

**The Johnson Society of Australia, Inc.**

**PAPERS**

**Volume 12**

**September 2010**





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The Society is grateful to Daniel Vuillermin for his assistance with copyright matters.

*The cover illustration shows Samuel Johnson imitating a kangaroo (see Boswell's Life of Johnson, ed. G.B.Hill, rev. L.F.Powell [Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1934-64] Vol.V, p. 511), from an etching by John Spooner, which is used with the artist's permission.*

## CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b>	page 5
<b>David Fleeman Memorial Lecture, 2008</b>	9
Ann Blake: <i>'An Ornament of the Metropolis'?</i> <i>Johnson, Sheridan and the London Theatre</i>	11
<b>Seminar Papers:</b>	
About the Contributors	35
Daniel Vuillermin: <i>Boswell's and Reynolds's Conflicting Diagnoses and the Nineteenth Century Genre Paintings of Dr Johnson</i>	37
Barrie Sheppard: <i>Johnson and Metaphor</i>	49
Nicholas Hudson: <i>Johnson and the Grammarians</i>	61
Barbara Niven: <i>The London Bach: A Musical Interlude</i> (stub paper)	79
<b>List of JSA Publications</b>	83
<b>About the JSA</b>	87



## Introduction

Unless you are a scholar, or attend the annual seminars of the Johnson Society of Australia, you may be surprised by how much there is still, apparently, left to be said about a writer who died 226 years ago, and whose written works, however extensive, are after all finite in number. Having prepared this year's crop of papers for publication, and having also just returned from the 2010 JSA Annual Seminar, I am delighted to report that we do not yet appear to have run out of subject matter.

In a Society like our own, in which the emphasis from the start has been on the enjoyment as well as the study of Johnson, it is not the originality of the subject matter that really concerns us: we meet and listen and talk to each other in order to keep certain ideas and practices – centred, of course, on Johnson – in cultural circulation. We frequently hear new things (or things that are new to us); we do often hear original things; but we are just as happy to hear evocative stories and telling impressions that we have heard before, in congenial company and in a comfortable setting.

While engaged in the harmless drudgery of editing I have again enjoyed the company of five writers, and found their work stimulating. I thank Ann, Daniel, Barrie, Nick and Barbara for making their work available to us. It is one thing to have something amusing and interesting to say to a sympathetic audience on a pleasant Saturday afternoon, and quite another to be prepared to commit it to print – even in this relatively informal publication.

In next year's volume I can promise the 2009 Fleeman Lecture by Dr Barry Jones AO, and as many seminar papers as there is room for: I already have a backlog of three or four – a bumper issue may be required!

Paul Tankard  
*University of Otago*  
*Dunedin, New Zealand*





The Johnson Society of Australia, Inc.

THE DAVID FLEEMAN MEMORIAL LECTURE  
2008

*'An Ornament of the Metropolis'?*  
*Johnson, Sheridan and the London Theatre*

ANN BLAKE



## The David Fleeman Memorial Lecture

The David Fleeman Memorial Lecture is presented annually by the Johnson Society of Australia in memory of the distinguished British Johnsonian editor and bibliographer who was the Society's first Patron. Each lecture is given by a scholar of international reputation.

The fifteenth Fleeman Memorial Lecture was delivered in Melbourne at the premises of the English Speaking Union on 4 October 2008 by Ann Blake.

Until 2000, Ann Blake was a Senior Lecturer in English at La Trobe University, Melbourne. She came to Australia in 1969 after reading English at Oxford, where she wrote her B.Litt. thesis on comic deception in Elizabethan and Jacobean comedy. Though never one of Professor Fleeman's students, she remembers him from that time – someone who, whenever she was in the upper reading room of the Bodleian Library, would always be there.

At La Trobe her main teaching and research interests were the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, boy actors and children's roles in Shakespeare, Irish playwrights, crime fiction and the expatriate Australian novelist Christina Stead. She has published a study of Stead's novels, *Christina Stead and the Politics of Place* (1999) and, with two colleagues, another book on expatriate writing, *England Through Colonial Eyes in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (2001). Most of her publications in journals and collections of essays have been on Shakespeare and Shakespearean comedy.

Since 2000, Ann has continued to write and occasionally teach. For three years she gave a Shakespeare course at the Oxford University Summer School for Adults, and has given regular talks to the Melbourne Shakespeare Society. 'Retirement' has also seen her move into the area of eighteenth-century theatre, with her new editions for the New Mermaid series of two classic comedies by Irish dramatists: Sheridan's *The School for Scandal* (2004) and Farquhar's *The Beaux Stratagem* (2006). The topic of her Fleeman Lecture reflects this interest and, in particular, Sheridan's ambiguous feelings about the theatre.



## ‘An Ornament of the Metropolis’? Johnson, Sheridan and the London Theatre

Ann Blake

A few years ago, I was working on a new edition of *The School for Scandal* by Richard Brinsley Sheridan, a man known to Johnson, and indeed a member of the Club from 1777. I had to try to understand what were for him the attractions of writing for the stage, and what sort of view he and his contemporaries had of the theatre. Broadly speaking, that is the topic of this paper, and its origin was in Ireland.

In 2006 I was a visitor at the W. B. Yeats summer school in Sligo. One of the speakers was the historian Roy Foster, who had recently completed his acclaimed biography of Yeats. In his last years, Yeats had returned to where he began, writing for the theatre, and had produced a number of plays, and this had created something of a problem for Foster. He explained that, as he was born in the mid-twentieth century, the theatre had never had much interest for him: he was, as we say, more of a film man. Yet here was this great poet, to the writing of whose life Foster had devoted ten years, pouring the last of his energy into play writing. Writing about this part of Yeats's life had been, for Foster, something of a revelation. He had had to come to terms with how important the theatre was to Yeats as a form of artistic expression, and also to acknowledge how central a place it had in London artistic life in general, and indeed in London society. What Foster's remarks made me realise was how important the theatre was to another Irish dramatist, R. B. Sheridan, and also to the literary and social worlds he inhabited.

In the eighteenth century, fame and fortune were the rewards of the author of a successful play. As one of Sheridan's nineteenth-century biographers wrote: 'In those days, most of the men and women who were burning to achieve popularity and independence wrote for the stage.'<sup>1</sup> The money, politely referred to here as 'independence', came principally from the theatre takings rather than from publication of the play. Playwrights didn't sell their plays to the theatre managers, but received the takings of the third night of performance, and, if it was successful, of later nights in the run, the sixth, ninth and so on. This could amount to large sums: Colley Cibber in 1718 received £105 for the publication of his play *The Non-Juror*; but within fifteen days of the

premiere in December 1717 he had cleared nearly £1000 in a playhouse which had 'not been so crowded for many years'.<sup>2</sup> Johnson's tragedy *Irene* (1749), often thought of as a theatrical failure, was kept going (as Boswell put it) for nine nights, a respectable run for a new play in those days, and Johnson received £300, with another £100 when it was published by Dodsley. In his *Life of Savage*, Johnson refers to Savage's early poems and remarks that writing for the stage could indeed be 'a more gainful kind of writing'. That was Johnson's own experience. Walter Jackson Bate points out that what Johnson earned from *Irene* amounted to half the sum his wife Tetty had brought with her when they married.

For Sheridan, play writing was a gold mine. His opera *The Duenna* was a phenomenal success, second only in the whole century to John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, the work which, in the contemporary phrase, 'made Gay rich and Rich [the theatre manager, John Rich] gay'. Sheridan's comedy *The School for Scandal* was another huge success.

The money from successful play writing did not detract from the literary status of the playwright, which remained high throughout the century. Though poetry continued to be the most prized form of literary art, writing plays was acceptable in the literary world, not just for the great writers of the past but also for contemporaries. Throughout the *Lives of the Poets*, Johnson uses the term 'poet' for those who are principally dramatists, in prose or verse, and makes no disparaging remarks about writing plays, though he may find fault with an individual work. Later in the century, when novels were becoming more numerous, a play is referred to as something superior to the newer literary form. Here I'd like to quote Mrs Thrale. She advised Fanny Burney after the success of her first novel, *Evelina* (1778):

Now Miss Burney, if you would write a play, I have a notion it would hit my taste in all things; do – you *must* write one; a play will be something *worth* your Time – it is the road both to honour and profit; and why should you have it in your power to gain both, and not do it?<sup>3</sup>

One of the reasons play writing was esteemed was that, in the often-repeated claim, the theatre was seen as 'a school of Morals'.<sup>4</sup> Here is Hazlitt writing along this line in the early nineteenth century:

Wherever there is a play-house, the world will go on not amiss. The stage not only refines the manners, but it is the best teacher of morals, for it is the truest and most intelligible picture of life.<sup>5</sup>

The social usefulness of the theatre was the argument most frequently produced to counter attacks on the stage throughout the eighteenth century. A more modest and practical view of the stage's moral force was that it kept people out of trouble. Johnson declared himself 'a great friend to publick amusements; for they keep people from vice.'<sup>6</sup> Similarly, in one of his many discussions with Boswell about the actor Garrick, of which more later, Johnson praised Garrick as a provider of 'harmless pleasure'. When Boswell queried him about this apparently low estimate, Johnson persuasively suggested that it was all too easy to undervalue harmless pleasure (*Life*, IV, 388). With less direct emphasis on moral teaching or public morality, many at this time also claimed, with Hamlet, that plays provided the audience with fascinating reflections of themselves, being able

to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature: to show virtue her feature,  
scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form  
and pressure (III.ii. 21-4).

In addition to the esteem the stage derived from its perceived moral value, it is important to recognise that its popularity depended in large part on its being the only form of dramatic narrative of both heroic and pathetic situations, and of everyday contemporary life, available to its audience, except the opera, that is: there were no films or television.

Hazlitt, who loved the theatre, also derived his enjoyment from the players, from appreciation of their skill, from the sense of an actor's career over the years, and so on. People who didn't enjoy plays were not likely to be pleasant people, declared Hazlitt, and talking about the stage was, he pointed out, a pastime which provided opportunity for conversation, even with strangers. For him, it was valuable as a kind of social glue. Interest and enthusiasm for the theatre was certainly at a height in the latter part of the eighteenth century. The miscellaneous writings of, for instance, Mrs Thrale, are scattered with theatre snippets, comments on authors, plays, actors, and the same is true of the letters and journals of a number of eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century writers, from Horace Walpole to Jane Austen and her family, whose enthusiasm for the theatre is well known. The prominence



William Hogarth, *Strolling Actresses Dressing in a Barn*, 1738  
A file from Wikimedia Commons

of the stage in the life of the town is equally apparent in contemporary novels set in London, Burney's *Evelina* for instance, where the round of entertainments was sure to include theatre visits. Until the end of the century, the theatres themselves were still small and intimate. The audience in the better seats observed the actors at close quarters. Theatre-goers could read reviews and theatre gossip in the newspapers; they could buy prints which commemorated actors in their favourite roles, and, if inclined, could follow their fashions. In short, they loved and admired their players, who became for some almost friends and acquaintances, in a way which has surely survived into our age of electronic media.

