible men on this subject, who all seem to entertain the same sentiments respecting life with those which are expressed or implied in the foregoing paragraph. It might be added that as the representation here spoken of, appears not consistent with fact and experience, so neither does it seem to be countenanced by Scripture.

There is, perhaps, no part of the sacred volume which at first sight promises so much to lend its sanction to these dark and desponding notions as the book of Ecclesiastes, which so often, and so emphatically, proclaims the vanity of things sublunary. But the design of this whole book, (as it has been justly observed,) is not to put us out of conceit with life, but to cure our vain expectations of a compleat and perfect happiness in this world; to convince us, that there is no such thing to be found in mere external enjoyments; — and to teach us to seek for happiness in the practice of virtue, in the knowledge and love of God, and in the hopes of a better life. (*Life*, 4:301)

After quoting some additional passages from the New Testament, Churton circled back to his main point:

Upon the whole... I am convinced that... the declarations of Scripture and the actual experience of individuals... authorize the sincere Christian to hope that his humble and constant endeavours to perform his duty, checquered as the best life is with many failings, will be crowned with a greater degree of present peace, serenity, and comfort, than he could reasonably permit himself to expect, if he measured his views and judged of life from the opinion of Dr. Johnson, often and energetically expressed in the Memoirs of him, without any animadversion or censure

by his ingenious Biographer. If he himself, upon reviewing the subject, shall see the matter in this light, he will, in an octavo edition, which is eagerly expected, make such additional remarks or correction as he shall judge fit; lest the impressions which these discouraging passages may leave on the reader's mind, should in any degree hinder what otherwise the whole spirit and energy of the work tends, and, I hope, successfully, to promote,— pure morality and true religion. (*Life*, 4: 301-2)

Churton also sent Boswell a copy of his Bampton Lectures, a copy of his patron Townson's *Discourses on the Gospels*, and a letter written by Townson, in which Townson wrote:

Mr. Boswell is not only very entertaining in his works, but they are so replete with moral and religious sentiments, without an instance, as far as I know, of a contrary tendency, that I cannot help having a great esteem for him; and if you think such a trifle as a copy of the *Discourses, ex dono authoris*, would be acceptable to him, I should be happy to give him this small testimony of my regard. (*Life*, 4:302)

Boswell was pleased to receive the letters, the praise, and the enclosures, and he replied promptly, sending Churton the letter which is now part of my collection. Here is a complete transcription of the letter:

Recd. Apr. 9 Ans. Apr 10

Reverend Sir,

London
5 April 1792

My worthy friend Mr. Langton had given me the satisfaction of knowing your favorable opinion of my *Life* of Dr. Johnson before I had the honor to receive your very obliging letter, for which I sincerely thank you, and I beg you may present my best respects to Dr. Townson with my acknowledgements for his kind expressions concerning my works. Such spontaneous praise I feel as the best reward of my labours. You and he, Sir, will also be pleased to accept of my thanks for the Books you have been so good as

to present to me, of which I have read enough already to perceive that I shall derive more than pleasure from them.

Be assured that I take in very good part the remarks which you have made upon my book; and you will be convinced of my sincerity when you have read what I am now to say.

As to Johnson's notion of the unhappiness of human life, I have when mentioning the Rambler (Vol. 1, p. 116) in some degree obviated any reflections against him on that head; and when mentioning Rasselas (Vol. 1, p. 186) I suggest that his "morbid melancholy" may have made life appear to him more miserable than it generally is. But the truth, Sir, is as you have judiciously observed that I myself have a large portion of melancholy in my constitution for which I am satisfied that allowance should be made. Your remark upon this important subject is so good that if you will give me permission, I will insert it as a note on "the unhappiness of human life" in my second Volume, p. 242.

I am very much pleased with your remark on the passage concerning the Burial service, and shall be very happy also to insert it.

In both instances, I request that the sanction of your name may not be refused.

My Octavo edition is now in the press; and therefore you will be so good as to let me hear from you with your first convenience. I shall esteem it a happiness to obtain your personal acquaintance, whenever an opportunity offers, and I am

Reverend Sir,
Your much obliged
humble servant
James Boswell

Please write to me under cover of John Courtenay Esq: M. P., London.⁵

5. The text is transcribed from the autograph letter in my collection. See item 271 in *The Age of Johnson: The Library of Loren and Frances Rothschild* (London: Kulturalis, 2025).

The Yale Catalogue of the Papers of James Boswell at Yale University, 1: L369, reports that the Boswell letter in my collection, which I have just quoted, is “in James Ross’s hand” and is a single folio leaf. The letter, however, is entirely in Boswell’s hand, and it is a folio leaf folded to form four quarto pages. Figure 1 shows part of the first quarto page.

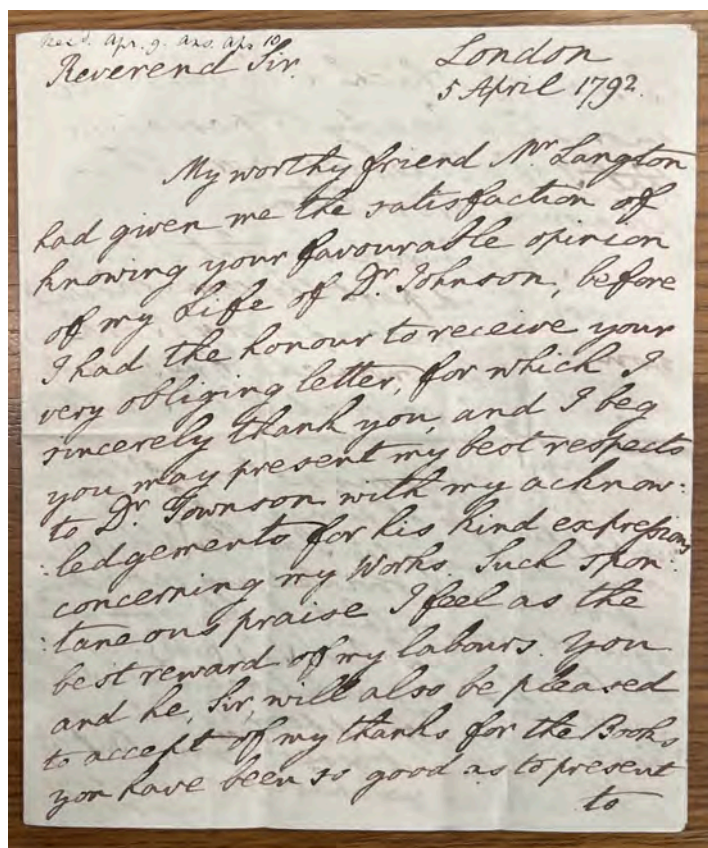


Figure 1: Letter from Boswell to Churton

After their initial correspondence, Boswell and Churton exchanged more letters. In one dated April 10, 1792, Churton expressed his gratitude for Boswell’s reception of his “strictures” and gave him permission to include them and attribute them to him in the forthcoming octavo edition (Boswell Catalogue 2:C788).

Boswell duly inserted Churton’s criticism in a footnote in the octavo edition. (*Life*, 4:300 n. 2.) After quoting Churton’s comments on Johnson’s pessimism, Boswell added: “I am obliged to Mr. Churton for complying with my request of his permission to insert his Remarks, being conscious

of the weight of what he judiciously suggests as to the melancholy in my own constitution. His more pleasing views of life, I hope, are just. “*Valeant quantum valere possunt.*” (Let them stand for whatever they are worth.)

On July 26, 1793, Boswell sent Churton a presentation copy of the second (octavo) edition of the *Life*. In his covering letter he noted that he had read Churton’s Bampton lectures “with more than ordinary satisfaction” (*Life* 4:534). “They indeed served as cordials to me, while I was under confinement, in consequence of having been knocked down, cut and bruised by one of those street robbers with which London has been grievously infested this year” (*Life*, 4:534).

On September 23, 1793, Churton thanked Boswell for sending him a copy of the *Life* (Boswell Catalogue 2:C789).

Churton went on to become a distinguished clergyman. In his later years he was associated with the group of high church Anglican divines known as “the Hackney Phalanx.” Peter Nockles described him as “an exemplar of orthodox churchmanship.”⁶ In his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, Newman recognized him as a “high Church dignitary of the last century.”⁷

The book that documents my collection, *The Age of Johnson: The Library of Loren and Frances Rothschild* (ISBN 978-1-83636-015-5), is available to Johnsonians from [Kulturalis](https://www.kulturalis.com) at a discount from the retail price of \$125. The book is also available on Amazon at a discount.

6. Peter Benedict Nockles, *The Oxford Movement in Context: Anglican High Churchmanship, 1760-1857* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 17.

7. John Henry Cardinal Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (New York: Random House, 1950), 118.



Johnson's Reading for the Dictionary: Upon the Spanish Invasion

MATTHEW M. DAVIS[†]

In the first edition of the *Dictionary*, Johnson defined *bravado* as “a boast; a brag.” He then appended an illustrative couplet on the Spanish Armada of 1588:

Spain, to make good the *bravado*,
Names it the invincible armado.

Anonymous.

Back in the 1990s, I went looking for the source of this anonymous quotation. I thought it might be easy to find because *armado* is a rare spelling variant of *armada*, and *bravado* is not used much either. I figured there couldn't be too many poems that rhyme *armado* with *bravado*.

I was wrong about that. It turns out there are at least twenty English poems that were printed after 1588 and before 1755 that feature the *armado/bravado* rhyme.

Beth Rapp Young drew attention to one of these poems several years ago. She identified, as a possible source for the quotation in Johnson's *Dictionary*, a song in *Westminster-drollery, or, A choice collection of the newest songs & poems both at court and theaters by a person of quality* (London: H. Brome, 1671). In that collection the song in question (which is on page 93) is called “An Old Song on the Spanish Armado”:

Some years of late in eighty eight,
As I do well remember...
The Spanish train, la[u]nch'd forth amain,
With many a fine bravado
Their (as they thought) but it prov'd not,

[†] Matthew Davis is the editor of this journal.

Invincible *Armado*,
Invincible *Armado*.¹

I agree that this merits nomination as a possible source. If there were no rival candidates, I would probably conclude that this was indeed Johnson's source. However, there are nineteen other candidates, and I will try to show that one of them is significantly closer to the lines Johnson included in the *Dictionary*.

The poem I wish to put forward as a candidate is an anonymous production that was probably composed in the 1590s or early 1600s. However, I have not found it in any printed book earlier than John Hall's *Jacobs Ladder: Or the Devout Souls Ascention to Heaven, in Prayers, Thanksgivings, and Praises* (London, 1676), 115-116. Hall's book is, in the words of the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, "a compilation of private, family, and occasional devotions," including "prayers thanking God for the nation's deliverance from popery... in 1588 [and] 1605." The book went through many editions well into the eighteenth century. The poem was also printed in a revised and "enlarged" sixth edition of R.B.'s *The English Hero; or Francis Drake Reviv'd* (London, 1701).² In this volume the poem is presented without a title, but in Hall's book it is presented with the title "Upon the Spanish Invasion in that remarkable year 1588, intended to reduce this nation to Popery and slavery by the (so-called) invincible Armada." This is probably an editorial title; however, since it is helpful to have a title to refer to, I will use an abbreviated version, "Upon the Spanish Invasion," in what follows.

Here are the key lines in the poem:

The Pope to make up the Bravado,
Stiles it, The INVINCIBLE ARMADO.

Those lines are quite close to the lines Johnson printed in the *Dictionary*:

Spain, to make good the *bravado*,
Names it the invincible armado.

1. This song is listed as a likely source for Johnson's quotation on the *Dictionary* website maintained by Brian Grimes: <https://www.sjdictionarysources.org/anon.html>

2. The poem is printed on page 155 of the sixth edition (London, 1701). It was not included in earlier editions.

There are three strong points of similarity between “Upon the Spanish Invasion” and the lines in the *Dictionary*:

1. Both contain the *armado/bravado* rhyme, with the *singular* forms of the nouns and *bravado* used before *armado*.
2. Both contain the noun phrase “invincible Armado.”
3. Both are tetrameter couplets.

In addition, I would point out that, where there are differences between the two couplets, they are *minor* differences that would seem to be entirely consistent with the possibility that Johnson supplied the couplet from memory:

- A. For the subject of the sentence, Johnson has “Spain” rather than “The Pope.” However, in 1588 the Pope and Spain were allies in the struggle against Protestantism and England, so the alternative phrasing preserves the basic meaning.
- B. For the verb in the sentence, Johnson has “names” rather than “stiles.” However, these two words are both semantically and metrically interchangeable.³
- C. In place of “to make *up* the bravado,” Johnson has “to make *good* the bravado.” The meaning in this case is subtly different.⁴ However, once again, the two phrases are very close, and once again they are metrically interchangeable.

If we look back at the other candidate — the song from *Westminster-drollery* quoted earlier — we can see that it is similar to the lines in the *Dictionary* on points 1 and 2 but not point 3. Also, it does not display the near equivalents noted in points A, B, and C. For these reasons, it seems to me the case for “Upon the Spanish Invasion” is significantly stronger.

If additional evidence is required, I would note that one of the books in which “Upon the Spanish Invasion” was printed is a book Johnson is believed to have consulted. In the Yale Edition of Johnson’s works, Brack

3. *Style*, v. to call, to term, to name (Johnson’s *Dictionary*).

4. *To make good*: to fulfill, accomplish (Johnson’s *Dictionary*). Cf. *to make up*: to get together; to compose, as of ingredients; to shape; to conclude (Johnson’s *Dictionary*).

and DeMaria list *The English Hero* as a very likely source for Johnson's *Life of Francis Drake*, which was printed in the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1740-41.⁵ It is possible that Johnson encountered the poem in a post-1701 edition of *The English Hero*, but it is also possible that he encountered it in an edition of *Jacob's Ladder* or in another source.

II

Having looked closely at one couplet, I would like now to step back and consider the larger family of poems that include the *armado/bravado* rhyme. "Family" seems like it might be the right word because this turns out to be a cohesive and interesting group of related poems.

All of the poems that contain the *armado/bravado* rhyme were written after the defeat of the Spanish Armada, and in most cases the authors are either describing the events of 1588 or alluding to them. The authors of these poems were almost all English poets who were eager to celebrate the English victory. Almost all of them attack the Spanish for their boasts and bravados, and almost all write as Protestants who detect the hand of God in the English victory. In other words, almost all of these poets give voice to a worldview which is patriotic, Protestant, and providential.

One of the first *armado/bravado* poems that found its way into print was a Skeltonic⁶ poem with a lengthy, rhyming title:

*A Skeltonicall Salutation,
Or condigne⁷ gratulation
And just vexation
Of the Spanish Nation,
That in a bravado,
Spent many a Crusado,⁸*

5. Samuel Johnson, *Biographical Writings: Soldiers, Scholars, and Friends*. Volume 19 of the Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, ed. O M Brack., Jr., and Robert DeMaria, Jr. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016), 84.

6. Skeltonic verses are named for John Skelton (c.1463-1529) who wrote poems with very short lines and strong rhymes, often ludicrous.

7. *Condigne*: "worthy of a person, suitable, deserved... it is always used of something deserved by crimes" (Johnson's *Dictionary*).

8. *Crusado*: "a coin stamped with a cross" (Johnson's *Dictionary*).

*In setting forth an Armado
England to invado.*⁹
(London: Toby Cooke, 1589)

The anonymous author goes on to taunt King Philip of Spain for boasting he would bring down the English:

O waspish king,
Where[']s now thy sting,
Thy dart, or sling,
Or strong bow-string,
That should us wring,
And underbring[?]¹⁰

A few years later, John Taylor the Water Poet (1578-1653) produced a sequence of historical sonnets, with one sonnet for each year in the recent history of England. When he came to 1588, Taylor chose to focus on the defeat of the Armada:

[1588]

This year Spain with a mighty preparation
With twelve score vessels loadeth Neptune's back,
With thirty thousand men attempts invasion
Of England's kingdom, and Eliza's wrack.¹¹
Then many a bragging desperate doughty Don,¹²
Proud of the strength of that great huge *armado*,
Went barely off, though they came bravely on,¹³
The power of Heaven opposing their *bravado*.
Our numbers unto theirs inferior far,

9. *Invado*: not listed in Johnson's *Dictionary* or the OED. The ending -ado is a regular past-tense suffix for all -AR verbs in Spanish, and past participles are often used as nouns; thus, *el abogado* (the lawyer) comes from the verb *abogar* (to advocate for), *el delegado* (the delegate) comes from the verb *delegar* (to delegate), etc. This means it is easy to produce Spanish words that rhyme with *bravado*.

10. *Underbring*: bring down, conquer, defeat, ruin. The quoted passage comes from p. 2.

11. *Eliza's wrack*: the *wrack* (wreck, ruin) and overthrow of Queen Elizabeth I.