The phrase 'eighteenth-century theatre' may of course conjure up a much more disreputable image of sexual licence, disorder and noise than the one I have been trying to create. Think of Hogarth's 'Strolling Actresses Dressing in a Barn', 1738. As often repeated in the period as



the 'school of morals' claim was the equation of acting and prostitution, of theatre and immorality; and the old legal designation of actors as 'vagrants', or rogues and vagabonds, was still in popular currency at the end of the century. However, as far as the plays were concerned, those licentious comedies composed by the rakish Restoration wits, such as *The Country Wife*, or *The Relapse*, were in the eighteenth century no longer staged in their original versions. The clergyman Jeremy Collier had in 1698 mounted an attack on 'the immorality and profaneness of the English stage', aimed particularly at the plays of Vanbrugh and Congreve, in which, Collier claimed, the hero was customarily 'some accomplished debauchee that regards neither God nor man'. Plays were thereafter tailored to the chaste ears of the time. The theatre soon came in for criticism again, this time for staging political satire, with plays aimed at Walpole, culminating in the imminent performance of one entitled *The Image of the Golden Rump*. This led to the Licensing Act of 1737, which established censorship of plays and kept political satire off the stage.

Though plays thereafter became comparatively proper and bland, to some, and not only Wesley and the Methodists, the presence of women on the stage still conveyed the strong aura of sexual availability suggested in the Hogarth print, and encapsulated for us in the name of Nell Gwyn, and perhaps also by Johnson's remark to Garrick: 'I'll come no more behind your scenes David; for the silk stockings and white bosoms of your actresses excite my amorous propensities'(in Boswell's polite version) (*Life*, I, 201).

Moreover the theatres – those 'ornaments of the metropolis', in the words of a contemporary<sup>7</sup> – however beautiful, and however charmingly dressed the performers, or socially elevated some of the patrons, were still rowdy places. The audience felt free to behave in ways that would not be tolerated today: they spoke up, interrupting the action, driving performers off stage, or calling for the manager and demanding one play replace another, one actor another, and so on. One audience interjection which Mrs Thrale thought worth recording, concerning a 'horrible accident' which befell an actor called Barrymore, was perhaps an extreme example of such behaviour: 'Mr Barrymore's horrible Accident shocked the Liverpool Folks so little, that whilst the Man's Blood was streaming on the Stage, They cried out: "Take away the Body, and bring forward the Farce."'8



*The Riot at Covent Garden in 1763 in consequence of the manager refusing to take half-price at the Opera of Artaxerxes*  
Victoria and Albert Museum, London – reproduced by permission

The ultimate manifestations of this noisy, interactive or ‘social theatre’, as the historian Baer calls it, were full-scale riots, which were regular events over the years, with the audience invading the stage (as depicted in a 1763 print of a riot at Covent Garden over increased prices during a performance of Arne’s *Artaxerxes*). Rioting may be said to have culminated in the 1809 OP Riots – OP meaning Old Price – when on sixty-seven evenings running there were riots at Covent Garden. When the theatre reopened after rebuilding following a fire, the manager, Kemble, had taken the opportunity to reorganise the seating, replacing the third tier with private boxes which had to be taken for the whole season, and also increasing prices throughout the house. The rioting audience, who saw themselves as stout defenders of the rights of English playgoers, from all ranks, attacked Kemble, even employing the old derogatory label of ‘vagrant’. In a print of John Bull as the English theatre-goer confronting Kemble, the paper under Kemble’s foot reads ‘VAGRANT ACT’. However popular the stage, however important to all walks of life, there was a residual ambivalence in the audience’s feeling for their players which might surface when they were displeased.

Both Johnson and Sheridan, Sheridan forty-two years the younger, manifest their own conflict of feeling about the stage and actors. Given the large part the theatre played in Sheridan's life it is surprising, to say the least, to find him on one occasion describing it as 'A Scene which I had always an Instinctive Abhorrence of, and which I am now more than ever convinced is, for its extent, the greatest Nursery of Vice and Misery on the Face of the Earth.'<sup>9</sup>

Sheridan was born into the theatre. His father, Thomas, is Johnson's crotchety acquaintance who compiled a dictionary of pronunciation, unfortunately for him overshadowed by Johnson's *Dictionary*. The older Sheridan also wrote and lectured on education, and on the art of speaking, and was a leading actor in Dublin and London, here once again overshadowed, this time by Garrick. When Sheridan was born in 1751 his father was actor-manager of Dublin's Smock Alley Theatre. Then, in 1754, there was a riot, sparked this time by a local political rivalry, and the theatre was destroyed. Burdened with debts, Sheridan's parents moved to London. There, to boost the family's income, Sheridan's mother, Frances, wrote a novel, and two short comedies, one, *The Discovery* (1763), a notable success.

Sheridan went to school at Harrow, where he convinced his teachers he had remarkable abilities, though he was idle and learnt nothing. However, after leaving school, he began to write, and published some translations and light verse. In 1770 the Sheridan family was living in Bath, and there began his dramatic romance with Elizabeth, 'the English nightingale', the beautiful daughter of Thomas Linley the composer, then at the height of her fame as a singer (the moment when Gainsborough painted a portrait of her with her sister Mary<sup>#</sup>). She was being pestered by the attentions of an unwelcome suitor, and was also unhappy that her father expected her to perform frequently in public, where her performances commanded very high fees. So she accepted help from Sheridan to travel secretly to France with her maid. At some stage Sheridan declared his love for her, and they were married. They returned to England, and after some months of separation, and contrary to the wishes of his father, who saw the Linleys as socially inferior, the couple was officially married in 1773.

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<sup>#</sup> Thomas Gainsborough, *The Linley Sisters*, 1772

This portrait may be viewed at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Webmeia.jpg>



George Cruickshank, *King John and John Bull*, Courtesy Harvard University, Henry Elkins Widener Collection, HEW 4.12.6, vol III, p.89

*KING JOHN [Actor-manager John Kemble]: Ladies & Gentlemen. Here I am ever ready to obey your commands – Have I not turn'd a deaf ear to your wishes – Have I not ordered the Performers to go on with their Business & pay no more attention to your disapprobation, than if you were not in the House. Have I not heard the public voice unequivocally expressed in this house, & in the public prints, & with all this on my mind do I not now, finding that neither Fire, Water, Theif [sic] Takers, nor the Riot act will silence you, Most respectfully appear before you to ask What is it you Want?*

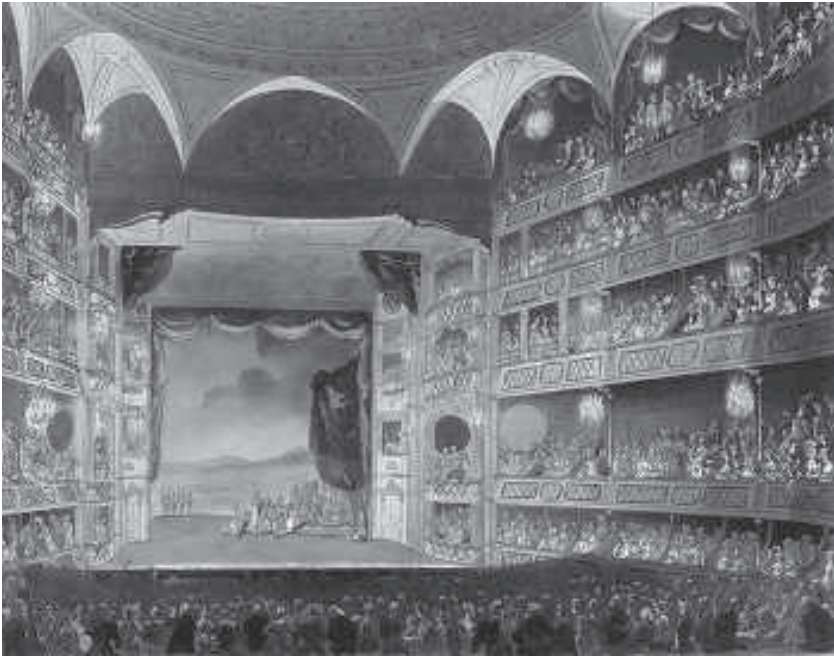
*JOHN BULL [the British public]: what – after Twenty five years experience, to know no better than to insult your old Friend John Bull by asking him such a question – Can't you read old Prices, &c that stare you full in the face? How dare you order Traps, Squallini, or Engine Pipes into my presence. Be it known unto you (BlackJack) that the Mighty & Magnamious [sic] John Bull will by means of his Horns &c compel you to bow your stiff neck and acknowledge him your Lord & Master*

*(No Italian private boxes [pigeon holes]  
NO CATALANI [expensive Italian singer])*

Sheridan was determined that his wife should not perform in public. To help provide for them (perhaps following his mother's example) he wrote a comedy, *The Rivals*, performed at Covent Garden in 1775, and followed it up in the same year with a two-act farce, *St Patrick's Day*, and then with *The Duenna*, an opera, or play with songs. In the following year he moved more completely into what might be thought of as the family business, theatre management, though he and his father might well have rejected that description. Sheridan succeeded in persuading friends to put up funds to join him in buying Garrick's share of the patent of the Drury Lane Theatre. *The School for Scandal* then appeared in May, at the end of the 1777 season, and in its first two seasons made £15,000, half of the sum paid to Garrick by the consortium of purchasers. The next year, 1778, *The Critic* brought Sheridan more theatrical success. *The School for Scandal* and *The Duenna* were to be two of the most performed plays until the end of the century, with *The Critic* the most performed afterpiece (a type of short play used to make up an evening's program). The theatre had given Sheridan fame, and some fortune: he and his elegant wife began to be invited to the homes of the politically influential aristocracy.

Sheridan then turned away from writing for the stage, and set out on a parliamentary career in the Whig party of Fox and Burke. This too made him famous in his day, but drained his finances. He continued to play a part in the management of Drury Lane for many years, commissioning plays, choosing the repertoire, hiring actors and so on. This theatrical connection left him open to the sneers of his political opponents. Lord Holland wrote that, as a boy at Harrow, Sheridan had been 'slighted by the masters and tormented by the boys, as a poor player's son'.<sup>10</sup> Later, Pitt sneered at his 'dramatic turns and his epigrammatic point' as being inappropriate in the House.

His parliamentary career began in 1780 when he was elected member for Stafford, proud to sit 'not as the nominee of any aristocratic patron', but still relying on financial backing from aristocratic friends.<sup>11</sup> His subsequent fame as a parliamentarian rests principally on his speeches at the impeachment and trial of Warren Hastings, Governor-General of India, who had been accused of extortion. However, his Irish origins, his lack of rank or fortune, in a House of Commons full of aristocrats, combined with his determined independence, wit, and rhetorical powers, made his fellow Whigs suspicious of



*Interior of Drury Lane Theatre after the rebuilding of 1794*  
A File from Wikimedia Commons

him. His support of the Prince of Wales, and the Prince's reliance on him, further damaged his position with his allies, as, in his later years especially, did his notorious drinking. In the political cartoons of the time he was a bloated red-faced drunk. He remained in Parliament for thirty-two years, but in the end his political luck ran out, and what his contemporaries referred to as his 'intemperate behaviour' and his 'pecuniary embarrassments' caught up with him.

A generous host and friend, he lived when he could in an extravagant, grand style, sustained at other times by, in the words of one of his close associates, 'confidence in the resources of his own genius'.<sup>12</sup> He failed to keep or answer letters, and under his management the company at Drury Lane complained constantly of not being paid; some, including Sarah Siddons, in disgust deserted to the rival company at

Covent Garden.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand his capacity to borrow money, and to fund huge schemes, such as the initial purchase of Drury Lane and then the rebuilding, after the 1791 fire, was a legend in his lifetime. When this new, larger theatre, seen in all its grandeur in a contemporary print, also burnt down in 1809, it was a devastating blow. The spectacular fire made a dramatic subject for fashionable painter, Thomas Luny.<sup>#</sup> As the flames shot up and, reflected in the Thames, made the water (according to a report at the time) look like a sheet of fire, Sheridan retired to drink a few bottles of wine with his parliamentary colleagues. When a friend remarked on his philosophic calm he famously replied: ‘A man may surely be allowed to take a glass of wine by his own fireside.’

Byron, who knew Sheridan – ‘dear Sherry’, as he called him – and who drank with him, marvelled at his conversation and his powers of persuasion, particularly when extracting money from people. There was need: Byron records that he had ‘more than once heard Sheridan say that he never “had a shilling of his own”’, meaning of course, money he had inherited.<sup>14</sup> Drury Lane was his banker.

In 1812, he lost his parliamentary seat and in 1813, no longer protected by parliamentary immunity from his creditors, he was arrested for debt. His end followed the pattern of a life marked by contradictions and paradoxes. He died in great poverty, with bailiffs at the door, yet was commemorated with a magnificent funeral, with aristocrats as pall-bearers. Though he wished to be buried among the politicians beside Fox, his grave in Westminster Abbey is beside that of the actor David Garrick.

Is his story that of a brilliant dramatist lost to politics, or, as Byron suggested, of a man of great talents held back by lack of money and wealthy connections? Certainly the latter. The House of Commons, not play writing, was for him the serious calling. Drury Lane which, with associates, he owned and managed for thirty-five years, but to which he never gave enough attention, was a means by which a man who had no independent fortune could fund his political career. His contemporaries

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<sup>#</sup> Thomas Luny, *The Burning of Drury Lane Theatre from Westminster Bridge*, c. 1809. This picture may be viewed by googling [Burning Drury Lane 1809](#) and clicking any of the first three files to come up.



claimed his early triumph made him unwilling to attempt another comedy: he was too frightened of competing with the author of *The School for Scandal*. When in 1799 he finally did produce another play, the hugely successful *Pizarro*, he judged the taste of the time perfectly and, as with *The School for Scandal*, wrote leading roles perfectly suited to the best actors of the day: John Kemble, Sarah Siddons and Dorothy Jordan. It also voiced his own liberal principles. *Pizarro* is Sheridan's version of the then popular German playwright Kotzebue's tragedy of the Spanish conquest in America. It makes a protest against 'European exploitation of native peoples'.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, it made a lot of money for Drury Lane.

One most detects Sheridan's ambivalence about the theatre when he faces the question of women performing in public, especially women in his own family. The profession of actress on the English stage after 1660 offered women particular opportunities, and difficulties. The public display of beauty and wit made the theatre a virtual market; actresses could sell to whom they pleased, some even marrying their aristocratic admirers and, like Nell Gwyn, giving up the stage. Those who remained had to endure the attentions of those theatre goers for whom just observing actresses was not enough. Going back stage to encounter them at closer quarters was all part of the entertainment.

Theatre managers throughout the eighteenth century struggled to keep men out of the wings. For the actress, pregnancy was a hazard, though it seems that audiences were remarkably tolerant of an actress performing the part of even an unmarried woman when she was in the earlier, through obvious, stages of pregnancy; for some, in particular the remarkable Dorothy Jordan, leading actress, mistress of the Duke of Clarence and mother of eleven, repeated pregnancy proved no barrier to fame and success.<sup>16</sup> Biographies of actresses began to appear at this time, and though some were serious histories, others were sensational, and in some cases fake, autobiographies of women whose sex lives were the principal attraction. In short, women performers worked surrounded by rumour and scandal. They struggled to attain social acceptability, as indeed did some men of the theatre: Sheridan has already been discussed. Another instance was Arthur Murphy, the actor and later playwright and friend of Johnson, who 'was refused admission to the Middle Temple on the ground that he was an actor'.<sup>17</sup>



Given the circumstances in which women performed, it is understandable that Sheridan, though he 'had not a shilling in the world', did not let his wife sing in public: and the one reference to Sheridan in Boswell's *Life* (where he is politely alluded to as 'a young gentleman') records Dr Johnson's approval for his so doing: 'He is a brave man. Would not a gentleman be disgraced by having his wife singing publicly for hire?' (*Life*, II.369) Here we should remember that Garrick's wife, a prominent dancer, had also given up her career when she married.

An early letter of Sheridan's, undated, but written probably in 1775, before Sheridan bought into Drury Lane, addressed to his father-in-law, Thomas Linley, offers a fascinating insight into Sheridan's attitude here. Sheridan is urging him, at length, not to allow his daughter Mary – like her sister, a highly successful singer – to take the step of going on the stage. In vehement language he insists on the impossibility of a woman remaining respectable once she became an actress: 'No Gentleman of Character or Fortune ever yet took a Wife from behind the Scenes of a Theatre' (*Letters*, III, 294). Marriage with a fellow actor is their only prospect, Sheridan declares, and he warns his father-in-law, who hoped to obtain a share in Drury Lane in the wake of Mary's acting, that his only acquisition will be 'such Relations as it will be a disgrace to be connected with'. Singing and acting are, he admits, both 'public' activities, but one is a decent and elegant entertainment, the other all 'Riot and Immodest Craft'. An actress chooses to 'obtrude herself into a conspicuous Scene of all that's *indelicate, immodest, immoral*' (296). At the beck and call of a mercenary Manager, she must, to perform at all, abandon all modesty, since her 'trade it is eternally to represent all the different modifications of Love before a mix'd Assembly of Rakes, Whores, Lords, and Blackguards in succession!' (297)

Sheridan, at least when he drafted this remarkable letter, takes a sternly patriarchal view of women living as actresses, independently of men. He is proud to write that his father is to act next year at Covent Garden (though at other times he felt differently and sought to prevent him), but this has no impact on the moral degradation he sees as the inevitable fate of a woman in the theatre who – in the old-fashioned phrase – chooses to make a public exhibition of herself: 'Their senses are corrupted in the operation of their Trade.' Nevertheless, Sheridan had dealings with actresses all his life, hiring, negotiating salaries, and so on, rehearsing Frances Abington in the part of Lady Teazle in *The*

*School for Scandal*<sup>18</sup> and even giving Sarah Siddons advice on playing the sleepwalking scene. When Garrick died, he was chief mourner and composed a moving tribute to the man, and to the transient art of the actor. But when it came to his own family he was convinced, with his friend and biographer, Thomas Moore, of the ‘loss or tarnishing of female modesty by the stage’.<sup>19</sup> Given his circumstances, Sheridan simply could not afford to live up to his principled objections to the theatre; but he drew the line at permitting any female member of his family to perform. Mary did not become an actress. Perhaps Sheridan’s chief motive was to protect his own social standing, but such vehement denunciation of women on stage comes strangely from one who wrote such brilliant roles for them.



Johnson’s feelings about the theatre were also troubled by the behaviour of actors. It must be stressed first that Johnson’s attachments to the theatre were varied and numerous. He had of course edited the works of Shakespeare, and in his commentary proved to be a critic who rejected neo-classical rules and understood how plays worked for live audiences. He counted actors and playwrights among his friends, notably David Garrick, Arthur Murphy and Tom Davies, spoke at times affectionately of particular actresses and enjoyed going to plays. He was too poor to go often, and later weak eyesight and hearing made it less worth his while. Even so, when late in life he received visits from Mrs Siddons and her brother John Kemble, he gallantly declared he would ‘hobble out to the theatre’ when she next played Queen Katherine in *Henry VIII* (*Life*, IV, 242). Years before that, in 1736, he had written against theatre censorship and the Licensing Act, and also, of course, composed a play himself, knowing it was a good way to make money, though, like many another writer, he fought with the theatre people putting it on, in his case Garrick.

But as Boswell points out early in the *Life*, Johnson’s estimate of actors was low and remained so – unreasonably, Boswell suggests, since the theatre became over the years more respectable (I, 167-8). Johnson is often recorded making disparaging remarks about ‘players’, and never more so than in the *Life of Savage*. There Johnson records the generosity shown to Savage by the actor Wilks, who, he remarks, was:

a man who, whatever were his abilities or skill as an actor, deserves at least to be remembered for his virtues, which are not often to be found in the world, and perhaps less often in his profession than in others. To be humane, generous, and candid, is a very high degree of merit in any case; but those qualities deserve still greater praise, when they are found in that condition which makes almost every other man, for whatever reason, contemptuous, insolent, petulant, selfish and brutal.<sup>20</sup>

When making critical remarks on Garrick's behaviour he finds a different set of damning adjectives. One target is the superficial pretence of acting, as when he ridicules Garrick as 'a fellow who claps a hump on his back, and a lump on his leg, and cries "I am Richard the Third"'? Nay, sir, a ballad-singer is a higher man' (*Life*, III, 184). The idea of an actor claiming to 'become' a character he was playing irritated Johnson, and in his last years he pointedly asked Kemble: 'Are you Sir, one of those enthusiasts who believe yourself transformed into the very character you represent?' (*Life*, IV, 243) On other occasions, it was the actor's physical performance that riled him. When in 1749 Garrick agreed to stage *Irene* at last, Johnson rejected Garrick's proposed changes, indignantly telling the mediator, the Reverend Dr Taylor: 'Sir ... the fellow wants me to make Mahomet run mad, that he may have an opportunity of tossing his hands and kicking his heels' (*Life*, I, 196). As Garrick aged, Johnson claimed he looked 'much older than he is', and put this down to his face being 'never at rest': 'such an eternal, fatiguing play of the muscles must wear out a man's face before its real time,'<sup>21</sup> another remark redolent with Johnson's disgust at the actor's using the body to entertain. And the conflicting versions of Garrick's becoming a member of the Club reveal it once again. Garrick arrogantly assumed that it was up to him, Garrick, whether or not to join the Club; Boswell allowed, as accurate, accounts of Johnson's momentary displeasure, but warmly disputed Sir John Hawkins's version, which has Johnson complaining of Garrick, 'he will disturb us by his buffoonery', as if he could never stop acting. Boswell also rejected Mrs Thrale's report which has Johnson threatening to blackball him, so he might sit 'unelbow'd by a gamester, pimp or player' (*Life*, I, 481). Here Johnson gives the conventional damaging low life associations of the player another airing. However, Garrick was eventually elected as the sixth new member.