12. *Don*: a Spanish nobleman.

13. This line makes more sense if the order of the verbs is reversed to coincide with the order of events: before the engagement, the Spaniards "came on" (*i.e.*, advanced) bravely, but afterwards they barely "got off" (*i.e.*, got away) with their lives.

Yet were they tane,¹⁴ sunk, slain, bang'd, thump'd & batter'd
 Because the Lord of Hosts, the God of war,
 He was our trust and aide; our foes he scatter'd[.]
 His name is over all the world most glorious
 And through his power his Church is still victorious.¹⁵

Although this is not a great poem, it is worth inserting because Taylor trots out many of the elements we find in the *armado/bravado* poems we are looking at: he rebukes the Spanish for their bragging and boasting, and he presents the English victory as a proof of divine approval.

Shortly after the Armada was defeated, a medal was struck at Middleburg in the Netherlands, with a Latin inscription: *flavit [Jehovah] et dissipati sunt 1588* (God blew and they were scattered).¹⁶



Figure 1: Dutch medal, commemorating the English victory in 1588. © The Trustees of the British Museum. [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

14. *Tane*: taken, made into a monosyllable via ellipsis.

15. Taylor's providentialist sonnet sequence is titled "God's Manifold Mercies." It can be found in *All the Works of John Taylor the water-poet* (London, 1630), 144-5.

16. On the medal, the name of God is omitted and the tetragrammaton is used instead, in accordance with contemporary Protestant practice. With regard to the winds as instruments of God, compare Job 4:9: "By the blast of God they perish, and by the breath of his nostrils are they consumed."

The winds that do the scattering work of the Lord are prominently featured in many of the *armado/bravado* poems, too. For example, George Wither introduces a version of the idea in his *Tuba-Pacifica* (1664). In his poem, a voice addresses the English and urges them to recall the events of 1588

... when the pow'rfulst of your *neighbouring Nations*
Seem'd so assured of their expectations,
That their *Sea Forces*, in a proud bravado,
Were termed an *Invincible Armado*;
Till GOD befriending you, did with one puff
Bring down their Pride, and blow their Malice off.¹⁷

Wither tells the story of the Armada as a story of puffing and counter-puffing. The Spanish launched their Armada with a *proud bravado*, a little puff of air produced by a boastful man. God then blasted the Armada with “one puff.” The passage is a vernacular gloss on the Middleburg medal’s *flavit... et dissipati sunt*.

Many of the same ideas are put forward in “Upon the Spanish Armada,” which I discussed in section I of this article. Since the poem is only 32 lines long, I will insert it here:

Poor England's Ruin is design'd,¹⁸
The Pope and Spain have combin'd,
Both have Infallibly Decreed
In eighty eight, England must bleed:
A vast Armada Spain prepares,
The Cost and Toil of many Years;
An hundred fifty Sail, and more,¹⁹
Come thundring from the Spanish Shoar;
The Pope to make up the *Bravado*
Stiles it, The INVINCIBLE ARMADO.
Whose vast and numerous Hulls contain
The Treasure and the Streng[th] of Spain:

17. George Wither, *Tuba-pacifica, seasonable precautions, whereby is sounded is sounded forth a retreat from the war intended between England and the united-provinces of lower Germany* (London, 1664), 11.

18. *Design'd*: planned.

19. *An hundred fifty Sail*: 150 warships (synecdoche).

Full twenty thousand Sold[ie]rs,
 And to increase our Woes and Fears
 Fetters and Chains they did prepare,
 The Marks of Slavery we must wear:
 Religion, Law, and Liberties,
 Are all design'd a Sacrifice
 To Romish Cruelty, and we
 Most wretched Slaves Condemn'd to be.
 Our Queen with watchful Eyes surveys
 Th' approaching Storm, and soon doth raise
 Two Royal Armies, to withstand
 The bold Invaders of our Land:
 A gallant Fleet too, she provides.
 But God himself the Case decides:
 The Lord of Hosts soon made them see
 There's none Invincible but He.
 He with a breath of Wind doth blast
 Designs so mighty and so vast,
 That all might see that none but he,
 An Universal King can be.²⁰

Here again the Spaniards are presented as puffed-up braggarts, and here again God is credited with chastening the proud. The story of the Armada is presented as an exemplum, reminding readers of the truth of the proverb, *pride goeth before a fall*. In this poem, and in several others I turned up, one senses the influence of Protestant theologians like Luther and Calvin, who emphasized the massive disparity of power between God and human beings. The Lord of Hosts is so potent that it requires only the slightest effort on His part to wreck even the most ambitious plans of puny human beings.

In 1680 James Salgado published a poem in Latin, with a parallel text in English. In the poem, he praises Queen Elizabeth, "that Noble Queen, / Who us from Popish bondage did redeem," while telling a similar story about the Protestant winds of 1588:

While yet this Noble Queen sate on the Throne,
 The *Spaniards* Hatched Mischief, came upon

20. I quote from Hall, *Jacob's Ladder*, 115-116.

Her Majesty, with all their great *Armado*,
 Threatning the *English* with a proud Bravado...
 Now when the *Spanish* and the *English* Fleet,
 Together in the boistrous Seas did meet[,]
 Against the *Spanish* God stretcht out his hand,
 The sevrall Winds came forth at his Command,
 Both East and West, both South and Northern Wind,
 Against the *Spanish* Forces were combin'd;
 So that the Ships fell foul of one another,
 Then they were sadly bruis'd and broke together:
 Both Ships and Men i' th' Sea were overturned,
 And what the Waters spared, the Fireships burned.
 Thus God gave her a Glorious Victory,
 And brought his People out of Jeopardy.²¹

Englishmen often connected the defeat of the Armada in 1588 to other remarkable events in English history, including the exposure of the Gunpowder Plot in 1605. In 1621, Samuel Ward produced a print that juxtaposed these two events and presented both as evidence of providential superintendence.

21. James Salgado, *Carmen in serenissimae Reginae Elizabethae Natalitia, classem Hispanicam ab ipsa devictam, & conspirationem papisticam antiquam & modernam...* (London, 1680), 1.



Figure 2: Anti-Catholic print by Samuel Ward, 1621. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Museum number 1847,0723.11. [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

At the top of Ward's print there is a dedication, in Latin and English: "To God, In memory of his double deliveraunce from ye invincible Navie and ye unmatcheable powder Treason." In the image below, we see the Pope and other Catholics plotting (in the center), the Spanish Armada drawn up in the shape of a crescent (on the left), and the House of Parliament in Westminster (on the right). Guy Faux (foreground, right, in hat and long cloak) is shown walking toward the House of Parliament, the basement of which he has filled with barrels of gunpowder. Above the Armada the winds are depicted, with the words "*Difflo: Dissipo*": "I blow and scatter" (another variation on the *flavit... et dissipati sunt topi*). Above the building we see the tetragrammaton, the eye of God, and a beam of light that brings the plot to light. Within the beam of light the artist has written "*Video Rideo*": "I see and smile." Four lines of verse below point the moral:

But he whose never slumbring EYE did view
The dire intendments of the damned crew

Did soone prevent what they did think most sure[.]
Thy mercyes LORD for evermore endure.²²

After the revolution of 1688, Protestant poets began adding another event to their list of providential interventions. They suggested that it could hardly be an accident that the Spanish Armada was defeated in 1588 and James II's efforts on behalf of the old faith were defeated exactly a hundred years later in 1688:

In .88 came proud Spain[']s Armado,
With Brags against our Church and great Bravado.
In .88, that Number of Salvation,
King William came to save our Church and Nation.²³

For pious Protestants, these were closely related events — both were consequences of the famous “Protestant winds.”

By way of summary, I would say that I went looking for a rhyme and found a whole worldview. I found a whole set of patriotic, Protestant, providentialist poems that show the English gaining confidence in themselves, their church, and their navy. The authors of these *armado/bravado* poems give voice to a shared sense that England was a nation favored by God, and this sense would, literally, launch a thousand ships and lead to the establishment of colonies all around the world. What we see in the *armado/bravado* poems is a nascent confidence in the nation — a confidence that would fuel the growth of the British Empire, with all of its achievements and excesses.²⁴

22. For background on Ward's print, and on providential thinking in general, see Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), especially chapters 1 and 5.

23. Francis Moore, *Vox Stellarum; or, a loyal almanack for the year of human redemption, 1738* (London, 1738), 8. Moore finds special significance in the number 8: “If History we search, we there shall find, / This number ever to our Church was kind” (8).

24. AI was not used in the writing of this article. However, Copilot AI was used for background research on some issues, including providentialist thinking and Spanish -AR verbs.



Two Engravings of Johnson by the Brothers Dalziel

MATTHEW M. DAVIS

A few months ago I stumbled across two images of Johnson that I suspect most JNL readers have never seen. I myself had never seen them, even though I am constantly on the lookout for art that might be used in the JNL. I showed the images to a few Johnsonians, and several of them told me they had never seen them either.

You won't find these images on Wikimedia Commons or on stock photo websites like Alamy.com. They seem to have popped up on the internet only a couple of years ago, when someone digitized an old book, *The Queens of Society*, by Grace and Philip Wharton (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1861). Textually, this book is not of any real importance for Johnson scholars: it merely reprints a few anecdotes from Boswell's *Life*. Pictorially, though, it is of some interest, for it contains two engravings of Johnson that were created especially for the book by the Brothers Dalziel.

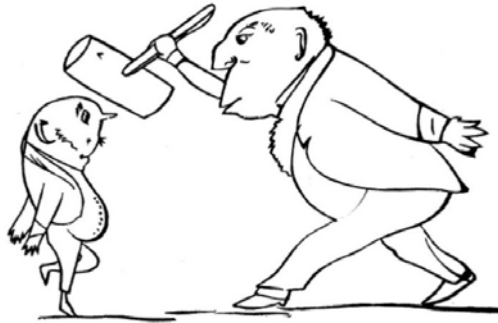
Before presenting the engravings, let me say a few words about the firm that produced them. The Brothers Dalziel was a London-based engraving company that flourished during the Victorian period. It was founded in 1839 by George Dalziel (1815-1902).¹ He was eventually joined by several of his brothers, one sister, and a number of artists who were not members of the family.

1. For more on the Brothers Dalziel, see their memoir, *A Record of Fifty Years' Work* (London, 1901). They were also the subject of a 2022 exhibition at the British Museum, "The Woodpecking Factory: Victorian Illustrations by the Brothers Dalziel." Some materials related to the exhibition can still be viewed online.



Figure 1: Members of the Dalziel family, 1880s (National Portrait Gallery)

The Brothers Dalziel established themselves as successful commercial illustrators in the 1840s. They produced many illustrations, including some that are still well known today — for example, their engravings for Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* books, Edward Lear’s *Book of Nonsense*, and Christina Rossetti’s *Sing-Song*.



There was an Old Person of Buda, whose conduct grew ruder and ruder;
Till at last, with a hammer, they silenced his clamour,
By smashing that Person of Buda.

Figure 2: A Brothers Dalziel engraving for Edward Lear’s *Book of Nonsense* (1894)

The firm prospered for five decades, until new processes of book illustration came along and put them out of business in the 1890s.

There are two engravings of Johnson in *The Queens of Society*. The first of these is shown below.



Figure 3: Dr. Johnson's Wedding

The caption at the bottom of the page, "Dr. Johnson's Wedding," is somewhat misleading. The engraving does not depict the wedding ceremony itself; rather, it depicts an episode of spousal maneuvering and counter-maneuvering that allegedly took place after the ceremony, when the newlyweds were riding from Lichfield to Derby. The episode is described in the Whartons' book:

[Johnson] used to relate the following particulars of his marriage (in 1755 to Mrs. Porter) with all the naiveté possible:— "Sir, it was a love marriage on both sides. Sir, she had a notion that a woman of spirit should use her lover like a dog." They were, it seems, to ride on horseback to Derby, and set out in very good humor. "So, sir, at first she told me

that I rode too fast, and she could not keep up with me; and when I rode a little slower she passed me, and complained that I lagged behind. I was not to be made the slave of caprice; and I resolved to begin as I meant to end. I therefore pushed on briskly, till I was fairly out of her sight. The road lay between two hedges, and I was sure that she could not miss it; and I conceived that she should soon come up to me. When she did, I observed her to be in tears.”²

The second image is shown in Figure 4, with the caption “A Scene in the Temple: Johnson’s Gallantry.” This engraving depicts an event that took place in 1763. Again, I give the version presented in the Whartons’ book, which traces back to Boswell’s *Life*:

“When Madame de Boufflers was first in England,” said Beauclerk, “she was desirous to see Johnson. I accordingly went with her to his chamber in the Temple, where she was entertained with his conversation for some time. When our visit was over, she and I left him, and were got into Inner Temple Lane, when all at once I heard a noise like thunder. This was occasioned by Johnson, who, it seems, upon a little recollection, had taken it into his head that he ought to have done the honors³ of his literary residence to a foreign lady of quality; and, eager to show himself a man of gallantry, was hurrying down the staircase in violent agitation. He overtook us before we reached Temple gate, and, brushing in between me and Madame de Boufflers, seized her hand, and conducted her to her coach. His dress was a rusty brown morning suit, a pair of old shoes by way of slippers, a little shriveled wig sticking on the top of his head, and the sleeves of his shirt and the knees of his breeches hanging loose. A considerable crowd of people gathered round, and were not a little struck by this singular appearance.”⁴

2. Wharton, *Queens of Society*, 362.

3. *To do (also perform) the honours*, OED, sense 6: “to perform the civilities or courtesies associated with a particular thing or place; to serve as a host or hostess; to perform some specified or implied social act.”

4. Wharton, *Queens of Society*, 363-64.

Marie Françoise Catherine de Beauvau-Craon, Marquise de Boufflers (1711-1786) was a French noblewoman, the royal mistress of Stanislaus I, King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania. She was also the mother of the statesman and poet Stanislas de Boufflers. In 1771, Johnson wrote her a letter in French.⁵

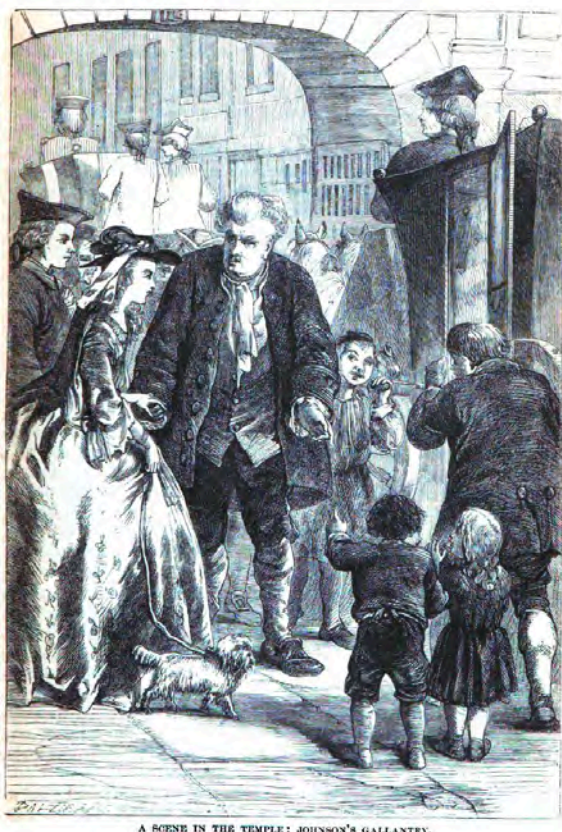


Figure 4: A Scene in the Temple: Johnson's Gallantry

I am not aware of any other illustrations depicting Johnson and Tetty, newly married, on the road to Derby. On the other hand, I have seen two other versions of the scene involving Madame de Boufflers. Both of these were created as illustrations for editions of Boswell's *Life of Johnson*.

5. See *Letters of Samuel Johnson*, ed. Bruce Redford (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), five vols., 1:360.

The first (Figure 5) comes from what may be the very first abridgement of Boswell's biography.⁶



Figure 5: Dr. Johnson's Politeness to Madame Boufflers (Image from Alamy)

The second (Figure 6) comes from a nineteenth-century edition of Boswell's *Life*.⁷ It depicts a moment a few seconds earlier than the moment depicted in the other two images — the moment when Johnson hurried out to correct his oversight.

6. *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D., Carefully Abridged from Mr. Boswell's Large Work*, by F. Thomas, Esq., of the Inner Temple (London, 1792), frontispiece.

7. *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* (London: National Illustrated Library, 1852), four vols, 2:258.



Figure 6: Another illustration of the same scene

In these images we seem to be dealing with an interesting sub-genre of Johnsonian illustration. One gets the sense that the world of High Society found Johnson's occasional attempts at gallantry rather amusing. Over the years many images of Johnson have been created *con amore*; some or all of the images discussed in this note may have been created more in the spirit of *subrisu efficta*.⁸ That is to say, someone may have been having a laugh at Johnson's expense.

8. *Subrisu efficta*: Latin, fashioned or depicted under a smile; created while smiling at the subject.



***Copilot at the Easel:
A Gallery of AI-Generated Images of
Johnson, with Commentary from
Eighteenth-Century Scholars***

MATTHEW M. DAVIS

In the last issue of the JNL, I included a couple of examples of what the latest AI bots can do as *sentence generators*. In this issue I have decided to share a few examples of what the bots can do as *image generators*. The portfolio that follows includes ten images of Johnson, all of which were generated by the Copilot AI bot in 2025 or 2026, based on prompts I supplied. I have placed the images in the order in which they were generated.

After generating the images, I put a version of this document up on Google Docs and invited a number of Johnsonians to serve as “judges” and comment on the images. I have included some of their comments in this article.



Figure 1: Johnson’s Penitence at Uttoxeter, 1770s or 1780s

Notes on Figure 1

I started fiddling around with AI image generation in 2024. I thought it might be possible to use the bots to generate some free illustrations for the JNL. Throughout most of 2024, however, I didn’t get many images that I thought were worth sharing. The image generators were just not very good at that point — and there was another problem, too. For many months the Copilot bot was not allowed to generate pictures of actual people. I tried to work around this prohibition by not using the name “Samuel Johnson” and instead asking the bot to draw a stout eighteenth-century man in a powdered wig and eighteenth-century dress. Figure 1 was generated using that sneaky work-around, in January of 2025. Copilot probably generated twenty images I didn’t like before it generated this one, which I did like — and still do. I like the monochromatic look, and since the man is shown in profile, you can’t really tell who it is. It *could be* Johnson.

The event depicted here will be familiar to many JNL readers. It is described in Boswell’s *Life*. In his later years Johnson went to Uttoxeter and

stood in the rain, in penance: “Once [when I was working for my father]... I was disobedient... I refused to attend [him] to Uttoxeter-market. Pride was the source of that refusal, and the remembrance of it was painful. A few years ago, I desired to atone for this fault; I went to Uttoxeter in very bad weather, and stood for a considerable time bareheaded in the rain, on the spot where my father's stall used to stand. In contrition I stood, and I hope the penance was expiatory.” Unfortunately, in my prompt, I left out the bit about “bareheaded.”

Judges' Comments

Robert DeMaria, Jr.: I don't imagine him looking so spruce; the wig particularly seems too well-groomed. The figure does embody the idea of contrition, however.

Anthony Lee: It's interesting that SJ is depicted standing in the street, alone. This is historically inaccurate, but it does convey the isolating nature of guilt.

Beth Rapp Young: I like this image, but I don't know if I would recognize what it depicted without your caption. Could someone be “bareheaded” in a powdered wig? Johnson defines this word as “Uncovered in respect,” and the OED is similar “With the head uncovered, esp. as a token of respect.” I don't know whether a head in a wig was considered “uncovered” if it was not topped by a hat.

Ileana Baird: I find the image very atmospheric: the details of the background, the ominous sky, the suggestive rendering of the rain — they all add up to an oppressive feeling of guilt and willful punishment. I also like how crisp Johnson's image is, centering the message of the graphic on the idea of penance, which is somehow enhanced by the imperfections of his body (the small feet and hands, the potbelly). I think, though, that the age is off as Johnson would have been in his seventies in 1780.

Lisa Berglund: Sorry to be the dissenter here, but I don't like this image. Frankly, it looks as if Johnson is relieving himself, given the way the rain is depicted in lines, and given the location of his hands. I also have always assumed that his penance required him to be in public (as in the well-known historical picture) rather than looking as if he sneaked out at night, or was caught out after missing his train.

Michael Bundock: As with all things AI, everything depends on the prompts. Here the full-bottomed wig is hard to reconcile with bare-headedness, and I missed the busyness of the marketplace and the sneers of the passers-by.

John Scanlan: The bow of the head perfectly fits the passage; but where are the puddles in the “very bad weather”?

Lynda Mugglestone: While this is a very attractive image, maybe it’s too attractive — like contrition is being performed but not really felt, enhanced by the personal puddle which has come to surround him. That wig — given contemporary descriptions of Johnson’s variously singed and ill-fitting wigs — seems equally out of place. But penance in the underlying story needs a public context — not just outdoors as here, but with others to see and bear witness in the busy marketplace which Johnson had previously rejected.

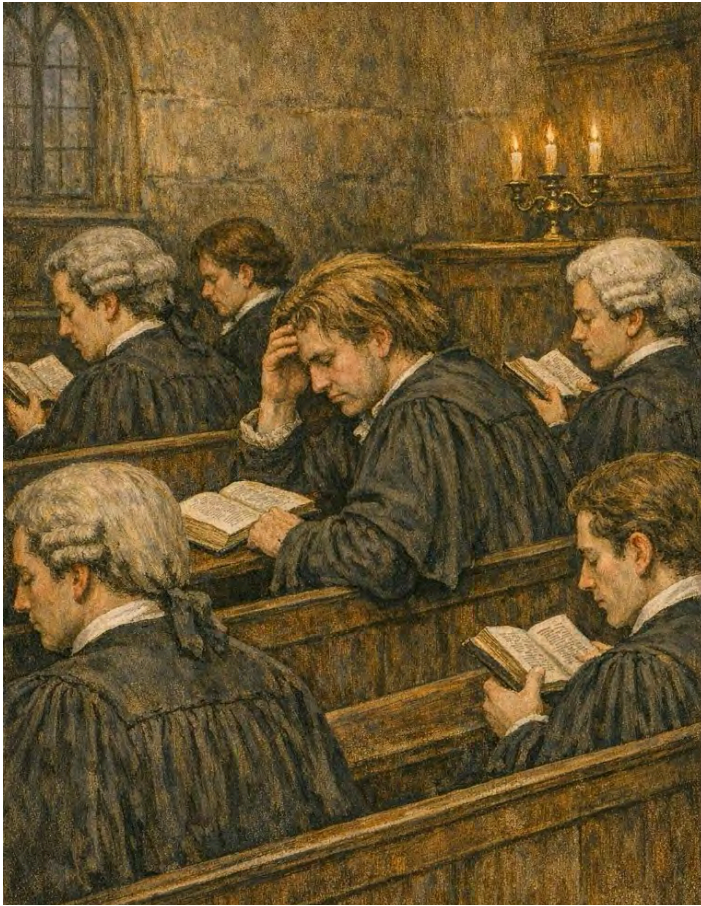


Figure 2: Johnson at Prayer in Pembroke College Chapel, Oxford, 1728-29

Notes on Figure 2

Early in 2026, I discovered that Microsoft had modified the rules governing image generation: Copilot was no longer prohibited from generating images of *deceased* historical figures. Emancipated thus, I asked Copilot to create an image of Johnson at prayer in Pembroke College Chapel and then (in later iterations) to make him look “troubled” about his own salvation, based on his recent reading of William Law’s *A Serious Call*. This was the fifth or sixth image Copilot generated, in March of 2026.

Again, the background story comes from Boswell’s *Life*. Johnson (Boswell says) “expected to find [*A Serious Call*] a dull book... and perhaps to laugh at it,” but he found Law “quite an overmatch.”

Judges' Comments

Robert DeMaria, Jr.: Even at twenty Johnson was apparently not this handsome; his features could not have been this symmetrical. One eye wandered. He had scars. He was “raw-boned.” He does look like he is battling scruples. This could be a meeting of the Oxford Methodists.

Matthew M. Davis: AI even flatters the dead!

Beth Rapp Young: Another nice image. I like the fact that we can see his face. Would the stubble be accurate? The posture is very evocative.

Ileana Baird: I feel this image lacks something... depth? The “troubled” expression needs a bit more work. Also, is Johnson a bit out of proportion compared to the other individuals in this image? The other protagonists here seem like copy-paste replicas due to holding the books in the same position/at the same height. This whole graphic is a bit odd.

Lisa Berglund: He doesn't look as if he's praying, but I like the image, though it is (as mentioned by others) too flattering.

Michael Bundock: Pembroke College Chapel was not completed until 1732, after Johnson's time there.

John Scanlan: Too “Hollywood.”

Lynda Mugglestone. Yes, have to agree with Michael on the historical problem here. The chapel was not finished during Johnson's time in Pembroke. Even when complete, it didn't (and doesn't) look like this. This one looks much earlier and perhaps draws on stereotypes of Oxford college chapels. Johnson has also apparently been reconfigured as a suffering Romantic hero, while his eyesight has apparently been rectified, too — the wonders of AI. All the others need to hold their texts close to their faces.

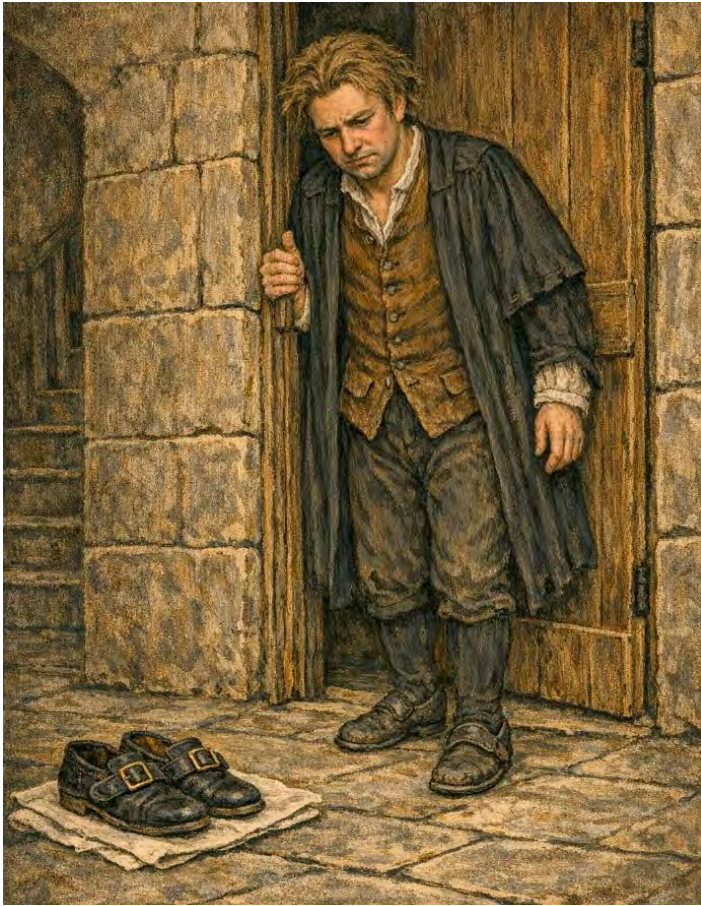


Figure 3: Johnson and the “Charity” Shoes; Pembroke College, Oxford, 1728-29

Notes on Figure 3

This image was generated in March of 2026, during the same session as Figure 2. The reader will notice that Copilot has managed to preserve the “look and feel” of Figure 2 while moving on to a new scene (something I had not previously seen it do). As a result, Figures 2, 3, and 4, all of which were generated in a single session, look like a series of illustrations in a children’s book on Johnson’s early years.

Boswell recorded that, while Johnson was at Oxford, he had very little money and his shoes were worn out and falling apart. A scholar of Christ Church set a new pair of shoes at his door, but Johnson “threw them away with indignation.”

Judges' Comments

Matthew M. Davis: I am struck that Johnson looks rather handsome and well formed here (and also in Figure 2), perhaps implausibly so. Also his old shoes don't look *all that worn out*.

Cal Curran: My objection is that he doesn't actually look indignant.

Matthew M. Davis: That's true; it looks like the bot decided to illustrate the moment just before the indignation kicked in.

Robert DeMaria, Jr.: This one seems more plausible to me than the first two, but wasn't Johnson's room on the top floor over the gate? I've seen it in its restored form.

Anthony Lee: Bob's right about the upper-level apartment. I have pictures of it somewhere. Maybe AI can work with graphics?

Beth Rapp Young: Yes, AI images make everyone look symmetrical. I actually think Johnson's clothes and shoes look slightly worn here, though I agree his expression might be "concerned" or maybe "puzzled."

Ileana Baird: My first reaction after reading the note was the same as Matt's: his own shoes don't look that worn-out! Besides that, though, overall, he doesn't come across as destitute in this image. I like the detail about the shoes placed on a piece of cloth: it suggests care, so Johnson's "indignation" in this scene wouldn't be justified, I think.

Lisa Berglund: The gifted shoes are so much larger than Johnson's feet it seems that he's wondering if a Brobdingnagian stopped by. I do value, however, the way the images make the viewer think about Johnson *as* youthful, rather than as already a stout authoritative sexagenarian.

John Scanlan: Does Johnson at Oxford look too much like Russell Crowe at Princeton (in *A Beautiful Mind*)?

Lynda Mugglestone: I'm temporarily occupying the Johnson room in fact, which is over the Lodge, and was historically the top floor. Again, there's quite a lot of prettification (and Oxford stereotyping) going on — this was one of the cheapest bits of accommodation in the college, but it looks rather like a posh bit of Magdalen here. Johnson is right to look concerned about those shoes — they are really not going to fit. Johnson has also had an academic uplift — he's wearing a scholar's gown but was in fact an ordinary commoner so another bit of imposture here!



Figure 4: Melancholy Johnson, 1735

Notes on Figure 4

This is another image from my fruitful March of 2026 session.

Johnson agreed to translate Lobo's *Voyage to Abyssinia* but (according to Boswell) his "constitutional indolence soon prevailed, and the work was at a stand. Mr. Hector, who knew that a motive of humanity would be the most prevailing argument with his friend, went to Johnson, and represented to him, that the printer could have no other employment till this undertaking was finished, and that the poor man and his family were suffering. Johnson upon this exerted the powers of his mind, though his body was relaxed. He lay in bed with the book, which was a quarto, before him, and dictated while Hector wrote. Mr. Hector carried the sheets to the press..."

Judges' Comments

Robert DeMaria, Jr.: Why not show Johnson dictating and Hector writing it down?

Anthony Lee: I wonder if AI can be programmed to compose the missing essays that Johnson composed for Warren's Birmingham newspaper. Wholly speculative, of course.

Beth Rapp Young: This is one of my favorite Johnson stories. I'd like to see the book in bed with him, and I'd like to see Hector taking dictation.

Ileana Baird: Where is the book?!? I like the sense of movement of this image and the engagement of the protagonists, but nothing here conveys anything else but some sort of conversation between the two. The note made me curious about the language of the book Johnson translated: the book is by a Portuguese author, but the translation is from French. I was not aware that in his 20s Johnson was that fluent in French... So looking this up, I found out that he likely learned the language in the early 1730s. He drafted an unfinished plan of study called *Adversaria* and set aside time to study French while simultaneously working on his Greek. So the "constitutional indolence" conveyed here may not be the best qualifier for Johnson.

Matthew M. Davis: I think the moment illustrated is the moment when Hector remonstrated with SJ and told him about the poor printer waiting for copy. I think that moment has appeal, too.

Lynda Mugglestone: Matthew's comment is interesting. Is this another point of contrition, then?

Matthew M. Davis: I am only semi-contrite.

Lynda Mugglestone: Johnson is being presented here as a Romantic hero (though the large tankard on the bedside might unfortunately suggest other causes for Johnson clutching his head – which might indicate contrition and regret of another kind). I'm not sure AI is completely getting this task.



Figure 5: Johnson Walking the Streets of London

Notes on Figure 5

In March of 2026, I asked Copilot to generate an image of Johnson walking the streets of London. It generated a whole series of images. I liked this one the best overall, though it is not without imperfections.

Judges' Comments

Matthew M. Davis: I give this high marks for “busy street feel,” but the pewter mug on the right is bizarrely large, even for a serious English drinker, and on the left side of the image there is a man with a bottle who almost seems to be hovering in the air.

Robert DeMaria, Jr.: The street is a little narrow for Fleet Street at Temple Bar, the location of the Devil Tavern, and surely there would be horses.

Anthony Lee: Perhaps be more specific: JOHNSON. “Why, Sir, Fleet-street has a very animated appearance; but I think the full tide of human existence is at Charing-cross.”

Beth Rapp Young: Shouldn't Johnson look like he is enjoying London?

Ileana Baird: Interesting observation by Beth. I've always imagined Johnson withdrawn, somehow focused inward, in disregard of what's happening around him. Some of that is captured in this image, but not very well; he seems rather angry here. The bot that generated the image knows its Hogarth, though; the background is clearly influenced by his drawings!

Lisa Berglund: The composition makes me wonder who the gentleman is whose back is turned to us. Is it Boswell? Oliver Edwards? Johnson is pointing a possibly accusatory finger... Did someone miss an appointment?