Johnson's remarks about Garrick are coloured by strong feeling. Irritation with him springs up at times when Johnson observes greater respect being given to 'the slighter, though perhaps more amusing talents' of the actor than to the 'dignity of literature'. When defending Garrick from the charge of including 'mean and gross flattery' of the Queen in his revision of a play, Boswell has Johnson say:

And as to meanness (rising into warmth) how is it mean in a player – a showman – a fellow who exhibits himself for a shilling, to flatter his queen? (*Life*, II, 234)

Even this defence of Garrick is overtaken by his distaste for a profession he feels to be humiliating and corrupting. Johnson would praise Garrick more wholeheartedly for raising the status of his profession, and when Garrick was charged with being over-assuming, Johnson hit back by declaring that the wonder was he assumed so little, given, it is understood, his great achievements. Boswell records a telling comment on the origin of the intensity of Johnson's feelings:

Sir Joshua Reynolds observed, with great truth, that Johnson considered Garrick to be as it were his *property*. He would allow no man either to blame or to praise Garrick in his presence, without contradicting him (*Life*, III, 312).

Perhaps Johnson's feelings for Garrick were contradictory because he had known him for so long, the pair of them initially leading parallel lives, as talented young men of Lichfield making their way in the world, with the younger Garrick winning fame and wealth much earlier than Johnson, and appearing to give himself airs and show off, not only on stage. But in his eulogy of Garrick in the *Life of Edmund Smith*, he wrote that Garrick's death 'eclipsed the gaiety of nations', provoking the jealous Boswell to bridle at the phrase (*Life*, IV, 387-8). Johnson loved Garrick, and wept openly at his funeral.

Underneath the ambivalence of Johnson's attitude to Garrick we may detect that inconsistency of attitude shared by many of his contemporaries.<sup>22</sup> In Johnson's reactions there is a sense of impropriety at a life led before an unselected public, performing to please those whose judgment you despise, and of the humiliations that attend it; 'a player – a showman – a fellow who exhibits himself for a shilling'. And this is all the more distressing when it is happening to someone you love and whose abilities you admire.

It is, I think, helpful here to compare Johnson's view of the position of the actor with that of the writer, as figures who in their different ways come before the public. In his *Life of Congreve*, Johnson writes of Congreve's reaction to the failure of his comedy *The Way of the World*,

which, though as he hints in his dedication, it was written with great labour and much thought, was received with so little favour, that, being in a high degree offended and disgusted, he resolved to commit his quiet and his fame no more to the caprices of an audience.

From this time his life ceased to be publick (*Lives*, III, 69).

Johnson goes on to condemn Congreve's giving up writing, and the snobbery in his wish to be considered 'rather as a man of fashion than of wit'. He records that early in the century when Voltaire visited him, Congreve disgusted Voltaire 'by the despicable foppery of desiring to be considered not as an author, but as a gentleman' (*Lives*, III, 70). Nevertheless, as is suggested by the sharp language in the Prologue Johnson composed for Goldsmith's *The Good Natured Man* (1768), he might well have had sympathy with Congreve's giving up writing for the stage in particular. In the Prologue, Johnson likens the political candidate in an election year to the playwright at his first night. Both are at the mercy of 'loud rabbles' who 'vent their rage / As mongrels bay the lion in the cage.' He imagines how the playwright's enemies have been saving up their spite for the occasion:

Their schemes of spite the poet's foes dismiss,  
Till that glad night when all that hate may hiss. ...  
This night, our wit, the pert apprentice cries,  
Lies at my feet, I hiss him and he dies.

Who is the playwright's audience? They are 'the poet's foes', 'loud rabbles', the 'pert apprentice'. This is what was meant by a 'public' life, and the word 'public' cannot help but remind us of Shakespeare's sonnet CXI, beginning 'O for my sake do you with fortune chide', where the poet, with some similarity of circumstances, complains that fortune

did not better for my life provide  
Than public means which public manners breeds.  
Thence comes it that my name receives a brand,  
And almost thence my nature is subdu'd  
To what it works in, like the dyer's hand.

There is no doubt that in the Prologue the direct public humiliation which might attend a writer turned playwright is keenly felt by Johnson; but, in general, Johnson is the professional writer, taking criticism on his chin, and contemptuous of gentlemanly anxieties about the vulgarity of publishing. Sheridan, in contrast, who was more socially ambitious and whose social position was less secure, as a parliamentarian who derived his income from the theatre, may well have been uneasy about publishing. In *The School for Scandal*, one of the foolish scandal-mongers is a would-be poet, Sir Benjamin Backbite. When asked why he doesn't publish, he defends himself by saying: 'tis very vulgar to print' (II.ii. 263). One editor of the play (Bateson) thought Backbite, in 1777, 'out of date with his convenient excuse'. Nevertheless the attitude persisted. Thomas Gray refused payment for the 'Elegy', and, according to Gosse, 'had a quixotic notion that it was beneath a gentleman to take money from a bookseller'.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps Sheridan sympathised with this view. There is some evidence that he believed gentlemen did not put their poems before the public.<sup>24</sup> Though he talked and wrote constantly of preparing his plays for the press, he never did so. In 1814, in a letter to his wife, occasioned by the unauthorised appearance in a newspaper of his poem known as 'The Portrait' (dedicated to his mistress, Mrs Crewe), he claimed:

'I never yet own'd or allow'd the printing of anything Plays Poems or speeches but two things to both of which I put my name – viz. The Critic and a political pamphlet on the affairs of India ... this Winter I am determin'd to give my friend Rogers full Power to put together and publish all my Scrib[b]lings (*Letters*, III, 202).

It is hard to say whether Sheridan was troubled by delicacy at putting work before the public or whether the lack of publication is simply to be explained by his notorious failure to finish anything. As he wrote to Garrick: 'What I write in a hurry I always feel to be not worth reading, and what I take pains with, I am sure never to finish' (*Letters*, I, 122).

If, by the end of the eighteenth century, fastidiousness about publishing was becoming rare, prejudice against actors, even in the hearts of those who admired their art intensely, was still widespread. Perhaps it has not disappeared altogether today. In spite of the efforts of Garrick and Siddons, and after two hundred years of actors winning increasing respectability and acceptance, there remains even now feeling against public performers – film stars now perhaps more than

stage actors – aroused by the perceived triviality of their efforts and by resentment at the great rewards they receive for them.

In his magisterial work, *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith, another member of Johnson's Club, acknowledges the ambivalence I have been emphasising and interprets it in economic terms:

There are some very agreeable and beautiful talents of which the possession commands a certain sort of admiration; but of which the exercise for the sake of gain is considered, whether from reason or prejudice, as a sort of publick prostitution ... The exorbitant rewards of players, opera-singers, opera-dancers, &c., are founded on those two principles; the rarity and beauty of the talents, and the discredit of employing them in this manner.<sup>25</sup>

Audiences required an actor or singer to expose himself to public humiliation, and were ready to pay a high price for the guilty pleasure.

Whether audiences today feel any embarrassment or guilt about the pleasure they receive from those celebrities they pay to entertain them is hard to say: in the current media climate it is not a matter frequently discussed. But it appears true that there was a greater consciousness of such emotions in the eighteenth century, certainly among the more delicate spirits such as Johnson and Sheridan, and earlier, Shakespeare. They sensed that the dignity or modesty of the player who appears, however eagerly, before the public had been violated. The theatre may have shone as an 'ornament of the metropolis' but it aroused in some painfully mixed feelings.

## Notes

- 1 W. Fraser Rae, *Sheridan, A Biography*, 2 v. (London: Richard Bentley and Sons, 1896), p. 290.
- 2 S. S. Kenny, 'The Publication of Plays', in *The London Theatre World 1660-1800*, ed. Robert D. Hume (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), p.310.
- 3 *Diaries and Letters of Mme D'Arblay (1778-1840)*, as edited by her niece Charlotte Barrett; ed. Austin Dobson, 6 v. (London: Macmillan, 1904-5), I, 149.
- 4 Marc Baer, *Theatre and Disorder in Late Georgian London* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 195.
- 5 W. C. Hazlitt, 'On Actors and Acting' [*Examiner*, January 5, 1817] in *Hazlitt on Theatre*, William Archer and Robert Lowe eds., 1895 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1959), p. 113.
- 6 *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, rev. L. F. Powell 6 v. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935-50), II. 169-70, hereafter cited in the text as *Life*.
- 7 Richard Phillips in 'The Picture of London' wrote of the Drury Lane Theatre, rebuilt in 1811 after the fire of 1809: 'This theatre is altogether a masterpiece of art, and an ornament of the metropolis'. Qtd. in *Jane Austen's Letters*, ed. Deirdre le Fay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 608.
- 8 *Thraliana, The Diary of Mrs Hester Lynch Thrale (Later Mrs Piozzi)*, ed. Katherine C. Balderston, 2 v. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1942), II, 1052.
- 9 *The Letters of Richard Brinsley Sheridan*, ed. Cecil Price, 3 v. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), III, 294; hereafter cited in the text as *Letters*.
- 10 *Further Memoirs of the Whig Part* (London 1816), p. 240, qtd. in Fintan O'Toole, *Traitor's Kiss: The Life of Richard Brinsley Sheridan* (London: Granta Books, 1998), p. 25.
- 11 Thomas Moore, *Memoirs of the Life of the Right Honourable Richard Brinsley Sheridan*, 2 v. (London, 5th ed, 1827), I, 303.
- 12 From a satirical essay on his friend by Richard Tickell, qtd. in Cecil Price, *The Dramatic Works of Richard Brinsley Sheridan*, 2 v. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), I, 20; hereafter cited in the text as *Works*.