Michael Bundock: This one is fine for busyness and trade signs, but where is Temple Bar?

John Scanlan: There seems to be a debt to Hogarth here, yet unlike in Hogarth's *Gin Lane* or *Beer Street*, the background characters have been flattened into versions of the pretty much the same character type.

Lynda Mugglestone: I like the trade signs, though the upsizing of the tankard from the previous image is disconcerting. Johnson was very tall — and is clearly towering over everyone else. Are the apples a reappropriated signifier of Nell Gwynn (with symbolic overtones of Eve). Maybe Johnson is wagging his finger before saying “It won't do, my dear”?

Matthew M. Davis: The partially extended finger could be due to the ineptness of the bot, but it could also be Copilot's attempt to illustrate the involuntary tics and convulsive movements Johnson exhibited.



Figure 6: An Oyster for Hodge

Notes on Figure 6

No set of Johnson images would be complete without an image of Hodge the cat. Boswell reported that Johnson used to go out and buy oysters for Hodge, “lest the servants, having that trouble, take a dislike to the poor creature.”

Copilot produced this image of the scene right out of the gate, on the first try, in March of 2026.

Judges' Comments

Robert DeMaria, Jr.: Rather sweet; I like to think of Johnson as kind, but in the portraits his hands look rather gnarled. He described them as “a scholar’s talons.”

Anthony Lee: Thumbs up for “rather sweet.”

Beth Rapp Young: Aww, this is a great image! Johnson seems a tad worried here? Maybe he isn’t sure Hodge will like the oyster?

Ileana Baird: I don’t know why, but while looking at this image I got worried about the cat turning over the inkpot on that desk cluttered with books! There is also too little space to write there, isn’t it? And why is the cat on the table?? Cats and books don’t usually go together in period images; owls and books, on the other hand...

Lisa Berglund: I have just realized that I always assumed Hodge was a tabby. And no, Johnson would not have fed him oysters stacked on top of his books, but I would believe an image of Johnson caressing Hodge with a pile of empty oyster shells in the background.

Lynda Mugglestone: This is definitely the wrong cat. I strongly suspect it is my cat Tom, who gets everywhere. I definitely wouldn’t let him near any ink on my desk. Hodge was a black cat, not a tuxedo. On the other hand, the candle is a good way from Johnson’s wig which is a safety improvement in other ways.

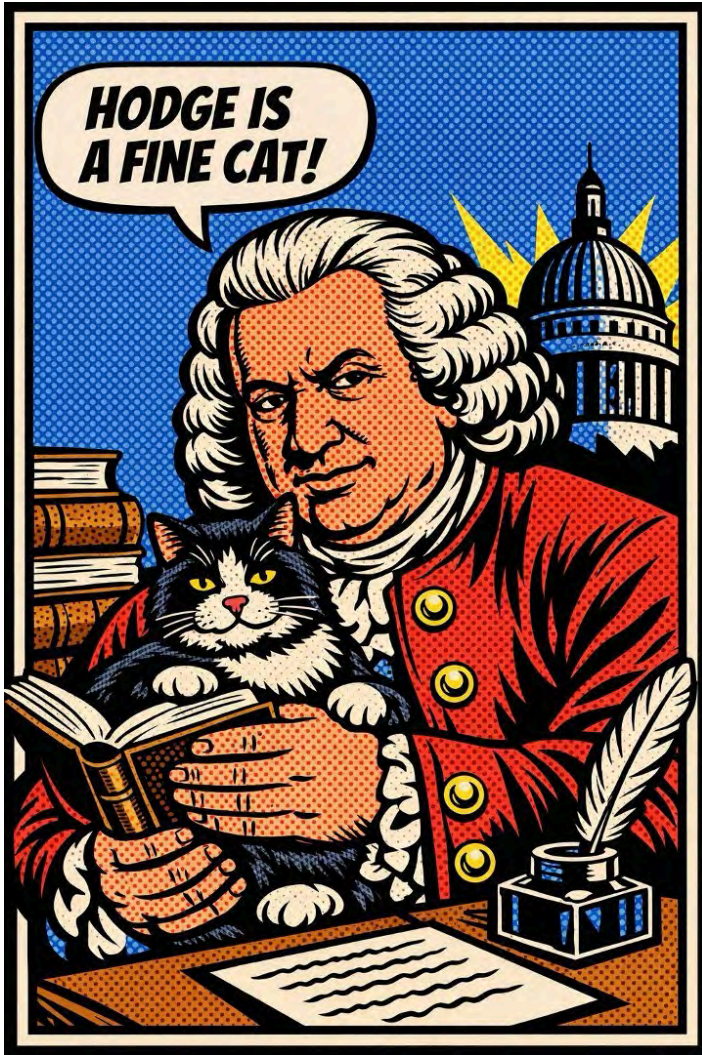


Figure 7: Hodge is a Fine Cat.

Notes on Figure 7

After getting an image of Hodge in the realistic style, I asked Copilot if it could produce a stylized image of Hodge, in the cartoon-like style of Roy Lichtenstein. I supplied the words in the speech bubble from Boswell's biography. Of the four or five images the bot produced for me in April of 2026, this was the one I like the best.

Judges' Comments

Robert DeMaria, Jr.: Abandoning any pretense of realism seems like a good idea. The face here, however, with its large nose and double chin seems more accurate to me.

Anthony Lee: At first glance, I thought that the US Capitol was in the background — not St. Paul's. I wonder what AI would make of SJ visiting Boston, the Great Wall of China, Italy, etc.

Beth Rapp Young: I like this one quite a bit! And this brings up so many other possibilities. Johnson in the style of anime? Picasso? Hockney? Cassatt? Photo-realistic Johnson?

Matthew M. Davis: Noted.

Ileana Baird: What's the building in the background!? With all the rays behind it, it is really distracting (at least to this viewer). Love the Johnson and the cat duo, though: their expressions kinda mirror each other. :)

Lisa Berglund: I agree that the background is distracting, but I love the two of them. Isn't the quotation "Hodge is a *very* fine cat, a very fine cat indeed!"

Matthew M. Davis: Apologies to Hodge. Lisa is correct. I defaulted to Boswell's characterization, thus revealing myself as not a cat person.

John Scanlan: I concur with Tony on the anachronistic near-depiction of the US Capitol, though here, to AI's credit, Hodge, not Johnson, is focus of attention.

Lynda Mugglestone: Still the wrong cat. The building did initially make me think of the Capitol. Johnson did of course acquire a flamboyant red coat for the opening of *Irene*, but he does also look oddly like an off-duty Beefeater here.

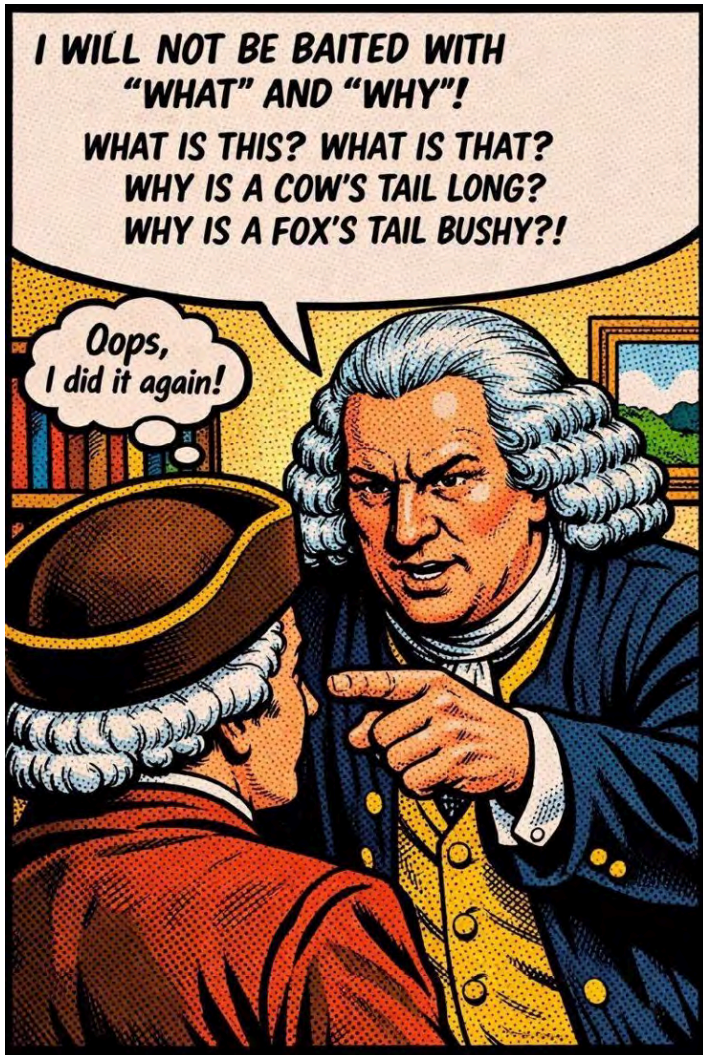


Figure 8: Boswell Rebuked, 1778

Notes on Figure 8

Here is another image in the Roy Lichtenstein style, generated in April of 2026. I asked Copilot to create an image of a time when Boswell went too far and asked one question more than he should have. Johnson's words are taken from Boswell's *Life*. Boswell's thoughts are taken from a Britney Spears song.

Judges' Comments

Robert DeMaria, Jr.: Johnson is too well groomed and handsome.

Anthony Lee: I think that his wig might look a little more topsy-turvy, with black singe marks.

Beth Rapp Young: This scene translates well to Lichtenstein, I think.

Ileana Baird: Love it! Just wished Johnson looked more like Johnson in the period images. Being blind in one eye and highly nearsighted in the other would result in some asymmetry in his facial traits, wouldn't it?

Lisa Berglund: Boswell's hat is very peculiar.

Lynda Mugglestone: I agree with Bob here — Johnson is suspiciously clean and neat. He also has an amazing wig collection he's showing off in these images. This is a side to Johnson of which we were unaware.

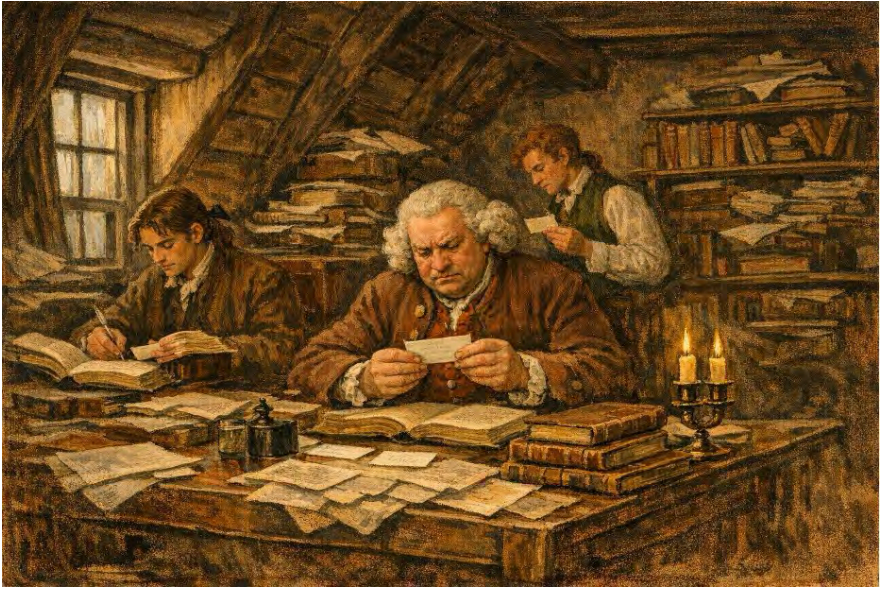


Figure 9: Working on the *Dictionary*, Gough Square, c. 1750

Notes on Figure 9

I drew on my reading of Kolb and Sledd and Reddick to generate this image of Johnson working on the *Dictionary*, with two of his amanuenses. I asked Copilot to put the three men up in the Gough Square garret and show one amanuensis copying illustrative quotations from a book onto slips while another one files slips that have been copied out. I also asked the bot to show Johnson studying a slip. I think it all came together rather nicely.

Judges' Comments

Matthew M. Davis: The amanuenses are implausibly young; they both look like David Balfour from *Kidnapped*!

Robert DeMaria, Jr.: I like this — the clutter and the consternation. He should be working with folio sheets, however.

Anthony Lee: Where is the light coming from? I forget how many windows there are in the room. Perhaps it should be a bit gloomier?

Beth Rapp Young: If you decided to make this one in photo-realistic style, you could use photos of the actual garret. Is that red hair on one of the amanuenses? He must be one of the Scots.

Ileana Baird: I like the controlled messiness of the image, but I think that Johnson should have kept the note closer to his right eye and the head tilted to the right too.... The candles (maybe more than two?) should have been placed to his right, too (he was blind in his left eye).

Lisa Berglund: I like the composition, but I think it needs to look more like the actual room.

John Scanlan: Yes, the light. To judge by Johnson's face, the light seems to be coming from the lower left corner of the image in *front* of him, and yet the main source of light is *behind* him to the left, with the candles doing no work at all. This scene strikes me as unnatural. Before its next attempt to paint the workshop of the *Dictionary*, AI should "studiously endeavour to collect examples and authorities of the [painters] before the restoration"!

Lynda Mugglestone: There are lots of windows in the garret so this might be fine, and the mess hasn't been edited out, which is good. Importantly, it does show the dictionary being composed of slips which was a significant part of the process, according to surviving materials. Johnson is too old though!

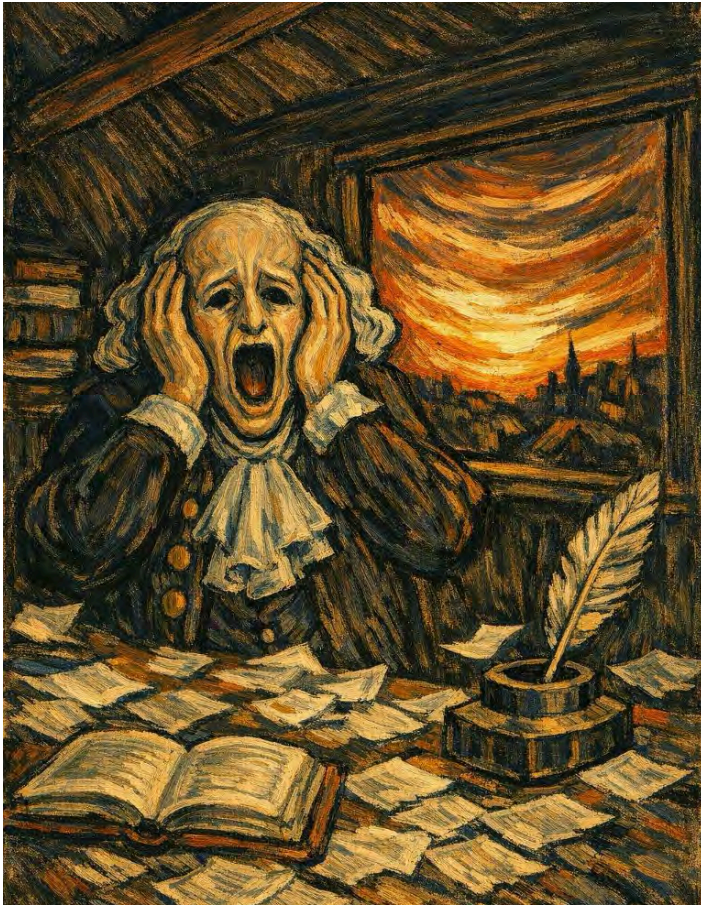


Figure 10: The Scream of the Lexicographer, c. 1749

Notes on Figure 10

If Figure 9 shows Johnson making steady progress on the Dictionary, Figure 10 shows him having a bad day at the office. In April of 2026, I asked Copilot to create an image of Johnson in the style of Edward Munch's famous painting *The Scream*. Copilot's first few tries looked like Johnson but didn't look much like the Munch painting. I pressed for something that was more Munch-like, with an exaggerated mouth and a face shaped like an upside-down pear. This version is full Munch, but it looks less like Johnson. Oh, well. Sometimes in life you have to choose: "No man can taste the fruits of autumn while he is delighting his scent with the flowers of the spring; no man can at the same time fill his cup from the source and from the mouth of the Nile" (*Rasselas*, chapter XXIX).

Judges' Comments

Robert DeMaria, Jr.: Interesting idea. I prefer the tears of the lexicographer to the screams, but there could be something haunting about this as an image of the lexicographer waking from his dreams.

Anthony Lee: According to Clifford, SJ had grey eyes. I wonder if you might request AI to make a close-up of his face.

Beth Rapp Young: The Ghost of the Dictionary Yet to Come?

Ileana Baird: Here I felt again something was off and checked Munch's *The Scream*. Two thirds of that image is in shades of blue, not sienna, orange, and yellow. So what's lost, I think, is the sense of cold despair that Munch's image suggests. Also, to more aptly describe the desperation of the lexicographer, I would have envisioned Johnson pulling his hair instead of screaming at this desk. Are there any Boswellian stories of Johnson getting frustrated and loud while working on his Dictionary?... I'm struck by what an exciting pedagogical exercise this image-making could be! The students could engage in generating such images based on their research on an author and the circumstances of his work or biography! You just gave me an idea of a classroom activity I may use in the future!

Lisa Berglund: Interesting, but I don't see this as a Johnsonian vibe.

Michael Bundock: Many of the images are in the tradition of realist Victorian historical portraiture, worthy but dull. Figures 7, 8 and 10 (in the style of Lichtenstein and Munch) seem much more interesting to me, and suggest other possibilities.

John Scanlan: Parodic imitation seems well suited to AI's current capabilities.

Lynda Mugglestone: Johnson has apparently run out of wigs. Worryingly, the house now seems to be beamed and thatched, providing an extra fire hazard. The image definitely offers a moment of nightmare realization for the "dreams of a poet doomed to wake a lexicographer."



Johnson (and Boswell) by the Book

MATTHEW M. DAVIS

Johnson has received a lot of good publicity in recent years in the pages of *The New York Times Book Review* (NYTBR). Most issues of the NYTBR feature a “By the Book” interview with a writer, and the writers who sit for these interviews are often asked to identify their favorite authors, or to name three historical figures they would invite to a dinner party. Johnson has been put on several favorite author lists and a whole bunch of invitation lists — and Boswell has gotten a bit of love, too.

In 2013, Garry Wills was asked to identify his favorite authors. He replied, “Shakespeare (of course), Augustine, John Ruskin, Samuel Johnson” (March 3, 2013).

In 2014, theater critic John Lahr was asked “If you had to name one book that made you who you are today, what would it be?” He replied:

Samuel Johnson’s “Lives of the Poets”: the first attempt to analyze poetry in the context of the life which created it. To me, Johnson is an exemplary critic: thrilling in both the witty balance of his judgment and his prose. (September 21, 2014)

Chef Gabrielle Hamilton said her dinner party invites would go to extroverts, perverts, poets, cranky people, witty people, and people who are “voracious and unafraid” (November 23, 2014). She put Johnson on the invite list but didn’t say which of her diverse criteria he satisfied. (I think he satisfies several of them!)

Gretchen Rubin, blogger and author of *The Happiness Project*, said she would invite Johnson to dinner, along with Virginia Woolf, George Orwell, and Flannery O’Connor:

These are four authors whose work I love, and also the four from who I learn the most, in my own writing.... I’d love to try to get them all talking among themselves, so I could sit in the corner and take notes. (October 23, 2016)

Ron Chernow, the well-known biographer, said he would invite one of his subjects, Mark Twain, along with Johnson and Jane Austen:

I know I wouldn't get a word in edgewise and would just sit back and watch the fireworks explode. I like to think that, now and then, Lady Jane would interject the wittiest remarks and deflate the considerable egos of her two long-winded male companions. The conversation would be so rollicking and fantastic that we would all forget to eat. (October 29, 2017)

Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates was asked, "What book might people be surprised to find on your shelves?" He replied, "The 1806 edition of Samuel Johnson's 'Lives of the Poets,' with which I fell in love in graduate school at Cambridge" (March 28, 2019).

Novelist Cathleen Schine told her interviewer that she likes to read both Boswell's *Life of Johnson* and Johnson's *Dictionary*. She reads the *Dictionary*, she added, as a form of "guilt-free procrastination" (August 25, 2019).

Johnson experienced a couple of lean years in the *NYTRB* in 2020 and 2021. Then the novelist David Shields brought him back into the column, offering some interesting remarks on Johnson, Boswell, and Robert Burton:

For half my life, the Samuel Johnson scholar Helen Deutsch has been urging me to read James Boswell's "Life of Johnson," and I've finally read it: one of the greatest books ever written (also one of the funniest, saddest and strangest). I also recently read another, equally great, long, sad and strange book, Robert Burton's "The Anatomy of Melancholy," which is what Boswell's "Life of Johnson" should have been called. (March 27, 2022)

Former Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin was asked the dinner party question. He listed Johnson, Edith Wharton, and Noel Coward (June 18, 2023).

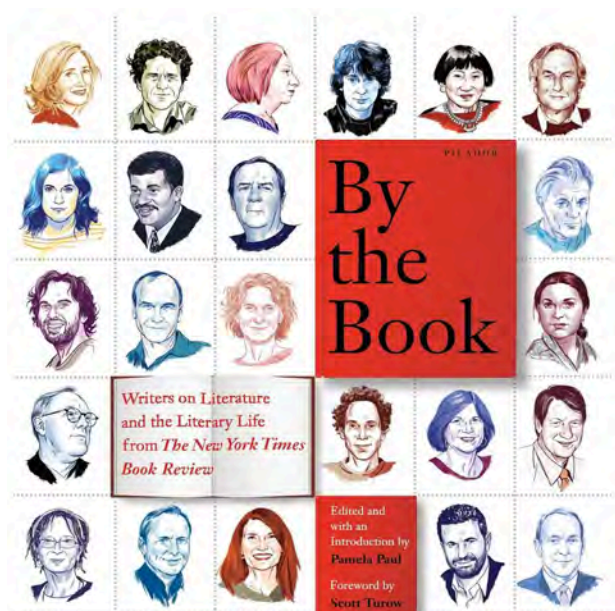


Figure 1: Pamela Paul edited this 2015 collection of “By the Book” columns.

Lawrence Wright, journalist and author of the novel *Mr. Texas*, said he would invite Johnson to dinner “just to determine if he’s as clever as Boswell made him or just overbearing” (September 24, 2023).

The poet Frederick Seidel was asked “Whom would you want to write your life story?” He replied, “Samuel Johnson comes to mind. Or Suetonius” (June 23, 2024).

Stephen Fry, well known for playing Oscar Wilde in the 1997 film *Wilde* and for narrating several Harry Potter audiobooks, fielded the “dinner party” question. He said he would invite Dickens “for party tricks, jokes and manic energy”; Wilde “for... well, I need hardly say”; and Johnson, “for gruntingly profound good sense” (June 22, 2025).



Johnsonian Gleanings from Print and Streaming Media, 2024-26

THE EDITORS

Two readers drew our attention to a YouTube video, [A Celebration of Dr. Samuel Johnson](#), in which the English poet Malcolm Guite welcomes a visitor with a video camera, smokes a pipe, talks about Johnson, shows his visitor some Johnson-related books from his library, and reads selections from Johnson's works, including excerpts from *Ramblers* 2 and *Rasselas*.



Figure 1: Video capture of Malcolm Guite

Johnson sometimes shows up in places where one would not expect him. We were not expecting to find him in a Quillette article on [“Why Soccer is Boring,”](#) by Robert Lynch, but there he was:

It's not that dribbling, passing, and shooting with your feet is unimpressive. It's that it's impressive the way a dog walking on its hind legs is impressive: the miracle is that it can be done at all, not that this is the highest use of the organism. It would be like a version of basketball where you're only allowed to dribble with your head.

Also unexpected: in April eighteenth-century scholar and JNL Advisory Editor Adam Potkay was named editor of the flagship journal of the

Modern Language Association, *PMLA*. He will serve a three-year term, beginning in July of 2026. The press release can be read [here](#).

Flora Lisica has [a note](#) in *Notes and Queries* 72.1 (March 2025) in which she argues that Johnson is lurking in the background in one of Keats's most famous sonnets, "On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Again." Lisica draws attention to the passage where Keats compares reading *King Lear* to passing through an "old oak forest" and suggests that the metaphor of the oak forest was inspired by Johnson's description of a Shakespeare play as "a forest in which oaks extend their branches &c."

There is a newish tutorial video on Johnson on study.com. The company won't be winning any awards for the realism of its cartoon figures. Their cartoon version of Johnson looks a lot like Thomas Jefferson and not at all like Johnson.



Figure 2: *Study.com* image of Samuel Johnson

David Womersley uses Johnson to explain what he is trying to do in his new book, [Thinking Through Shakespeare](#) (Princeton University Press, 2026). Womersley begins by quoting the well-known passage from the Preface to Shakespeare in which Johnson describes Shakespeare as "the poet of nature, the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life." He notes that Johnson's view of Shakespeare was widely accepted for two hundred years but has been rejected recently by strong historicist critics who reject the concept of general nature and treat Shakespeare as a very much product of his time and place. "This book,"

Womersley writes, “is an attempt once more to write about Shakespeare as a man whose plays reflect on deep questions of enduring human importance and to resist the modern academic trend of retreating from the central human preoccupations which animate his drama.” In the chapters that follow, Womersley looks (mainly) at *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *King Lear*.

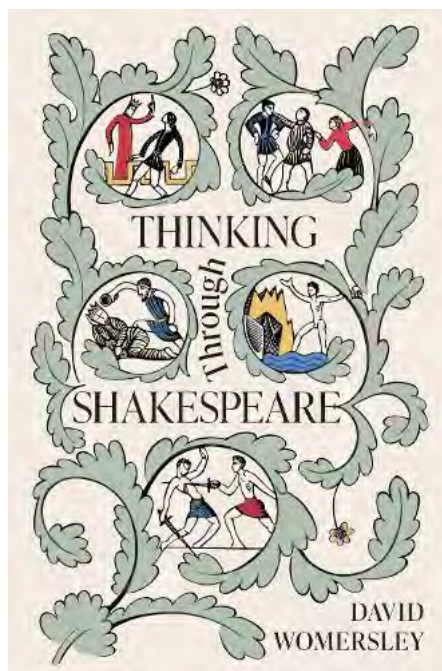


Figure 3: David Womersley, *Thinking Through Shakespeare*

Henry Oliver, the author of *Second Act* (a book on late bloomers) and a Substack newsletter called The Common Reader, has published a number of blog posts and articles on Johnson in recent years. Here is a sample of his writing on Johnson:

Johnson was a living sermon of determination: plagued by illness mental and physical; tormented by the idea of hell and the possibility of madness; agitated by his constant struggle for accomplishment and his incapacity for meeting the dreams of his youth; Johnson spent his life resisting depression, living with compulsions and twitches, and searching for money. Living in this way is what made him a great critic.

Here are some links to Oliver's Johnson-related posts:

- ["You can never be wise until you learn to love reading \(On my love of Samuel Johnson\)"](#)
- ["Samuel Johnson, opsimath"](#)
- ["Woolfish Perception"](#) (mostly on Virginia Woolf but also on Johnson)
- ["Growling in a corner: Samuel Johnson's Lost Years"](#)

Johnson is featured in [an episode of the Oxford Writers' House podcast](#). JNL contributor Lynda Mugglestone is interviewed in the podcast, and the discussion centers on Johnson's years in Oxford.

Readers may have missed Allan Ingram's recent article, "In Two Minds: Johnson, Boswell, and Representations of the Self," in *Writing and Constructing the Self in the Long Eighteenth Century*, edited by Ingram, John Baker, and Marion Leclair (Manchester UP, 2025)

A quotation attributed to Johnson has been making the rounds on the internet lately: "Kindness is in our power, even when fondness is not." At first, we thought this was *faux* Johnson; however, it appears to be a lightly rewritten version of something Johnson wrote in a letter to Boswell after Boswell's father died:

Your father's death had every circumstance that could enable you to bear it; it was at a mature age, and it was expected; and as his general life had been pious, his thoughts had doubtless for many years past been turned upon eternity. That you did not find him sensible must doubtless grieve you; his disposition towards you was undoubtedly that of a kind, though not of a fond father. Kindness, at least actual, is in our power, but fondness is not; and if by negligence or imprudence you had extinguished his fondness, he could not at will rekindle it. Nothing then remained between you but mutual forgiveness of each other's faults, and mutual desire of each other's happiness. (*Boswell's Life of Johnson*, 4:154).



***The Cambridge Introduction to Samuel Johnson*, by Robert DeMaria and Dan Hitchens**

Cambridge University Press, 2025. 163 + xiv pp.

Reviewed by J. T. Scanlan[†]

This new volume by Robert DeMaria and Dan Hitchens might best be understood as part of an important and underappreciated resurgence of the historical introduction in academic publishing. As *JNL* readers probably sense, during the past few decades, academic publishers have decided to issue a great number of “handbooks,” “companions,” and introductory critical volumes on a stunning variety of topics. Although designed for both academic and non-academic readers, many of these works are formidable scholarly works by anyone’s standards. This is especially true of the Oxford handbooks, an ongoing series that consists of well over a hundred volumes. The Oxford handbooks typically address a subject with a rich scholarly history and include relatively concise scholarly essays by leading scholars on various aspects of the subject, with thoughtful suggestions for further reading. As readers of *JNL* know, Samuel Johnson has an Oxford handbook devoted to all aspects of his career, edited by Jack Lynch. At 704 pages, it’s a hefty volume, comprised of learned essays by thirty-six scholars. (Full disclosure: I contributed an essay on the evolution of Johnson’s sense of humor.) And true to generic expectations, the essays aspire not to present the final word on various aspects of Johnson’s achievement but rather to provide reliable, readable observations and stimulate further thought.

[†] J. T. Scanlan is Professor of English at Providence College. He edits, with Jack Lynch, *The Age of Johnson*.

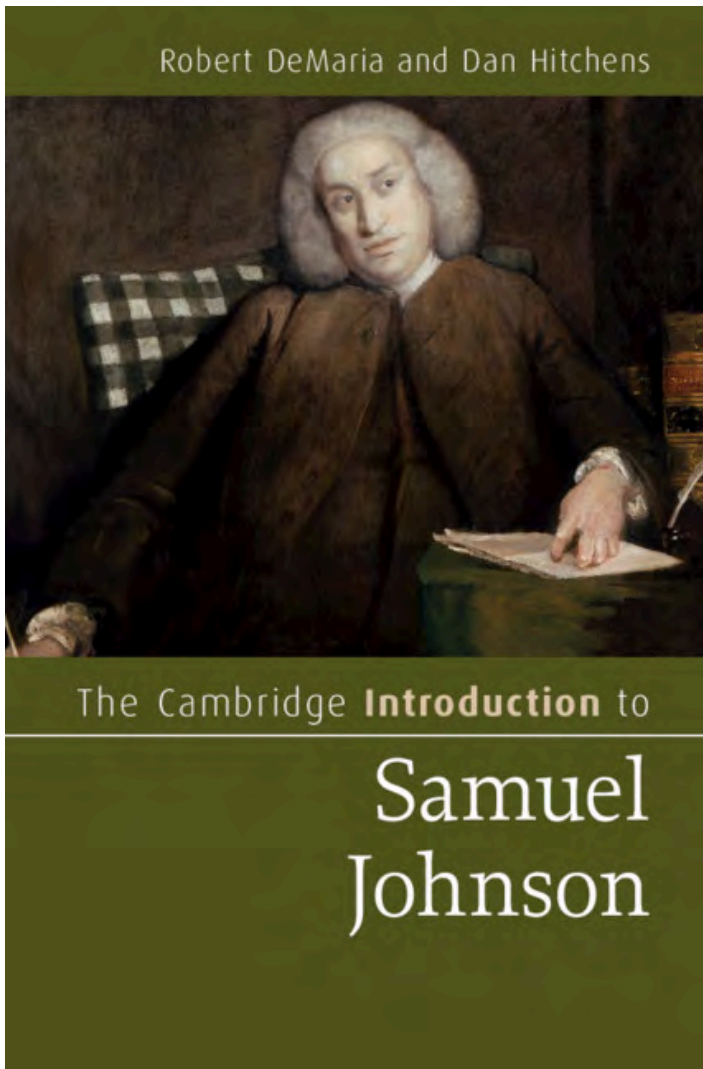


Figure 1: Cover of *The Cambridge Introduction to Samuel Johnson*

Cambridge University Press has committed itself to a similar publishing venture, producing hundreds of “companions,” as Cambridge calls them. Though somewhat shorter in length, the Cambridge companions, like the Oxford handbooks, address a great range of academic topics. And eighteenth-century subjects figure prominently in the collection. Again, readers of *JNL* will be familiar with *The Cambridge Companion to the Novel* (2006), edited by John Richetti, *The Cambridge Companion to Laurence Sterne*, edited by Thomas Keymer, *The Cambridge Companion to Emma*, edited by Peter Sabor, as well as many others. Samuel Johnson has not one, but two, companions on his complex achievement, both edited by the

erudite scholar-cum-editorial director, Greg Clingham. The most recent, *The New Cambridge Companion to Samuel Johnson* (2022) includes seventeen essays on various dimensions of Johnson's life and work, and to the editor's credit, only three essays were written by scholars whose work appeared in the earlier 2006 companion. And this time around, those three scholars address different topics.