- 13 He was nevertheless concerned about the welfare of actors, for instance when Drury Lane burnt down in 1794. In 1802 he argued before the Court of Chancery that the first claim on the theatre's revenues should be the actors': see James Morwood, *The Life and Works of Richard Brinsley Sheridan* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1985), ch. 6.
- 14 *'In the Wind's Eye': Byron's Letters and Journals*, v. 9, 1821-1822, ed. Leslie A. Marchand (London, John Murray, 1979), p. 32.
- 15 John Loftis, 'Political and Social Thought' in *London Theatre World*, p. 284.
- 16 The lack of love scenes in *The School for Scandal* has been attributed to Sheridan's *reshaping* the role of Maria to suit Pricilla Hopkins, who replaced Mary Robinson, when she declined the part because she was pregnant. Hopkins was judged not to have been a success.
- 17 Philip H. Highfill, 'Performers and Performing' in *London Theatre World*, p.144.
- 18 An anecdote survives of Sheridan rehearsing a particular passage (III.i. 235-7): 'No, no that won't do at all. It mustn't be *pettish*. That's shallow—shallow. You must go up stage with, "You are just what my cousin Sophy said what you would be," and then turn and sweep down on him like a volcano. "You are a great bear to abuse my relations! How *dare* you abuse my relations!"' (*Works*, I, 393)
- 19 Moore, I, 43.
- 20 *The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets*, introduction and notes by Roger Lonsdale, 4 v. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), III,127; hereafter cited in the text as *Lives*.
- 21 *Diaries and Letters of Mme D'Arblay*, I, 65.
- 22 Highfill, p. 145.
- 23 H.M. Paull, *Literary Ethics: A Study of the Growth of Literary Conscience* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1928), p.329.
- 24 See *An Ode to Scandal, together with A Portrait by R. B. Sheridan*, ed. R. Compton Rhodes (Oxford, Blackwell, 1927).
- 25 Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p. 124.



## **SEMINAR PAPERS**



## About the Contributors

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# Boswell's and Reynolds's Conflicting Diagnoses and the Nineteenth-Century Genre Paintings of Dr Johnson

Daniel Vuillermin

In my first talk to the Johnson Society in 2004, I considered two of Sir Joshua Reynolds's portraits of Dr Johnson: the first painted in 1756–57,<sup>1</sup> and the other 1762?–69 (commonly known as 'Dr Johnson Arguing').<sup>2</sup> The first of these, Reynolds's earliest portrait of Johnson, was painted soon after the publication of the first edition of the *Dictionary*, and shows Johnson at work at a writing table, pausing in thought. Despite the date of this painting, it should not be thought that this is Johnson at work on his *Dictionary*. Nor is it a snapshot of Johnson while writing his essays or journalism. As Boswell tells us, it is an imaginary scene:

Posterity will be astonished when they are told, upon the authority of Johnson himself, that many of these discourses, which we suppose had been laboured with all the slow attention of literary leisure, were written in haste as the moment pressed, without even being read over by him before they were printed.<sup>3</sup>

Johnson himself testifies to his methods when writing *Lives of the Poets*, in one of his prayers:

I wrote in the usual way, dilatorily and hastily, unwilling to work, and working with vigour and haste.<sup>4</sup>

It should not concern us that the scene depicted in this portrait is fictitious, as Reynolds's portraits of Johnson are, above all else, concerned with portraying the *mind* of Johnson. I contend that, in this particular painting, it is not so much Johnson's contemplative gaze that is most telling, but rather the depiction of his hands; in his right hand is a quill poised, showing 'a mind which was ... always ready for use',<sup>5</sup> or as Boswell describes it, that 'peculiar promptitude of mind' with which Johnson was endowed. His left hand clenches several sheets of paper; this represents not the attempt to grasp at an idea or an apt expression, but rather shows the force and intensity which Johnson brought to 'every occasion, and in every company' (*Life*, 145).

As I have shown previously, this painting was instrumental in the writing and publication of the *Life of Johnson*; Boswell used this particular portrait, to the exclusion of all others by Reynolds and other artists, as his controlling image of Johnson. He not only commissioned an engraving of it for the frontispiece of the book, which is itself another story to tell, but also used the portrait to describe his first meeting with Johnson in Tom Davies's back parlour. Describing this latter scene, he writes:

I found that I had a very perfect idea of Johnson's figure, from the portrait of him by Sir Joshua Reynolds soon after he published his Dictionary, in the attitude of sitting in his easy chair in deep meditation, which was the first picture his friend did for him, which Sir Joshua very kindly presented to me, and from which an engraving has been made for this work (*Life*, 277).

However, we know from Boswell's journals, discovered early last century, that his first impressions of Johnson were very different from those conveyed to him by Reynolds's portrait. In the journal, Boswell notes that Johnson is a man of:

... the most dreadful appearance. He is a very big man, is troubled with sore eyes, the palsy, and the King's evil. He is very slovenly in dress and speaks with a most uncouth voice.<sup>6</sup>

This is not a case of augmenting the text by means of *ekphrasis*, but constitutes the foundational image in Boswell's making of Dr Johnson.

The twentieth century was for Johnson a veritable age of pathology and this is evinced in studies by Bernard Bronson and Katherine Balderston, and continues to this day in the journal *The Age of Johnson*. One portrait in particular, painted 1762?-69, has captured the attention of contemporary critics and is often cited as exemplifying one or more of Johnson's physical and/or psychological conditions. For Boswell, it was the 1756-57 portrait that represented his version of Johnson; for post-Freudian audiences it was Reynolds's second portrait that represents the Johnson of our age. This is reflected in the use of this image in various publications on Johnson, for example, Kai Kin Yung's catalogue for the bicentenary of Johnson's death and more recently the catalogue of an exhibition at Gough Square, *The Tyranny of Treatment: Samuel Johnson, His Friends and Georgian Medicine*.<sup>7</sup> The subject matter of this portrait, however, remains contested.



I will not attempt to further speculate on Johnson's condition as it is perhaps represented in this painting. Rather, I want now to show the foundations of this diagnostic uncertainty in the contestation between Reynolds and Boswell, who both offered different opinions or diagnoses, if you will, of Johnson's peculiar gestures. In the *Tour to the Hebrides*, following a passage on Johnson's character, Boswell describes Johnson's physicality, with a particular focus on his ailments:

His person was large, robust, I may say approaching to the gigantick, and grown unwieldy from corpulency. His countenance was naturally of the cast of an ancient statue, but somewhat disfigured by the scars of that evil, which, it was formerly imagined, the royal touch could cure. He was now in his sixty-fourth year, and was become a little dull of hearing. His sight had always been somewhat weak; yet, so much does mind govern, and even supply the deficiency of organs, that his perceptions were uncommonly quick and accurate. His head, and sometimes also his body, shook with a kind of motion like the effect of a palsy: he appeared to be frequently disturbed by cramps, or convulsive contractions, of the nature of that distemper called St Vitus's dance.<sup>8</sup>

St Vitus's Dance, or chorea as it is now known, is a movement disorder that is most commonly associated with Huntington's disease. In the *Life*, Boswell makes use of Sydenham's definition of the condition to support his diagnosis of Johnson:

This disorder [St Vitus's Dance] is a kind of convulsion. It manifests itself by halting or unsteadiness of one of the legs, which the patient draws after him like an idiot [sic]. If the hand of the same side be applied to the breast, or any other part of the body, he cannot keep it a moment in the same posture, but it will be drawn into a different one by a convulsion, notwithstanding all his efforts to the contrary (*Life*, 105).

Boswell's conjecture that these movements were simply a physical disorder were countered by Reynolds, who writes:

Those motions or tricks of Dr Johnson are improperly called convulsions. He could sit motionless, when he was told so to do, as well as any other man; my opinion is that it proceeded from a habit which he had indulged himself in, of accompanying his thoughts with certain untoward actions, and those actions always appeared to me as if they were meant to reprobate some part of his past conduct. When ever he was not engaged in conversation, such thoughts were

sure to rush into his mind; and, for this reason, any company, any employment whatever, he preferred to being alone. The great business of his life (he said) was to escape from himself; this disposition he considered as the disease of his mind, which nothing cured but company (*Life*, 105).

Reynolds's account is suggestive, in modern terms, of a psychosomatic disorder. Yet Boswell, who was always determined to deem himself the most faithful to Johnson's memory, in a later edition of the *Tour to the Hebrides*, responded to Reynolds by reinforcing his own argument. As an addendum, he writes:

Such they appeared to me: but since the first edition, Sir Joshua Reynolds has observed to me, 'that Dr Johnson's extraordinary gestures were only habits, in which he indulged himself at certain times. When in company, where he was not free, or when engaged earnestly in conversation, he never gave way to such habits, which proves that they were not involuntary.' I still however think, that these gestures were involuntary; for surely had not that been the case, he would have restrained them in the publick streets (*Tour*, 257).

It is on this point – whether Johnson's gesticulations were voluntary or involuntary – that Boswell and Reynolds differ. Yet it is worthwhile to consider that Boswell and Reynolds were perhaps both right; that Johnson did indeed exhibit involuntary tics and was also subject, in particular circumstances, to a more complex psychological condition that was manifested physically.

However, my interest is not just to compare Boswell's and Reynolds's diagnoses, but also to show how they differed in their representations of Johnson's ailment. For Boswell, this condition was documented according to his own diagnosis, predicated by his own notions as a biographer that he should most faithfully relate the minute particulars of Johnson's character. In one of the earliest physical descriptions of Johnson in the *Life*, Boswell writes:

He wore his hair, which was straight and stiff, and separated behind: and he often had, seemingly, convulsive starts and odd gesticulations, which tended to excite at once surprise and ridicule (*Life*, 68).

And later:

From Mr Garrick's account he did not appear to have been profoundly revered by his pupils. His oddities of manner, and uncouth gesticulations, could not but be the subject of merriment to them ... (*Life*, 71).

Another well-known anecdote from Boswell concerns William Hogarth's seeing Johnson, on a visit to the home of their mutual friend, the novelist and printer Samuel Richardson:

While he [Hogarth] was talking, he perceived a person standing at a window in the room, shaking his head, and rolling himself about in a strange ridiculous manner. He concluded that he was an ideot [sic], whom his relations had put under the care of Mr Richardson, as a very good man (*Life*, 107).

Each of the anecdotes about Johnson's condition that Boswell recounts in the *Life* concludes with others reacting with ridicule, or as Alexander Pope describes in a letter (a second-hand account, as he never met Johnson), that Johnson had an 'infirmity of the convulsive kind ... [which made] him a sad Spectacle'. Boswell does little to confer any dignity on Johnson's condition (*Life*, 105).

Turning once more to Reynolds's 1762?–69 portrait, we see Johnson recast in a classical guise. The most notable allusion is to the great Roman orator, Cicero. He is depicted as wearing a typical eighteenth-century collared shirt, combined with a cloak reminiscent of classical garb. The painting is emblematic of Reynolds's notion of the 'Grand Manner': a style that brings together portraiture and history painting, and that does not seek to copy nature but rather to create an ideal form, drawing on classical art and Renaissance masters. This style is also apparent in Johnson's statuesque pose, which again, draws upon these classical sculptures, and which reference is later echoed by Boswell, who writes in the *Tour* that Johnson's 'countenance was naturally of the cast of an ancient statue' (*Tour*, 256).