Perhaps the most popular versions of this currently flourishing but not unprecedented genre are Oxford's pocketbook-sized "very short introductions," which typically appear in large racks near the check-out counters at the better bookshops in college towns. Although written by single authors and usually not much longer than 100 pages, these volumes, like the Oxford handbooks and the Cambridge companions, are written by leading scholars in their respective fields. But this publishing venture is strikingly different in scope: there seems to be no limit whatever in subject matter. As an Oxford ad for the series puts it, "from Public Health to Buddhist Ethics, Soft Matter to Classics, and Art History to Globalization," these little books seem cover all sorts of topics and ideas, especially those in currently in vogue. And although the readership might well include professors or university students hoping to learn more about a newfound interdisciplinary interest, it probably consists more of "common readers" who keep up with at least some of the influential ideas of our times. And some of the VSIs, as insiders call them, have an added comic appeal because of their standardized subtitles. Among the works whose full titles may elicit a chuckle are *Kant: A Very Short Introduction*; *Ideology: A Very Short Introduction*; *Meaning: A Very Short Introduction*; and (my favorite) *The Rule of Law: A Very Short Introduction*. While the professorial historical introduction is certainly an old genre, closely related to college lecturing, there seems to be a fresh appetite for this kind of writing today, and DeMaria and Hitchens's superb new book seems designed to capitalize on this current trend.

Since the "introduction" is flourishing once again, we might begin by asking how well DeMaria and Hitchens embrace the requirements of the genre and how well they gratify the possible expectations of their readers. In my view, they embrace the generic demands of the "introduction" with great skill, and consequently, I expect both seasoned Johnsonians and relative newcomers will greatly enjoy spending, say, an afternoon with this lively little book.

Any good introduction to Samuel Johnson must exhibit not only full control of Johnson's extensive and varied writings but a secure knowledge of the secondary scholarship, especially that written after the Second World War. There is perhaps no one alive today who knows this vast body of "learning," in the Johnsonian sense of the word, better than Robert DeMaria. His co-author, Dan Hitchens, who studied at Oxford under the tutelage of Freya Johnston and is now a journalist and senior editor at *First Things*, the American monthly on Catholic intellectual life, is entirely at home with the massive Johnsonian *oeuvre*, too. Together they offer readers trustworthy distillations of key features of Johnson's works and the related scholarly debates. For example, in the opening chapter on Johnson's "Life and Times," they summarize the national significance of his long-delayed edition of Shakespeare with the pithy statement, "Shakespeare was Britain's poet, and Johnson was Shakespeare's (and thereafter Britain's) critic and scholar" (18). Obviously, the subject of Johnson's relation to Shakespeare's emergence in the eighteenth century as Britain's national poet is complex, as the vast body of scholarship on the subject proves. But in the opening chapter of an introductory volume, with later chapters to come on Johnson as a critic and as a scholar, such compression is welcome. And for those readers well versed in the reputation of Johnson's edition of Shakespeare, this statement is right in line with the high praise that the great eighteenth-century Shakespearean Edmond Malone lavished on the Preface in Johnson's edition.

This book is full of other moments when DeMaria's and Hitchens's mastery of the full range of Johnsonian materials leads to fruitful commentary. In "Poet and Storyteller," one of the best chapters in the book, DeMaria and Hitchens comment on how often Johnson returns to themes he explores in his 1748 poem, *The Vanity of Human Wishes*. In elaborating on this point, they highlight Gwin Kolb's observation in the introduction to the Yale edition of the *Rambler* that in "The Fountains," Johnson followed the pattern of the story of "The Choice of Hercules," by the fifth-century BCE sophist Prodicus of Ceos. The authors then comment,

Northrop Frye liked to point out that writers often write and rewrite the same myth throughout their careers. 'The Choice of Hercules' is that myth for Johnson. He rewrote it also in 'The Vision of Theodore, the Hermit of Teneriffe.' One of the best essays ever written on Johnson, Lawrence Lipking's "Learning to Read Johnson: 'The Vision

of Theodore' and *The Vanity of Human Wishes*," shows the similarities of these works and their mutual centrality in the myth that Johnson was always rewriting. (56)

Although this distillation is more extensive and more scholarly in nature than the earlier comment on Shakespeare and Johnson, it is equally unimpeachable. And for those readers coming to criticism on Johnson as novices, this brief statement provides practical advice on what article to read to become a better reader of Johnson. While all Johnson scholars may have their favorite article on Johnson, DeMaria and Hitchens resist indulging their own tastes and choose instead a critical essay that novices can "turn to use," as Johnson might put it.

This is not to say that DeMaria and Hitchens stint on presenting their own individual stylistic merits in this book. The work clearly shows signs in places of being written in two somewhat different voices. But in the hands of DeMaria and Hitchens, this is a strength rather than a distraction. Why try to smooth out two distinctive voices into a single bland one? In fact, among the charms of the book are the subtle movements from what may be DeMaria's light-handed but intensely scholarly approach to eighteenth-century books and their contexts, especially those related to Johnson's *Dictionary*, and what may be Hitchens's more spirited and journalistic commentary on the cultural and religious politics of Johnson's time. In the chapter on Johnson as a scholar, for example, some readers will sense the hand of DeMaria in the detailed description of Johnson's failed attempt to edit the works of the Italian Renaissance scholar Angelo Poliziano, as well as other attempts early in his career to conceive of himself as in the line of the European humanist scholars. The comments in this section on the philological dimension of some of Johnson's works are especially insightful. "His edition of Roger Ascham's *English Works* and of Thomas Browne's *Christian Morals* also qualify [as philological] to a degree, as does some of Johnson's poetry — notably his translation into Latin of many Greek epigrams from the *Greek Anthology* — parts of many of his biographies, and his bibliographical work on the Catalogue of the Harleian Library" (62). That's a superb condensation of some of the key ideas in DeMaria's earlier influential critical biography of Johnson, supplemented with secure knowledge of the full scope of Johnson's poetry, including that written in a foreign language — a knowledge amply on display in DeMaria and Robert Brown's new edition of Johnson's poetry (Routledge, 2024), a work destined to be the standard edition of Johnson's

poetry for generations to come. Indeed, all of Johnson's "scholarly activity — this immersion in books" at this time of his life helps readers understand how Johnson primed himself for his "greatest scholarly projects" (63) — his *Dictionary* and his edition of Shakespeare. A concentrated presentation of Johnson's complex ways with books and learning is a hallmark of this volume, and it's delightful to see the presence of DeMaria's profound knowledge of Johnson's life of reading and thinking in such deft, succinct passages — regardless of whether DeMaria actually wrote it!

A somewhat different style characterizes the chapter on Johnson as a journalist, which suggests that perhaps Hitchens was the lead author of this section. But regardless of who wrote it, it's equally pleasurable because it appears to be written by someone with an intimate knowledge of the demands and realities of writing for the periodical press, the *sine qua non* of anyone introducing Johnson's work as a journalist. "Journalist" is the second chapter of the book, and to help readers understand the contexts of Johnson's early career in letterpress, the authors note the population of Great Britain in the first half of the eighteenth century and explain that the circulation of the *Gentleman's Magazine* in Johnson's day was "proportionally not much less than the *Guardian* or *Financial Times* today" (23). But suppressing easy comparisons to contemporary journalism, the chapter moves on to emphasize how distinctive Johnson's *Rambler* was. The *Rambler* "is sometimes described as the eighteenth-century equivalent of a newspaper column, but whereas modern columnists feel an obligation to grab the reader's attention, Johnson seems to have deliberately eschewed many of the tricks of the journalists trade — gossip, reference to current affairs, and so on" (30). The style here — bold, confident, and a touch conversational — is different from the style in the chapter on Johnson as a scholar, but it's equally enjoyable because it suits the subject. And as the chapter unfolds, we see that the authors understand fully Johnson's aspiration in the *Rambler* to write about timeless or, as Johnson might put it, "durable" truths. Johnson repeatedly treats the mind, the authors write, "as a factory of comforting illusions waiting to be exploded. As early as *Rambler* 2, Johnson writes that we are always seeking experiences which turn out to be less than we expected. Anticipation beats reality" (34). Indeed, a recurring theme of the *Rambler* is "its crushing awareness of how we delude ourselves about the future.... A wise person doesn't think too much about the future" (35). The direct, concise prose style of the chapter on Johnson the journalist complements the subject matter, just as the learned style complements the chapter on Johnson as a scholar. And in

that Johnson was both a journalist and a scholar — “the professional writer par excellence” (41) — the shift in tone ranks as one of the most attractive features of the book. It reflects two important components of Johnson life as a writer — and helps explain why he remains a hero to many journalists and scholars today.

Although DeMaria and Hitchens generally avoid inventive, arresting interpretations of Johnson’s life and works, they both have their own critical predispositions and proclivities, and I can imagine some academics taking issue some aspects of the book. For example, the Johnson who appears in this book is an especially devout man whose Christianity stands at the heart of his social and political ideas. “Central to Johnson’s thought is his awareness of the Christian doctrine of original sin — each person’s strong, irrational tendency towards evil. We are caught in between kindness and cruelty” (99). And cruelty can be inflicted not only by people but by the state, as Johnson points out memorably in his strong criticism of capital punishment for crimes of different degrees of iniquity (in *Rambler* 114). In the chapter on Johnson as a critic, the authors write, “Johnson’s belief that criticism is subordinate and instrumental to religion and morality has ramifications throughout his criticism. In a more explicit way than other religious critics (C.S. Lewis, say, or Northrop Frye), Johnson makes religion and morality part of the evaluative calculus” (91). Readers who take issue with this orientation, however, perhaps underestimate how entirely different the moral and religious world of eighteenth-century London was from our own moral world today. What DeMaria and Hitchens present is completely in line with Johnson’s own words on his writing, as well as with the standard interpretations of much of Johnson’s writing, as befits an introduction. In *Samuel Johnson and the Life of Writing* (1971) — a work published more than half a century ago — Paul Fussell writes, “nothing he feels, thinks, or says about writing can be understood outside the context of his personal religious life, especially his sense of the Christian obligation to write ‘sincerely’ and to criticize responsibly” (91). In fact, Fussell argues that Johnson “conceives of writing as something very like a Christian sacrament, defined in the Anglican catechism as ‘an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given unto us’” (112). DeMaria and Hitchens’s emphasis on the importance of Johnson’s religious life simply provides a trustworthy context for contemporary readers, most of whom probably come to Johnson from a secular perspective. And it’s in keeping with DeMaria and Hitchens’s foundational commitment to provide historical context to readers in their introduction,

an orientation encapsulated in the epigraph to Chapter 1, taken from Johnson's *Life of Dryden*: "To judge rightly of an author we must transport ourselves to his time" (1).

Other readers might register other minor criticisms. Perhaps the last chapter on Johnson's afterlife, "Legend," concentrates so much on British reactions over the past two and a half centuries that the enormous American appetite for Johnson and his circle, especially in the years after the Second World War, is stunted. One might also argue that DeMaria and Hitchens focus so much on the extent to which Johnson repeated himself, in one way or another, over the course of his long life that the evolution of Johnson's thinking and writing is not addressed in enough detail. As Gwin Kolb once wrote in a review of the earlier *Cambridge Companion to Samuel Johnson*, "a number of Johnson's opinions were decidedly not monolithic, [and] shifted and evolved with the passing of time and circumstances."¹

Perhaps the most obvious possible criticism of the volume is that it says little about Johnson's conversation and Boswell's part in preserving, and in Johnsonising, it. Certainly an ample portion of the Johnsonian canon is what he said in conversation. For it is there, as in his writing, that one obtains a view of his mind, as Boswell and his contemporaries perceived. At the end of the *Life of Johnson*, Boswell resists trying to explain his feelings on learning of the death of Johnson and defers to William Gerard Hamilton, "an eminent friend," who says in words that most *JNL* readers will be able to recite from memory: "He has made a chasm, which not only nothing can fill up, but which nothing has a tendency to fill up. Johnson is dead. Let us go the next best: — there is nobody; no man can be said to put you in mind of Johnson." Hamilton was speaking not only of Johnson's writing, but his conversation, and his sheer intellectual presence. Johnson's power as a man of letters exceeded the power of his writings, and perhaps DeMaria and Hitchens might have included more on his conversation, a form of linguistic display that often rose to the status of literature when Johnson spoke.

And yet these possible criticisms are at best minor criticisms that perhaps say more about how other academics and writers might write their own introductions to Samuel Johnson. Indeed, the excellence of the DeMaria and Hitchens's book depends on the uninhibited viewpoints

1. Gwin Kolb, review of *The Cambridge Companion to Samuel Johnson*, ed. Greg Clingham, *Modern Philology* 98:2 (May 2001) 680.

and special talents of both DeMaria and Hitchens, and the result is an immensely readable historical introduction to Samuel Johnson that deserves to stand alongside some of the best historical introductions to Samuel Johnson, including that by David Nichol Smith, published in 1913.

I introduce David Nichol Smith's work because his introductory historical biography, published as Chapter VIII of Volume X (The Age of Johnson) in the mammoth *Cambridge History of English Literature* (Cambridge Univ. Press) has a similar spirited attention to the dexterity of Johnson's work in journalism, poetry, philology, and biography, and it represents well the state of scholarship on Johnson during his time. But because modern Johnsonian scholarship was in its infancy then, much remained to be done, as Nichol Smith suggests throughout the essay. In many ways, DeMaria and Hitchens's book, with its excellent handling of all the Johnsonian work that has taken place since 1913, fulfills Nichol Smith's implicit hopes for modern Johnsonian scholarship.

At the same time, one must also wonder whether the current appetite, or need, for such an introduction in the first place is analogous to the situation facing Nichol Smith, when the general readership of Johnson's writings was small and needed a lift. If this is true, and if the vogue for multi-volume introductory histories of English literature a century ago resembles the vogue for stand-alone learned "introductions" today, then DeMaria and Hitchens are the ideal writers to provide a similar lift for today's readers, especially independent "common" readers who have just discovered Johnson and who, like the sculler boy who took Boswell and Johnson to Greenwich in the summer of 1763, are eager "to get knowledge."



***Early English Periodicals and Early Modern Social Media*, by Margaret J. M. Ezell**

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024.
85pp.

Reviewed by Robert DeMaria, Jr.[†]

This book is part of the Cambridge University Press series called *Cambridge Elements* with the subheading “Eighteenth-Century Connections.” The idea of the series, as stated on the publisher’s website, is a concise expression of the general principles observable in a great many contemporary studies of eighteenth-century literature. For example, “Connections’ asserts that many agents contribute to the making of texts — not just authors, but also readers, reviewers, correspondents, printers, publishers.” This is to say that the findings of book history, as established by pioneering critics and historians, such as Eisenstein, Darnton, and McKenzie, are happily influential in the outlook of the series. There are similarly concise statements about the series’ “global” approach and its awareness of generic “hybridity,” but the inclusion of book history is the principle most relevant to *Early English Periodicals*, and it is on the whole very well observed. Unfortunately for Johnsonians, the thematic orientation of the book leads to a mere token discussion of Johnson’s *Rambler* at the end of an “Epilogue” that gives more than equal attention to Eliza Haywood’s *Female Spectator*.

The theme of this book, in keeping with remit of the *Elements* series, is the similarity between the English periodical in its early stages and social media as we know it today. To the author’s credit, she does not allow the development of this theme to obscure or refract her treatment of the eighteenth-century phenomenon. She is restrained in the extent to which she presses the connections, almost limiting them to the epigraphs opening

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the sections into which the book is divided. In fact, the main way in which Ezell makes the connection is by stressing the importance of audience participation in the development of the periodical journal. This participation brings in the “readers, reviewers, [and] correspondents” in the “Connections” statement quoted above. Although the book is admirably adherent to its theme, it comprises a fairly standard, if excellently executed, history of the genre.¹

John Dunton’s *Athenian Mercury* predictably leads the parade of print journals: it is important in every history of the genre but particularly so here because it explicitly and creatively courted audience participation. Dunton invited the public to pose questions to his group of experts, and he answered them in print quite soon thereafter. Some of the questions were probably made up, but many, we must assume, came from real people. Swift’s first publication, an unironic panegyric to the Athenians, appeared in the journal after all, and (almost uniquely) signed with his own name. Elizabeth Singer Rowe contributed a large amount of poetry and established her name in the journal. Most of the contributions were, however, anonymous and therefore hard to verify.