This refiguring, by way of an ancient statue, has the result of dignifying Johnson's condition. This effect was affirmed by Johnson, who wrote to Reynolds in a letter of July 1771:

When I came to Lichfield, I found that my portrait had been much visited, and much admired. Every man has a lurking wish to appear considerable in his native place; and I was pleased with the dignity conferred by such a testimony of your regard (*Life*, 454).

However, neither Reynolds's portraits nor his representation of Johnson's condition was to have an enduring influence on the image of Johnson throughout the nineteenth century. The 'dignity conferred' upon Johnson by Reynolds was displaced for later audiences by Bos-

well's account in the *Life*, which, in its overemphasis, had the effect of transforming Johnson into something akin to a monster. This is best exemplified in Macaulay's (in)famous review in the *Edinburgh Review or Critical Journal* (August–December 1831) of Croker's edition of the *Life*, where he says of Johnson:

From nature, he had received an uncouth figure, a diseased constitution, and an irritable temper ... (25)

We see the eyes and mouth moving with convulsive twitches; we see the heavy form rolling, we hear it puffing; and then comes the 'Why, sir!' and the 'What then, sir?' and the 'No, sir;' and the 'You don't see your way through the question, sir!' (38)

Every thing about him, his coat, his wig, his figure, his face, his scrofula, his St. Vitus's dance, his rolling walk, his blinking eye, the outward signs which too clearly marked his approbation of his dinner, his insatiable appetite for fish-sauce and veal-pie with plums, his inextinguishable thirst for tea, his trick of touching the posts as he walked, his mysterious practice of treasuring up scraps of orange-peel, his morning slumbers, his midnight disputations, his contortions, his mutterings, his gruntings, his puffings, his vigorous, acute and ready eloquence, his sarcastic wit, his vehemence, his insolence, his fits of tempestuous rage, his queer inmates, old Mr. Levett and blind Mrs. Williams, the cat Hodgé and the negro Frank, all are as familiar to us as the objects by which we have been surrounded from childhood (20).

These images are clearly as 'familiar' as they are because of a lifetime of reading Boswell.

Although there continued to be various derivations of Reynolds's portraits in the form of paintings, lithographs, etchings, mezzotints, marble busts and statues, by the mid-nineteenth century there was a decisive break from the influence of Reynolds and portraiture altogether. Johnson, in a new series of paintings, emerged in the most popular style of the time: genre painting. These scenes from the supposed everyday life of Johnson were drawn, predictably, from anecdotes in Boswell's *Life*, and bore such titles as *Dr Johnson Perusing the Manuscript of The Vicar of Wakefield* (1843), *Dr Johnson in the Ante Room of Lord Chesterfield* (1845), *Dr Johnson at Tea at Mrs Thrale's with Goldsmith* (1845), *Johnson at Cave's* (1854), *Before Dinner at Boswell's Lodging in Bond Street 1769* (1868) and *Dr Johnson's Tardy Gallantry* (1886).

The painters of these works shunned portraiture, which had dominated English painting since the mid-eighteenth century, to instead draw upon earlier native traditions, citing Hogarth and the Scottish artist David Wilkie as their key influences. From c.1843 to c.1886 more than twenty paintings of Johnson were exhibited at the Royal Academy. The first major proponent of this movement was the artist Edward Matthew Ward, who was born in 1816, and who died a suicide in 1879 after a series of illnesses and depression. Ward was part of a group of artists known as ‘The Clique’, founded by Richard Dadd (who also committed suicide, after killing his father) in the late 1830s, members of which included Augustus Egg, Alfred Elmore, Henry Nelson O’Neil, John Phillip and William Powell Frith, another major painter of Johnson. Although these artists were prominent members of the Royal Academy, the Clique rejected academic art and, in particular, the ideals of Reynolds as expounded in his *Discourses on Art* (1769–90).

Ward’s second painting of Johnson, exhibited in 1845 at the Royal Academy, titled *Johnson Waiting in the Ante Room of Lord Chesterfield*,<sup>9</sup> earned him great acclaim, and this painting was, indeed, seminal in this new series of paintings of Johnson. Although it is not clear whether or not Johnson actually did visit Chesterfield, this painting derives from a Boswell anecdote:

Lord Chesterfield, to whom Johnson had paid the high compliment of addressing to his Lordship the *Plan* of his *Dictionary*, had behaved to him in such a manner as to excite his contempt and indignation. The world has been for many years amused with a story confidently told, and as confidently repeated with additional circumstances, that a sudden disgust was taken by Johnson upon occasion of his having been one day kept long in waiting in his Lordship’s antechamber, for which the reason assigned was, that he had company with him; and that at last, when the door opened, out walked Colley Cibber; and that Johnson was so violently provoked when he found for whom he had been so long excluded, that he went away in a passion, and never would return (*Life*, 181).

Johnson, as we know, ultimately exacted his revenge in his famous letter to Chesterfield and, of course, his derisive definition of ‘Patron’ in the *Dictionary*: ‘One who countenances, supports or protects. Commonly a wretch who supports with insolence, and is paid with flattery.’<sup>10</sup>

Ward's painting is divided into three main parts. The left flank shows the disgruntled Johnson with a cast of other wearied claimants. This is juxtaposed with the right flank, showing a frivolous group featuring Colley Cibber, the popular writer of plays such as *Love Makes a Man* (1700) and *She Would and She Would Not* (1702), as they leave Chesterfield's private chamber, which serves as the background of this scene. Significantly, the depiction of Johnson in this painting does not stem from Reynolds's portraits, but rather a portrait by James Barry painted c.1778–80.<sup>11</sup>

This portrait was part of Barry's series of paintings titled *The Progress of Human Culture and Knowledge*, a permanent exhibition in the Great Room at the Royal Society. There is a congruity in Ward's use of the Barry portrait as a direct influence on his critique of patronage, in that Barry is one of the first English artists who was determined to create art according to his own principles rather than those of his patrons. This painting was instrumental in the refiguration of Johnson, where he becomes representative of the emerging values of the age typified by patriotism, historical yearnings and issues of morality, albeit in a Boswellian guise.

The figuring of such values through the image of Johnson is also exemplified in a painting by Eyre Crowe, titled *Johnson Doing Penance at Uttoxeter*, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1869 and currently held at Gough Square. This painting also draws on a popular story from the *Life*, given in Johnson's words:

Once, indeed, I was disobedient; I refused to attend my father 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 (*Life*, 1357).

This painting shows Johnson standing, head bowed, in the bustling Uttoxeter market square. In this painting Johnson is represented as an idealised Christian figure of guilt and repentance, a dominant theme of Johnson's own prayers, where he writes:

Pardon my sins; remove the impediments that hinder my obedience; enable me to shake off sloth, and to redeem the time misspent in



Adrian Stokes (1854–1935), *Johnson's 'Penance' in Uttoxeter Market, c.1920.*

idleness and sin, by a diligent application of the days yet remaining, to the duties which Thy providence shall allot me. O God, grant me Thy HOLY SPIRIT, that I may repent and amend my life; grant me contrition, grant me resolution, for the sake of JESUS CHRIST ... O God; for His sake, O God, pardon and receive me (*Prayers*, 31).

Yet by contrast, twentieth-century interpretations of this incident have argued that it is not so much a great act of Christian contrition, but rather shows, as Hudson writes, a 'figure tormented by family-induced guilt, religious doubts and congenital melancholia. Curiously detached from his era and place, he stands for mental suffering, human courage and literary greatness at all times.'<sup>12</sup> By this view, Hudson continues, Johnson does not hang his head as a great Christian but as the "Johnson Agonistes" favoured in our post-Romantic and Freudian age'.

It is important to consider the role of these paintings, in relationship to Macaulay's review, in the subsequent refiguring of Johnson. In the nineteenth century Johnson became not only a conduit for many

of the prevailing ideas and concerns, but also, through these paintings, he came to be an embodiment of the notion of 'Englishness'. What is more, these paintings demonstrate how Boswell's *Life of Johnson* had come to shape the popular representation of Johnson, in ways that endured until the mid-twentieth century when scholars such as Donald Greene sought to break down the Boswellian image of Johnson, and to recover or, indeed, resurrect both the historical Johnson and Johnson the writer. I don't believe these paintings are, in themselves, great works of art; to modern eyes they are unsophisticated, quaint and perhaps too didactic. However, what these paintings can offer, once we move away from biographical interpretations, is not just (as Hudson says) Johnson's 'importance in cultural history, particularly in connection with his role in fashionable areas of print culture, gender studies, and post-colonialism'(Hudson, 1), but also how Johnsonian studies can show decisive epistemological shifts in criticism and the broader history of ideas.



## Notes

- 1 This painting can be viewed at the National Portrait Gallery website: <http://www.npg.org.uk/> (search: Samuel Johnson)
- 2 This painting can be viewed at the National Trust Photo Library website: <http://www.ntpl.org.uk> (search: Samuel Johnson)
- 3 James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 145.
- 4 Samuel Johnson, *Prayers and Meditations* (London: T. Cadell, 1785), 190.
- 5 C. R. Leslie and T. Taylor, *Life and Times of Sir Joshua Reynolds* (London: John Murray, 1865), 454.
- 6 James Boswell, *London Journal, 1762–63: Now First Published from the Original Manuscript*, ed. Frederick A. Pottle (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1950), 260.
- 7 Kai Kin Yung, *Samuel Johnson, 1709-84: A Bicentenary Exhibition* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1984) and Natasha McEnroe and Robin Simon, ed., *The Tyranny of Treatment: Samuel Johnson, His Friends and Georgian Medicine* (London: The British Art Journal, 2003).
- 8 James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson LL.D. including a Tour to the Hebrides*, 5 v. (London: John Murray, 1831), 2:256
- 9 This painting can be viewed at Tate Online <http://www.tate.org.uk> (search: Samuel Johnson Chesterfield). A copy of this original painting is held at The Donald and Mary Hyde Collection of Dr. Samuel Johnson at the Houghton Library, Harvard University.
- 10 Jack Lynch, ed., *Samuel Johnson's Dictionary: Selections from the 1755 Work that Defined the English Language* (London: Atlantic Books, 2004), 382.
- 11 This painting can be viewed at the National Portrait Gallery website: <http://www.npg.org.uk/> (search: Samuel Johnson James Barry)
- 12 Nicholas Hudson, *Samuel Johnson and the Making of Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1.



# Johnson and Metaphor

Barrie Sheppard

The idea for this paper began with a conversation with the late Rusi Khan some five or six years ago. Recalling a comment he had made in a tutorial many years before about Johnson's objection to Shakespeare's pie metaphor in the hollow crown speech in *Richard II*, I said to him that I was interested in writing on the subject of Johnson and metaphor. Rusi nodded in approval, and the conversation developed along lines that included the fundamental role that metaphor plays in language generally, not just in literature. Hence this paper, which I would like to dedicate to Rusi's memory.