The *Philosophical Transactions* of the Royal Society gets an early mention in this thematic review of the periodical because the editor reached out, at least, to friends and contacts to gather copy. The contributors are genuine in most if not all cases. The same is true for the *Gentleman’s Journal*, which gets deserved attention as well. Then there is Defoe’s *Review*, which flirts with including its audience and sometimes suggests it is the product of a society — like the Athenian Society in Dunton’s work — but is actually all the work of the amazingly productive Defoe. Still, the fiction or supposition of communal creation is taking hold.

With the most successful attempt at audience involvement, the genre reaches its peak of success. This is, as in other histories of periodicals, the productions of Addison and Steele — the *Tatler* (1709-11) and the *Spectator* (1711-14). Many if not most of the letters to these journals are, unlike the

1. Although they certainly do not diminish the overall excellence of the book, there are some irritating typographical errors: 1. in almost every case an apostrophe before a contraction, such as 'em, is rendered as a closing single quotation mark ('); 2. there are some misspellings of important names; 3. there is an instance of diplography (69); 4. there are a few truncations of words (e.g., “fictious,” 70). Also, Johnsonians who have consulted Fleeman’s bibliography will bridle at the “ballpark” accuracy of the bibliographical information on the *Rambler*.

letters in many other journals, from real readers. It is a testimony to the success of these periodicals that the authors were sent more letters than they could publish. Two volumes of unpublished letters were published well after the series were complete, and another volume appeared in 1959 following the exhumation of some of Steele's papers. The fiction of communal creation is also present, and in one case at least it is said to encourage a similar periodical. The introduction very early (No. 10) of Isaac Bickerstaff's sister Jenny encourages the launch of the *Female Tatler*. This relatively short-lived periodical gets perhaps disproportionate attention, but the attention is justified because its relative failure tells an important part of Ezell's story. Whereas readers were able to penetrate the disguise of Isaac Bickerstaff — a character whom Swift created as part of his pamphlet war with the astrologer John Partridge — and find the well-known authors Steele and Addison, they were not able to be sure of the identity of the female tatler, Mrs. Crackenthorpe, "a Lady that knows everything." In fact, her identity is not yet known for sure.



Figure 1: Masthead of *The Female Tatler*

The twist in Ezell's story is that communal involvement as a key to success in the publication of journals yields before mid-century to the growing interest in celebrity authorship. This is why Johnson's *Rambler* appears mainly in the epilogue. It shows what happened to the genre when it stopped touting the importance of the "many agents contribut[ing] to the making of texts." Ezell accurately reports (and unnecessarily repeats) Johnson's statement in the last *Rambler* that he "never complied with temporary curiosity, nor enabled my readers to discuss the topick of the day" (Yale 5.316). This is the end of the story. It does not breach the comparison between social media and early periodicals because, quite obviously,

celebrity is important to the success of social media as well. Perhaps, in fact, applying Ezell's history of the periodical, we should expect the importance of celebrity to exceed the importance of participation in social media in our time and lead to a winner-take-all kind of literary economy, like that playing out in the so-called real economy.

In sum, this is an excellent survey with a persuasive point of view. My only serious criticism is that it could have been executed using secondary sources — including some excellent work by Ezell! — and that the importance of the literary features of the essays is somewhat neglected. When Ezell notes that the *Female Tatler* failed partly because it did not “possess elegant prose to propel it into the canon of English literature” (67), one is reminded that notice of this feature of essays in the periodicals has been lacking. Even here, it is not the prose itself that causes failure but the exclusion from the canon to which uninspiring prose contributed. In Ezell's defense, however, an aesthetic survey of the genre was not in her remit, and there are other works — one could start with Johnson's *Life of Addison* — that pay plenty of attention to the prose of the journals treated here.



***Writerly Hate in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, by Thomas Leonard-Roy**

Oxford University Press, 2026. 224 pp.

Reviewed by Robert G. Walker[†]

Thomas Leonard-Roy has produced a provocative, well-written, and well-researched original study that centers on the relationship between his topic, hate, and five of the eighteenth century's most important figures: Pope, Johnson, Boswell, Horace Walpole, and Frances Burney. There is no doubt that such a study could not have been written before the advent of search engines, but this is not a criticism here, for the author has used this tool, first of all, to call our attention to a concept far more pervasive in the century than most of us thought, and, second, as a lead into some new critical readings of familiar works and authors.

"The Golden Age of Hate" is the eighteenth century, according to a fine introduction, which outlines why the study will deal not just with hatred expressed within the literature but also with hatred expressed toward the writers themselves. It may indeed be true that at the time literary audiences "read to hate." The term was both obvious and a bit slippery. Johnson referred to a very good friend, Richard Bathurst, as "a good hater," certainly a compliment. Swift is quoted: "We have just Religion enough to make us *hate*, but not enough to make us *love* one another." Though the word may not always connote the same today as in Johnson's day — Leonard-Roy properly observes that it seemed less tinged with violence — everyone knew what hate was. Another important observation, that "authorial hate provok[ed] readerly disdain," leads into the first, and perhaps best, chapter in the book, "Late Pope and the Poetics of Hate." "The paragon of malefic satire that Pope became in the 1730s guaranteed that generations of readers and critics would in turn find ample justification to hate him."

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OXFORD

Writerly **HATE** in Eighteenth-Century Britain

THOMAS LEONARD-ROY



Figure 1: Cover of *Writerly Hate in Eighteenth-Century Britain*

The chapter on Pope focuses on his satires, of course, and on his literary feuds, most extensively with Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. In a personal aside, I reviewed recently a book (Sperrin, *State of Ridicule: A History of Satire in English Literature*) that treats satire from the classical to the modern period as primarily concerned with politics. For the eighteenth century at least, the case for hatred in all its forms rather than only political seems much stronger. Leonard-Roy is a fine close reader, something difficult to illustrate in a review. I will quote one passage, at some length. In the *First Satire of the Second Book of Horace*, Leonard-Roy writes, “Pope saved his most brutal couplet... for Lady Mary.” He writes a

relatively mild couplet, which “sets up the real blow, against Lady Mary, who inflicts torment whether as lover or hater: ‘From furious *Sappho* yet a sadder Fate, / P—x’d by her Love, or libell’d by her Hate.’

After the iambic regularity of the first line in the couplet, the punch of ‘P—x’d by’ spews disdain... What was implicit in the lines from the *Dunciad* is now cruelly plain: Lady Mary is not just a prostitute, a ‘batter’d jade,’ but she is also syphilitic. At the same time as it embellishes the Lady Mary-in-a-brothel scenario, ‘pox’d’ refers cruelly to her harrowing struggles with smallpox and ridicules her campaign to introduce inoculation for the disease into Britain. (31)

The chapter concludes with “A Brief History of Pope-Bashing.” Not developed is the concept of the satiric persona, made popular especially by Pope’s scholarly defenders in the second half of the twentieth century but actually anticipated, to a certain degree, as Leonard-Roy mentions in a slightly different context, by the defenses of satire written by Dryden and others. The survey of scholarship is delightful reading: for example, discussing the critics’ compromise, Leonard-Roy observes, “it remained common to admire the verse and disdain the man.” And after mentioning the poet James Reeves (1909-78) — “Reeves was perhaps the last great Pope-basher” — Leonard-Roy concludes the chapter with a brief summary of one man’s reaction to the Laura Brown-Felicity Nussbaum collection, *The New Eighteenth Century*: “one scholar obliquely [called] its contributors the dunces of the academy.” (A note suggests the unnamed scholar was Donald J. Greene, about whom more later.)

Leonard-Roy shifts gears in the chapter on Johnson, leaving poetry behind to discuss “the hazards of hating in conversation and in criticism.” Ideas introduced early are treated in more detail here, including that the Johnson we all know as one who would always talk for victory got as good as he gave: “He was the constant subject of gossip and fake news, with newspapers periodically claiming that he was dying or had gone completely blind or mad.” What Johnson meant by “a good hater” is further explicated: “When he called Bathurst a good hater... he was not referring to the sort of vicious personal hate forbidden by his faith, but rather to a moral hatred of sin, *good* hatred, the sort endorsed by scripture. As one nineteenth-century religious writer expressed it when discussing Ecclesi-

astes 3:8 ('A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace'): 'to be a good hater in that sense is but to be, so far, a good man.'" Leonard-Roy mentions Johnson's disputes with Soame Jenyns and those sparked by his *Lives of the Poets*, all well-known, but he gives more attention to Johnson's dispute with Jonas Hanway, a noted philanthropist and thus seemingly a bad target, perhaps because such a target might suggest "how negative criticism, no matter its claim to impartiality, has a way of rousing suspicions that the critic is simply malicious." This leads him back to modern scholar Donald J. Greene (the "J" stands for "Johnson," by the way), and I would like to spend a little time on this section, for it seems one of the rare occasions when Leonard-Roy does not give us the whole story.

Leonard-Roy discusses in some detail the participants in "the controversy in the mid-1990s around Johnson's supposed Jacobitism, which pitted Donald Greene, Thomas Curley, and Howard D. Weinbrot, all based at American universities, against the British scholars Jonathan Clark and Howard Eskine-Hill." Indeed, the debate was acrimonious, as debates involving Greene frequently were, but I think Leonard-Roy may have missed an important context. As Clark was in a real sense making his bones by taking on the current dean of Johnson studies, Greene had done the same thing decades earlier among the previous generation of Johnsonians, by stressing "Johnson's Johnson" rather than "Boswell's Johnson." In the mid-fifties, not many so-called Johnsonians actually read Johnson. Rather they read, and taught, Boswell. The dominant undergraduate anthology before the Norton appeared was *Major British Writers*, where fewer than ten writers were included for our period and one entry was joint, "Johnson-Boswell," in which Johnson's writings were almost exactly balanced with sections from the *Life of Johnson*. Greene systematically argued that Johnson was by far the more substantial writer and that Boswell's depiction was often wrong or highly limited. Once he calculated exactly how many days during their twenty-two-year friendship Boswell was in Johnson's company — shockingly few it turns out. Although I and others often pointed out in print that it was not necessary to denigrate Boswell in order to elevate Johnson, Greene, with his heavily-fact-based approach, presented in a polemical style, did much more to advance Johnson studies than did most of the other Johnson scholars at the time. Moreover, in a book on hate, Leonard-Roy may be eliding controversial style with emotion. William F. Buckley certainly hated Gore Vidal (and vice versa), but it is unlikely that he hated many of the vast number of those he debated contentiously on

his weekly television show for four decades. To be fair, Leonard-Roy may recognize this issue — he comments briefly on how tone could mitigate hatred and how a desire to be humorous may have motivated Johnson in some of his comments. Also, he is at some pains to separate Johnson's "roughness" from his hate. Still, a semantic problem is present here and in the next chapter, on Boswell.

Leonard-Roy believes Boswell hated only three people: Giuseppe Baretti, Edward Gibbon, and John Horne Tooke. His personal journals, discovered and published in the modern period, reveal that he mostly "reserved [his] hate for himself." The author's thesis in this chapter is that the *London Journal* displays ebullience and charm but also Boswell's "chronic self-loathing. "Those dark feelings," Leonard Roy writes, "were inseparable from his Calvinist upbringing and continued struggles with Christian doctrine and worship." In a nutshell, then, "his severe Calvinist upbringing had permanently darkened his being." This reading is potentially correct, but I have my doubts. First, the religious issues discussed here were even more complicated than the complicated summary. Sure, it may be true that "Boswell's very devotion to his journal was Calvinist, a daily concern with holding himself to account," but when Samuel Johnson encouraged him to keep up his journal, was he encouraging him to become a better Calvinist? I think not. Leonard-Roy returns to Donald Greene — it is impossible to resist using the language of the book and therefore call this "Greene-bashing" — linking Greene's view of Boswell with that of Macaulay and much later of Claude Rawson. To sum up, the view of Boswell as a self-hater is well-argued. The source of that self-hatred, a Calvinist rearing, less so. Since we are in the world of psycho-medicine, I might suggest a clinical reason instead. Could Boswell have been one of those alcoholics whose drinking manifests itself often in depression? (His drinking is noted repeatedly by Leonard-Roy, but not to this end.)

The concept of hate, somewhat stretched by the previous chapter, reaches a breaking point in "Horace Walpole and the Pleasures of Contempt." Walpole's familiar letters, voluminous but unpublished in his lifetime, are important for scholars, being "among the richest sources for information about eighteenth-century arts, politics, and fashionable society." I think, however, for people concerned primarily with literature, learning that he was a private hater, that his preferred style of hating was "indifference and contempt," and that "public hate... risked causing him embarrassment" are not of great interest. I think everyone will enjoy

reading this chapter once, if only for quotations like this one from William Beloe (1758-1817), who wrote that Walpole was “in the truest sense of the word, a perfect courtier... consummately insincere.” But few of us will want to read it a second time. Since Leonard-Roy does a good job in various spots of referring to marginalia found in his subjects’ private libraries, I will share an excerpt from this reviewer’s marginalia on this chapter. Leonard-Roy writes that Walpole “articulated a gentleman-amateur’s disdain for the world of professional letters and authorship.” In the margin I scribbled, “This sounds like simple envy to me. Walpole wanted it both ways, to be famous and private. Unlike Boswell, who showed not envy but excessive admiration of the famous.”

I doubt that anyone could do a better job of finding interesting things to say about Frances Burney’s *The Wanderer, or, Female Difficulties* (1814) than Leonard-Roy has. He admits that “it is a frustrating novel, and widely seen as Burney’s worst. Critics call it Burney’s ‘least-known, least-liked, and most difficult novel,’ a ‘work of gigantic ambition and bewildering failure.’” A good case is made that Burney, “a brilliant satirist with a vigorous and often violent sense of humour,” was compelled during her years of service at the Court (1786-1790) as keeper of the Queen’s robes to stifle her feelings, and that the plot of her last novel displays a heroine in many of the same circumstances. I am convinced also by the argument that the novel shows Burney exacting her revenge years later, in fiction, where she could drop the mask of deference she had to wear at Court. The chapter could stand alone; in fact, in his conclusion the author seems to hint at a possible objection to including it in this book: “if anyone knew how resentment and bitterness, *if not hate*, could coexist with love and loyalty to one’s mistress, it was probably Burney” (my emphasis).

The Coda, a mere seven pages, matches the chapter on Pope as the best section in the book. *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (1809) had positioned Byron “as the heir to Pope and Swift, wielding poetry to settle personal scores and denounce English culture.” Here is an especially good observation on a passage from *Don Juan*:

This collection of allusions — Johnson and Cervantes, with Swift’s withered tree in the background — shows Byron dwelling on fundamental questions about how he feels in his poetry and its effect on his sanity. He celebrates Johnsonian good hating before candidly admitting his mis-

givings about his own hate, and finally turns to Cervantes' deranged knight in a reflection on how he must prevent his own quixotic nature from driving him mad. (184)

To conclude with praise about something that used to be mundane or expected, but no longer is, I found the book carefully written and carefully proofed. I spot checked four longer quotations, and they were perfect. The only two suggestions I would have had, and both are a bit of a strain, are these. I would have preferred "had sneaked back into England" instead of "had snuck," and instead of "Piozzi had effectively lived with Johnson for years while married to Henry Thrale," perhaps "Johnson had effectively lived with Piozzi for years while she was married to Henry Thrale."



***The Enlightenment: An Idea and Its History*, by J.C.D. Clark**

Oxford University Press, 2024. 592 pp.

***Enlightened Oxford: The University and the Cultural and Political Life of Eighteenth-Century Britain and Beyond*, by Nigel Aston**

Oxford University Press, 2023. 819 pp.

Reviewed by David Womersley[†]

Do things come into existence only once they have been named? The Bible suggests otherwise:

And out of the ground the LORD GOD formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto the man to see what he would call them: and whatsoever the man called every living creature, that was the name thereof. And the man gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field...¹

Common sense tells us that rivers and mountains and trees must have existed before any person named them. Everybody who died before William Harvey published *De Motu Cordis* in 1628 was necessarily ignorant of the circulation of the blood; and yet their blood certainly circulated, just as ours does, even though that phrase, “the circulation of the blood,” had yet to be spoken. But perhaps things may be different in the symbolic order of human opinion. There it does seem to be at least worth investigating

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1. Genesis 2:19-20.

whether or not something truly exists before a label has been devised for, and attached to, it.

J.C.D. Clark's contention in *The Enlightenment: An Idea and Its History* is that, in the case of the Enlightenment, the label was not retrospectively attached to something it accurately although belatedly represented. Rather, the label reified and distorted a congeries of tendencies and elements in eighteenth-century culture which were later simplified into something called "The Enlightenment." In a much-repeated formulation we are frequently told that, in the long eighteenth century, enlightenment was everywhere, but the Enlightenment nowhere. The Enlightenment, we are to believe, was reified and the label devised only very late, some two centuries after the intellectual developments it was used to identify had occurred. The currents of ideas that later were grouped and disciplined into an "Enlightenment" were, so we are told, in fact more diverse and unfocused than the retrospective label would lead us to believe.