Metaphor is fundamental to language generally, not just to literary language. It facilitates the construction of conceptual language systems that enable us to make sense of our experience.

One example will suffice to demonstrate this. The language we use to structure our experience of time draws, metaphorically, on the language of the categories of movement and space. We say, for example, that 'time passes', that it can be 'long' or 'short', that it 'marches on'. Time can be 'on the move', it can 'fly', it can 'drag', it can 'creep in a petty pace'. One event, we say, is either 'before' or 'after' another: 'before' and 'after' being space words. Adverbial phrases of time begin with prepositions: e.g., 'at' this point in time, 'in' the future, 'in' the past, 'over' time, 'down the track', and so on. We even evoke space when we indicate time past and future by gesture: we point to the future in front of ourselves, and behind for the past. Of course, with the exception of Macbeth's metaphor of time creeping at a petty pace, and the cliché 'down the track', all of the metaphors I have cited are now dead, and so are read as literal descriptions, but they began their lives as metaphors nonetheless.

I might suggest here in passing that this fact, that we use literally words originally drawn, metaphorically, from the language of space and movement, is why so much confusion and mystery bedevils our attempts to define time.

The proliferation of dead metaphors in our language, illustrated here in terms of the concept of time, is probably what Ralph Waldo

Emerson meant when he said that language was fossilised poetry. Further, we might also suggest that this same fact is implicit in Johnson's etymological method in the *Dictionary*. He began many of his definitions with the word's etymological roots, the origins of the words, what he called their 'radical primitives'; in other words, the literal roots from which metaphorical branches grew. As Henry Hitchens has put it, 'Johnson saw that the etymology of every word, however commonplace the word itself, contains the gleam of an illustrious past. Etymology is forever fascinating because it revives the poetry of the everyday'.<sup>1</sup>

My concern in this paper will be with the literary use of metaphor. I will begin with some examples of metaphor from contemporary Australian poetry, then give an analysis of the grammar, or logic, of the concept of metaphor, drawing on Johnson's own definitions. This will lead on to Johnson's criticism of the conceits of the Metaphysical poets, in particular Cowley and Donne, and his criticism of Shakespeare's language, in light of Johnson's own Augustan, neo-classical style. And I will conclude with an examination of a couplet from *The Vanity of Human Wishes* in light of his criticism of Shakespeare.

First, to some contemporary examples. In his prose poem, 'In the Mallee', the Australian poet Robert Gray compares a flock of birds, landing and rising from the ground across a mallee landscape, with a basketball bouncing in slow motion. Here are the lines:

... after this, I decide  
to head back  
for the road, which is over where birds slowly  
rise and settle in a flock, the black  
basketball's tumbling, slow-  
motion bounce. Those are eagles ...<sup>2</sup>

'...where birds slowly/rise and settle in a flock, the black/ basketball's tumbling, slow-/motion bounce.' The best we can say of the metaphor here is that it is strained. No flock of birds flies in a fixed volume-shape; nor, if it did, would the flock fly in the shape of a sphere; and neither would its rise and fall be symmetrical, with equal angles of descent and rise, as is the case of a bouncing ball.

In 'A Half Remembered Visit', the late Phillip Hodgins describes a room in a derelict homestead this way:

One room was a puzzle of broken harnesses, bridles, saddles, cruppers and girth straps, stiff and heavy with the smell of themselves and long-gone horses.<sup>3</sup>

The word ‘puzzle’ in ‘One room was a puzzle’ has both a literal and metaphorical reference. Literally, it raises the question as to why these items of harness should have been left, and left inside the house, the answer, in fact, being suggested in the previous lines that they may have been things the family couldn’t bring itself to throw out. Metaphorically, *puzzle* creates an image of a jigsaw puzzle of the bits and pieces of harness, which, when assembled, create a picture of part of homestead life, long gone.

Hodgins’ metaphor of the jigsaw puzzle works; Gray’s bouncing basketball doesn’t.

Boswell, in the *Life of Johnson*, records Johnson commenting on the value of metaphor. It is, says Johnson, a ‘great excellence when used with propriety, for it gives you two ideas for one – conveys the meaning more luminously, and generally with a perception of delight’ (19 Sept. 1777). The ‘propriety’ of a metaphor Johnson judges according to how it conforms to reason, and decorum; but more of that later. Hodgins’ jigsaw metaphor conforms to reason, and gives delight; Gray’s bouncing basketball does not.

In the *Dictionary*, Johnson defines *metaphor* as ‘The application of a word to a use which in its original import, it cannot be put.’ This use of the word is the figurative or non-literal use of the image term in the metaphor. I should say at this stage that Johnson also defines the difference between simile and metaphor: a metaphor is a ‘simile comprised in a word’. It is clear that for him the logic of the concept of the metaphor and of the simile is the same. I think he is right. Their difference lies in their linguistic form, and in the effects that flow from that difference.

Earlier, I talked of the logic, or grammar, of the metaphor. Well, what is that logic? As Johnson’s definition indicates, a metaphor (and a simile) consists of two terms: the first is the subject or literal term – the flock of birds, and the scattered items in the room of the old homestead, in the examples I have given above. And the second term is the figure or comparison term; that is, what the subject is likened to, compared or associated with – the bouncing ball, the jigsaw puzzle in

the two metaphors cited earlier. It is the comparison term that creates the image (the bouncing ball, the jigsaw puzzle), which, as the term 'image' suggests, is usually visual, but it might well evoke the other senses, of sound, smell and touch.

When a metaphor or simile works, resemblances from the non-literal or image term carry across to unite with the subject term, in some way that, as Johnson says, illuminates it. For the metaphor or simile to work, for it to have 'propriety', it must conform to reason, to use Johnson's words again. There must be some convincing correspondence between the subject and figure term, otherwise there is nothing for the imagination to work upon. At worst, the comparison term, the image, actively works *against* any comparison. It draws attention to itself, away from the subject, the 'thing', as Johnson himself put it in a comment on the language of the seventeenth-century poets who preceded Dryden.<sup>4</sup>

Hodgins' image of the puzzle illuminates the fact of the scattered items on the floor of the old farmhouse. However, Gray's bouncing ball doesn't; it baffles, drawing attention to itself and away from the flock of birds. His observation, and imagination, have failed him.

In his *Life of Cowley*, Johnson comments at length on the language of those early seventeenth-century poets that Johnson, using a term adopted from Dryden, had dubbed the Metaphysical Poets: Donne, Ben Jonson, Suckling, Waller, Denham, Cowley and Cleveland. Their wit, of which Johnson says they had 'more than enough', resided in 'a kind of *discordia concourse*'; that is, a 'combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike'.

This excess of wit was revealed in their creation of conceits: that is, metaphors involving extravagant, far-fetched comparisons, or, as Johnson himself put it, the Metaphysicals 'yoked the most heterogeneous ideas together by violence.' They 'ransacked nature and art' for their 'illustrations, comparisons, and allusions'. We might note here the force of Johnson's own metaphor to describe the conceit. To bring the two ideas into relation, they had to be 'yoked', and the nuances of 'yoked' extend into the terms 'violence' and 'ransacked'.

For the subject term of the metaphor and the non-literal comparison term to require a violent yoking is for Johnson a defiance of

reason. Or, as we might say, it is for the metaphor to be strained. Robert Gray's description of a flock of birds in terms of a bouncing basketball needs a great deal of violence to bring the two ideas together – if indeed they can be so related.

Following his definition of the conceit in his 'Life of Cowley', Johnson lists evidence of violent ransacking from the poems of Donne and Cowley. Images are ransacked from knowledge that is arcane to the general reader of poetry: they are drawn from medicine, geography, philosophy and chemistry and 'ancient laws of augury and rites of sacrifice'. This ransacking can result, he says, in 'enormous and disgusting hyperboles'. The metaphysical poets, he says,

were in very little care to clothe their notions with elegance of dress, and therefore miss the notice and praise which are often gained by those who think less, but are more diligent to adorn their thoughts.

And,

As they sought only for novelty, they did not much enquire whether their allusions were to things high or low, elegant or gross; whether they compare the little to the great, or the great to the little.

Johnson lists forty-six examples of conceits that he considers to be either absurd, far-fetched, abstruse, exaggerated, disgustingly novel, or violent and unnatural. Here are some of them.

This is from Cowley: a lover says of his mistress's breath,

By every wind that comes this way,  
Send me at least a sigh or two;  
Such and so many I'll repay,  
As shall themselves make winds to get to you,

The loved-one's breath is compared to wind! Her breathing is wind containing sighs that the lover will return, also as wind!

In the following description, also from Cowley, of an armoured warrior, the brilliance of his brass cladding is so 'dismal' (i.e., threatening) that it frightens the sun.

All armed in Brass, the richest dress of War,  
(A dismal glorious sight,) he shone afar.  
The Sun himself started with sudden fright,  
To see his beams returned so dismal bright.

This is reminiscent of Romeo's conceit, when he imagines two stars swapping places with Juliet's eyes only to be put in the shade by the brightness of her cheeks. Although, I suspect Johnson would have recognised that the conceit was functioning to reveal Romeo's state of mind, as he suggested might be the case with a line of Macbeth's he considered faulty. But I will return to it later.

In Cowley's 'On His Mistress Bathing', Johnson found 'violent and unnatural' the conceit of the loved-one in her bath being likened to a fish attracting other fish to her light, a light so bright that it was as if the sun set in her bathtub every night.

The fish around her crowded, as they do  
To the false light that treacherous fishes show,  
And with as much ease might taken be,  
    As she at first took me;  
    For ne'er did light so clear  
    Among the waves appear,  
Though every night the sun himself set there

'Who but Donne,' asks Johnson, 'would have thought that a good man is a telescope?'

Though God be our true glass, through which we see  
All, since the being of all things is he,  
Yet are the trunks which do to us derive  
Things, in proportion fit, by perspective,  
Deeds of good men; for by their living here,  
Virtues, indeed remote, seem to be near.

The image of the telescope is implicit here in the words 'trunk' and 'perspective'. The sense is that though God is the source and therefore mirror of all goodness, the lives of good men, like telescopes, bring God's goodness closer to us.

On the famous image of the pair of compasses in Donne's 'Valediction Forbidding Mourning', in which parting lovers are compared to the compasses scribing a circle, Johnson comments scathingly, 'it may be doubted whether absurdity or ingenuity had the better claim.'

Generally, I think Johnson's view, that the comparisons contained in metaphors should accord with reason, is right; although we may well disagree with his judgements and debate amongst ourselves about the propriety of the comparisons in individual cases. I should also say here



that the issue can be subtler than I have presented it. Odd comparisons can be made to work, particularly, I suspect, when the metaphor is contained in the verb. For example, would we quarrel with Donne's telescope metaphor if he had said something like: 'A good man's life is like the goodness of God telescoped to mankind generally'?