Figure 1: Engraving of Isaac Newton separating light with a prism, 1880

The Enlightenment: An Idea and Its History is divided into three parts. Part One, "Absences?", reviews the writings of a number of eighteenth-century authors whom one might have assumed were some of the personnel of the Enlightenment, here taken to be a movement involving reason, a belief in progress and even perfectibility, a reliance upon empirical science, a confinement of religion to the realm of private opinion, in politics a focus on the design of institutions calculated to promote human flourishing in this life, and a commitment to freedom, justice, and equality. The purpose of Part One is to demonstrate that, when examined closely, the writings of these figures — D'Alembert, Rousseau, and Voltaire in France; Locke, Hume, Wollstonecraft, Godwin, Price, Priestley, and Paine in Britain — do not conform to this stereotypical Enlightenment. It is perhaps surprising that Gibbon was not given extensive consideration, particularly since the work of John Pocock has installed *The Decline and Fall* at the center of the enlightened endeavours of at least the English eighteenth century. Had Gibbon received the attention bestowed on Price or Godwin, it would have been difficult to have overlooked this comment in chapter 61 of *The Decline and Fall*: "On this interesting subject, the progress of society in Europe, a strong ray of philosophic light has broke from Scotland in our own times; and it is with private, as well as public regard, that I repeat the names of Hume, Robertson, and Adam Smith." Although the phrase "the Enlightenment" is to be sure not used here, nevertheless this does look rather like an identification of what later came to be called "the Enlightenment." But of course, as we are told, interpretation demands selection. Part Two, "Anticipations?", embarks on a similar voyage, this time to discredit the attempt to create a genealogy for Enlightenment by earlier trends which might be thought to have contributed towards it. Part Three, "Achievements?", describes the eventual coining of the term "the Enlightenment," and exposes the various and allegedly unhistorical motives which led to it.

A term of art frequently encountered in the pages of *The Enlightenment: An Idea and Its History* is "retrojection," here used to refer to the misleading importation into the past of language or concepts that came into existence only later. In this account, "the Enlightenment" itself is the prime example of such an act of retrojection. It is curious, therefore, that the argument of *The Enlightenment: An Idea and Its History* rests upon a massive retrojection, namely the tailoring of the discussion to fit the requirements of a late twentieth-century political agenda. What is that agenda? Here we might attempt a reifying retrojection of our own, and coin the label "the Petrean Revanche."

What was “the Petrean Revanche”? It was a twentieth-century historiographical tendency arising from and focused upon Peterhouse, Cambridge. There were two pillars. The first was the sometime master of the college, the Methodist and adulterer Herbert Butterfield. His contribution to the “Revanche” was a hostility to teleological historical narrative, as embodied in his classic *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931) — although it should be noted that, when it seemed possible that his (ultimately successful) campaign for the Regius Chair at Cambridge might be enhanced by something a bit more patriotic and less iconoclastic, Butterfield had no difficulty in reversing the argument of his earlier book for *The Englishman and His History* (1944). The second pillar was the dyspeptic Tory Maurice Cowling, who in a sequence of monographs presented a series of what one might carelessly have considered to be staging posts on the way to modernity — franchise reform, the rise of the Labour Party, and the defeat of Nazism — as in fact moments when the Conservative *élite* strengthened its hold on power. And there were a number of lesser members of the Revanche — what one might call pilasters — such as the architectural historian David Watkin and the ecclesiastical historian Edward Norman.

How does *The Enlightenment: An Idea and Its History* fit into the Petrean Revanche? The cat is allowed to peep from the bag in the closing pages, where we read that:

Its account [i.e., the account offered in *The Enlightenment: An Idea and Its History*] of ‘the Enlightenment’ finds the formation of that anglophone concept in the era that is now widely identified as ‘modernism’, the mindset (to simplify) held (in one interpretation) to be the appropriate expression of societies dominated by manufacturing industry, urbanization, mass democracy, and secularization. The concepts employed to express that mindset, and to impose its normative projects on a variety of subject matters, shared a common characteristic: those concepts, often new in the nineteenth century, became heavily reified in the twentieth to the point that they came to seem beyond question. (482-83)

“The Enlightenment,” we are to believe, was “among the last of these concepts to be coined and to survive, but proved to be among the most powerful.”

To the extent that an historical event — in this case, the advent of “modernism” — can be presented as less the outcome of the *longue durée*, and more the disguised product of local and contingent considerations, to that extent the possibility of halting, overturning, or even reversing it seems more possible. In such a Quixotic cause no price might seem too high to its devotees — even, it may be, the reshaping of historical scholarship from a dispassionate survey of all the relevant evidence to the cherry-picking of helpful details, and the overlooking of the rest.

It is, then, with some relief that one turns to Nigel Aston’s *Enlightened Oxford*: a comprehensive and untendentious survey of the intellectual life and social and political connections of the university during the eighteenth century. In the many decades since Edward Gibbon and Adam Smith inserted their stilettos between the shoulder blades of their *alma mater* the astonishingly durable image they sketched of Oxford — lost to all worthwhile academic activity, the home of unproductive drones saturated in port and prejudice, addicted to the increasingly Brigadoon-like cause of Jacobitism — has received at least in part an empirical corrective, not least in the multi-volume history of the University published by OUP. Gibbon and Smith provided a caricature rather than a portrait, and the detail of the life of the university in the eighteenth century, here lovingly and learnedly curated by Aston, tells a different story. Not, it must be said at once, a tale of white-hot academic endeavour and undeviating Hanoverian loyalty; but rather a more interesting and plausible story of how an institution of more than national importance adjusted and preserved itself in the aftermath of high-political events (1688 and the Hanoverian succession of 1714) that threatened to destroy it.

Aston has rightly given priority to richness of detail over elegance of argument. This is a wonderful book in which to dip — it is almost a bedside book, at least for those who nurse a curiosity about Oxford. It is at one level a treasure-trove of Oxonian anecdote — for instance, the story of the so-called “Vinegar Bible” of 1717, “strewed with misprints... that did nothing for the reputation of proofreaders” at the University Press. Would that one could say that the press had put those days well and truly behind it. For although *Enlightened Oxford* is a very handsome and generously-illustrated book, it is disfigured by a sprinkling of errors of

presentation. Italicization of titles of books is very haphazard, particularly in the epigraphs to chapters. Underlinings, presumably made at proof stage, have from time to time survived as underlinings rather than being converted into italicisations in the final text. Occasionally what look like proofing instructions have been taken over literally into the text, rather than being realized in a correction. Some cross-references have not been updated (e.g., p. 132, n. 4). Not all the errors, however, can be laid at the door of the press. It is, for instance, surprising to learn that John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* was one of the books burned by the University in 1683 on the grounds of its "damnable Doctrines," since the *Two Treatises* were not published until 1690 (p. 40).

But it would be wrong to let the final emphasis fall on slips and errors. This is a rich and rewarding study, comprehensive in its scope and unwaveringly fair-minded in its judgements.

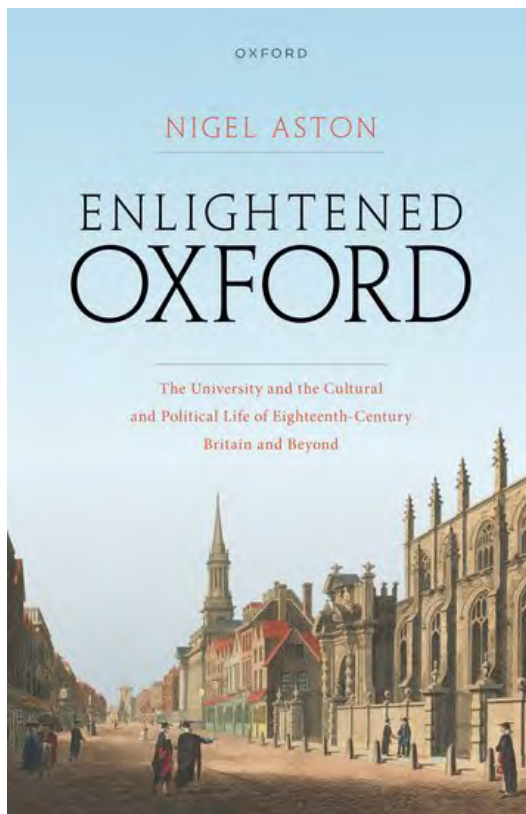


Figure 2: Cover of *Enlightened Oxford*



***Jane Austen's Bookshelf: A Rare Book Collector's Quest to Find the Women Writers who Shaped a Legend*, by Rebecca Romney**

New York: Marysue Rucci Books, Simon & Schuster, 2025. 464 pp.

Reviewed by Lisa Berglund[†]

In this sprightly “unconventional memoir” (239) as she calls it, Rebecca Romney describes how she set out to learn more about the women writers who preceded and influenced Jane Austen, by reading and — equally important — by collecting their works. A lifelong Austen fan and a rare book dealer by profession, Romney was once, she confesses, utterly unfamiliar with the women writers of the late eighteenth century. Her book describes her feelings of delight, astonishment, and even shame as her project led her to authors whose novels were readable, whose experiences were relatable, and whose achievements were remarkable.

Jane Austen's Bookshelf devotes a chapter each to Austen, Frances Burney, Ann Radcliffe, Charlotte Lennox, Hannah More, Charlotte Smith, Elizabeth Inchbald, Hester Lynch Piozzi (Mrs. Thrale), and Maria Edgeworth. Each chapter reviews the subject's life and discusses her principal literary accomplishments, including works that Austen mentioned in her novels or correspondence. Romney describes tracking down copies of these books, whether first editions or recent paperbacks, and reading them for the first time. She asserts that she had never read any of them before, which is somewhat hard to believe, but her enthusiastic account of her discoveries is very engaging. *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Romney reports, is “one of the best reading experiences I've had,” while “I found that *The Female Quixote* was far wittier than any of Austen's novels.” She was “riveted” by Miss Milner in the first half of Inchbald's *A Simple Story*, so

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enthralled by *Evelina* that she finds herself getting up from her couch to go to the heroine's rescue... but also, she confesses, utterly unable to get past the first chapter of More's *Coelebs in Search of a Wife*.

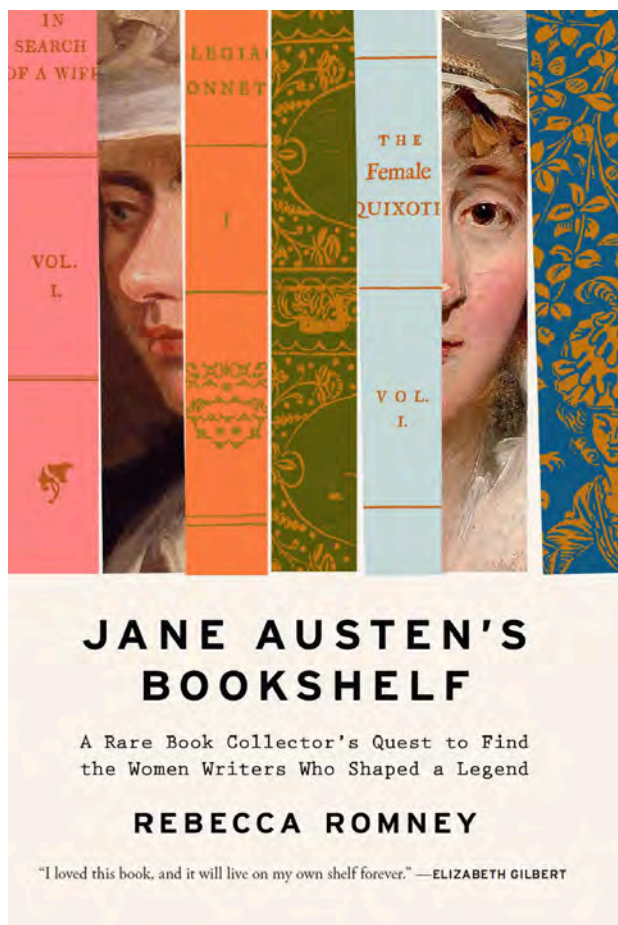


Figure 1: Cover of *Jane Austen's Bookshelf*

The discussion of each writer's works and biography is complemented by accounts of related topics, conveyed in a breezy, informative style. The chapter on Austen emphasizes publishing details, including the interesting fact that the colophons of books published late in the year gave the date of the following year, to encourage sales with an appearance of newness. The chapter on Radcliffe offers an excellent summary of rise of the gothic novel and its reception; that on Burney describes late-eighteenth-century anxieties about novel reading (with an amusing digression in defense of the heroine's habit of fainting). Inchbald's career as an actress and playwright provides a compact introduction to Georgian theater, and

a section reflecting on Edgeworth's reputational "slide" from canonical to regional "Irish novelist" is especially illuminating (297). In other areas, Romney's reading prompts autobiographical reflections, as when she connects her discomfort with More's proselytizing to her own break with the Mormon faith. Throughout the book Romney comes to terms with the "internalized sexism" (66) that had led her for many years to ignore these writers; she recalls with embarrassed hindsight having asserted to a client that Boswell's *Life of Johnson* was the only legitimate biography of its subject, despite having never read Piozzi's *Anecdotes* nor even, for that matter, Boswell.

While it is a memoir, *Jane Austen's Bookshelf* is also literary history of the later eighteenth century, layered with a history of the literary criticism of the later twentieth century, the period that first canonized Austen and then, gradually, began to acknowledge the value of the women writers who preceded her. It also celebrates the way access to women's literary history has been transformed by the internet. Particularly striking is Romney's observation that the critics in the 1960s and 1970s who dismissed women writers as influences on Austen, choosing instead to see the hand of Johnson or Richardson or Cowper, did so having probably never read Inchbald or Edgeworth... not necessarily out of sexist contempt, but rather because copies of their books were nearly impossible to find. Today, all the novels that Romney discusses can be found online via Project Gutenberg, the Internet Archive, and/or other repositories.

I read Romney's chapter on Piozzi with particular interest. Unsurprisingly, Romney spends little time on Piozzi's literary works; indeed, her *Letters of Samuel Johnson*, which we know Austen read, because she quotes it in a letter to her sister Cassandra, isn't discussed at all. Instead, the chapter is a sympathetic account of Piozzi's troubled first marriage, marked by eighteen years of bearing and losing children, her happy but controversial second marriage, and her estrangement from her daughters. The book ends with tempered admiration for what Romney neatly calls Piozzi's "unrepentant heart" (325).

Both Romney's strengths and weaknesses as a commentator on eighteenth-century writers are demonstrated in this chapter. I appreciated her trenchant rhetorical question "What does Piozzi's literary legacy have to do with her parenting?" (264); I cheered when she wrote that she was "sick of reading about Johnson every time I picked up a book about Piozzi" (271); and I vigorously underlined her final comment, "I saw in her a writer

whom I admired for her courage to experiment, to combine genres as the surest way to stay true to herself. A model, perhaps, for my own writing. A model for this book” (279). At the same time, Romney’s claim that Piozzi “cheerfully resisted” (260) Italian friends who attempted to convert her to Catholicism is contradicted by Piozzi’s anguished annotations in the copy of *Observations and Reflections* that she presented to William Augustus Conway. Romney also implies without foundation that Piozzi’s daughter Hester Maria (Queeney) knew of her father’s infidelities and mistreatment of her mother; and her account of Piozzi’s break with Johnson, though not inaccurate, is weakened because Romney fails to quote the most powerful lines from Piozzi’s valedictory letter. This critique may apply to the volume as a whole: The nonspecialist reader can learn much from these pages, while the scholar may be troubled by minor irritants.

Jane Austen’s Bookshelf includes a descriptive bibliography of the volumes that Romney collected for her “bookshelf,” which is an excellent introduction to aspects of rare book cataloging and collecting. It has a useful general bibliography, and I like the way the notes are located in an easy-to-follow citation section that avoids the superscript intertextual numbers that might intimidate lay readers. I noted a few grammatical errors, and one typo, the misspelling (on two occasions) of O M Brack’s name. In some places, the prose is casual to the point of becoming vulgar. For example, Romney writes,

The high end of the collectible book market... hasn’t always valued women authors as much as their male counterparts. In this context, it really was a statement that this guy’s first edition could be picked up for a song, even in a solid leather binding contemporary to its era.

Next, I grabbed the first publication of Talfourd’s memoir of Ann Radcliffe... (97)

Phrases like “this guy” and “I grabbed” are no doubt intended to render potentially daunting material accessible, but the phrasing is distractingly unfortunate.

I enjoyed *Jane Austen’s Bookshelf*, but the book wasn’t written for me. It was written for my late mother, a lifelong Austen fan who also loved Burney and Edgeworth, who never got through *The Female Quixote*, and who kept meaning to read *Udolpho*. I wish I could give her my copy.