Turning now to Johnson's view of Shakespeare's language, we have this from his Preface to Shakespeare:

Shakespeare opens a mine which contains gold and diamonds in inexhaustible plenty, though clouded by incrustations, debased by impurities, and mingled with a mass of meaner minerals.

The 'gold and diamonds' of Shakespeare's plays are their just representations of human nature. The faults, the incrustations, the impurities and meaner minerals are his language, which defies decorum and therefore reason.

Boswell, in the *Life*, reports Johnson commenting that Shakespeare never has six lines together without a fault. And sometimes there are more. For example, he thought every word in Macbeth's description of the dead Duncan is faulty, 'His silver skin lac'd with his golden blood'. The whole line is a 'general blot'; although he did suggest, as I have intimated above in connection with Romeo's description of Juliet's eyes, that the blot may be intended as an expression of Macbeth's state of mind at the time of saying. Says Johnson:

Shakespeare probably put these forced and unnatural metaphors into the mouth of Macbeth as a mark of artifice and dissimulation to show the difference between the studied language of hypocrisy and the natural outcries of sudden passion.

Johnson was clearly alive to how the dramatic function, which language he objected to, could serve in creating states of mind.

Here are two more examples of Shakespeare's faults. First we have his oft-quoted objection to Lady Macbeth's lines, lines which, incidentally, he mis-attributes to Macbeth:

Come thick night!  
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,  
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes;  
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,  
To cry, Hold, hold!

The images, drawn from common life, are not in keeping with the magnitude of the ideas expressed. 'Thick' is an epithet now heard only in the stable, he says; a 'dun' night may come or go without any other notice than contempt. A 'knife', the implement of butchers and cooks, is too mean an instrument to describe the killing of a king and loyal friend. And the idea of Providence 'peeping through a blanket' is 'risible'. However, despite himself, it seems Johnson does respond to the power of the lines, which, he says, exert 'all the force of poetry, that force which calls new powers into being, which embodies sentiment, and animates matter'. It is strange that he doesn't realise that much of that power derives from the force of the imagery.

The second example comes from his notes on *Richard II*. Johnson singles out the following lines of the hollow crown speech, those in which the King laments that death and the grave are all that any man, king included, can ultimately, call his own:

And nothing can we call our own, but death  
And that small model of the barren earth,  
That serves as paste and cover to our bones.

Of the lines, he dismissively comments, 'A metaphor, not of the sublime kind, taken from a *pie*.' ('Pie' in Shakespeare's time was often referred to as a 'coffin'.) Not the 'sublime kind'. Clearly sarcastic! A common pie as an image of the grave. Lacking due gravitas, obviously. If a knife is too common an instrument to kill a king, what can be said for a pie as an image of his grave!

Johnson's criticism of Shakespeare's language, and that of the Metaphysicals, comes out of a sensibility very different to that of the seventeenth century, a sensibility left behind by the Augustan style of Dryden. And Johnson was an Augustan, although he did take a liberal, common-sense view of the classical Unities of Time and Place, and the strict classification of works into tragedies and comedies. Following Aristotle, whom he regarded as the father of criticism, literature must be an imitation of life. It must both instruct and delight. Shakespeare, despite his genius for presenting true representations of human character, fell short because he failed to instruct; he didn't take moral stands. Further, a poem, or drama, must rest on three principles – Reason, Truth and Decorum, the triple pillars of eighteenth-century high culture. The conceits of the Metaphysicals defied reason. They

might be novel, but they were absurd, and couldn't please long, like a man compared to a telescope, or a flock of birds likened to a bouncing basketball. Such absurdities precluded a true imitation of life. Shakespeare, of course, passed the truth to life test, but offended against eighteenth-century decorum. Killing a king with a mere knife, describing Providence peeping through a blanket, and comparing a king's grave to a pie, was just not the thing.

It might be interesting to ask here: how should Shakespeare have written Lady Macbeth's lines for them to meet with Johnson's approval?

For a start, 'thick' would have to be replaced, perhaps with 'solid'. 'Cover' or 'pall' might replace 'blanket'. And for 'knife', 'blade', 'dirk', 'dagger', or 'sword' would have to be substituted. The lines would have to be in rhymed, heroic couplets. Johnson didn't think much of blank verse. He said it was nothing but 'crippled prose' unless distinguished from prose by 'tumid and gorgeous embellishment'. Moreover, as heroic couplets the lines would have to be read, because, for Johnson, a play was a 'book recited with concomitants that increased, or diminished, the dramatic effect'. Incidentally, he thought *Macbeth* was better read than performed.

To conclude, I want to consider Johnson's introductory lines in *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, where we find this couplet setting out his project in the poem:

Then say how hope and fear, desire and hate,  
O'spread with snares the clouded maze of fate.

The Augustan elements are unmistakable: the subject is the difficult passage of a life to its destiny, its fate. As such, the subject is lofty and general, in accord with Imlac's dictum in *Rasselas* about the subject of poetry. The verse is rhymed couplets in iambic pentameters. But what of the metaphors? We have the image of the gamekeeper's 'snares', and of a garden 'maze'. Hope, fear, desire and hate cast snares over the clouded maze of fate. But between the images of snares and mazes, and the subject, fate, isn't there a gap between high sentiment and common, low language – the kind of gap, rejected by Johnson, between Lady Macbeth's feeling of guilt and its expression in images of a dun night, a blanket and a knife? Like Shakespeare's images, Johnson's metaphors give his lines a concreteness, a specificity, an earthiness. Further, the lines, in which images fuse with their subject terms, are

textured with nuances. The maze is o'spread with snares. *Maze* not only evokes a labyrinth, it is a clouded, obscured one at that, suggesting the pathway to our destiny is tricky, devious and unclear; it also suggests the mental confusion and bewilderment accompanying the path (in Johnson's time, *maze* had these meanings – a trace of this sense of *maze* remains in the modern verb 'to amaze'). And we could go on, teasing out the nuances of these four metaphors in this seventeen-word couplet. We might even say it 'calls new powers into being, which embodies sentiment and animates matter', to use Johnson's own words of Lady Macbeth's lines.

But they are an exception. There is nothing in the rest of the poem to compare with them. Likewise in Johnson's 'On the Death of Dr. Robert Levett', the images are similarly general. They evoke ideas rather than feeling. They lack the concreteness, the specificity of the Shakespearean language, where idea and image fuse in the metaphor so that it is difficult to separate the intellectual notion of the meaning from its feeling component.

Finally, here's a stark contrast between Johnson's Augustan style and the Shakespearean. In the Prologue to the first draft of *Irene*, Johnson sets out his purpose with these lines:

Learn here, that Peace from Innocence must flow;  
All else is empty sound, and idle show.

These lines typify the Johnsonian style: one line of statement, followed by exposition and reflection, a pattern similar to the structure of his prose. It is one that doesn't, as one critic has put it, capture in words, as Shakespeare did, 'significant particularities of sensation and feeling, the significance coming out in complex total effects ... which are left to speak for themselves.'

The difference is no more apparent in a comparison of the lines from the *Irene* prologue 'All else is empty sound, and idle show', with Macbeth's response to the news of his Queen's death:

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more: it is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.

Did Johnson have Shakespeare's lines resonating somewhere in the back of his mind when he wrote the Prologue? But the image of the strutting actor ranting words that signify nothing has become merely 'idle sound and empty show'. What a huge difference in effect!

## Notes

- 1 Henry Hitchings, *Dr. Johnson's Dictionary: the Extraordinary Story of the Book that Defined the World* (London: John Murray, 2005), 88
- 2 Robert Gray, 'In the Mallee', *Nameless Earth* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2006).
- 3 Phillip Hodgins, 'A Half-remembered Visit', *Up on All Fours* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1993 ), 15-16
- 4 Johnson, 'The Life of Dryden', *Lives of the Poets*, ed. L. Archer-Hind, 2v. (London: Dent 'Everyman's Library', 1925), 2:231

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\_\_\_, 'Preface to Shakespeare', *Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. Walter Raleigh (London, 1908)

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# Johnson and the Grammarians

Nicholas Hudson

My subject today is a curiously unpopular one: grammar. And I say ‘curiously’ because the way in which we acquire grammar is perhaps one of the most spectacular of uniquely human achievements, and hence should be enthralling. Let us see whether Sam Johnson can make it enthralling for us.

In his *Dictionary of the English Language*, Johnson defines *grammar* thus:

the science of speaking correctly; the art which teaches the relations of words to each other.

It is very hard to fault this. Furthermore, from this and our general knowledge of Johnson’s delight in words, we would be excused for expecting that he would have a generally favourable attitude to this art and science. However, as so often, Johnson shows his true colours in the quotations with which he brings the words to life. There are just three of them:

We make a countryman dumb, whom we will not allow to speak but by the rules of grammar. (Dryden)

Men, speaking language according to the grammar rules of that language, do yet speak improperly of things. (Locke)

*Varium et mutabile semper femina*, is the sharpest satire that ever was made on woman; for the adjectives are neuter, and *animal* must be understood to make them grammar. (Dryden)

All in all, this is a pretty bleak summary of the contribution of grammar to human happiness: that it discourages some people from speaking at all for fear of getting it wrong, that getting the grammar right does not mean that you get the story right, and that grammar is only good for smart-arse jokes.

There are two further relevant quotations under a separate headword ‘Grammar School’ which is defined as ‘A school in which the learned languages are grammatically taught.’

Thou hast most traitorously corrupted the youth of the realm in erecting a grammar school. (Shakespeare’s *Hen. VI*)

The ordinary way of learning Latin in a grammar school I cannot encourage. (Locke)

This is also a sorry pair of quotations, coming from a grammar school boy who had once earned his living teaching grammar.

So, is this really Johnson's view of grammar, and if so, where does it come from? This was the quest which led me to today's topic.

For convenience we will start at the beginning. Two million years ago, a species of anthropoidal ape evolved which, for reasons which need not detain us, was hairless and walked upright. Like their more primitive forebears, these apes had a largish vocabulary of vocalisations, and with the passage of time this vocabulary grew. But it had no grammar. Each grunt or squeak was a single, complete, unique message.

We will never know how, where or when the great breakthrough occurred, but it was probably some 150,000 years ago, with a vocalisation meaning *not*. This one word, attached to any of the others in her vocabulary, suddenly doubled the number of messages she could convey. And I say *she* advisedly, because it seems more than possible that this discovery was made by mothers who, being hairless, carried their young in front of them rather than clinging to the hair on their backs, so that the young made constant eye contact with the mother's lips.

Once a start had been made, progress was rapid. In the next 140,000 years, the vocabulary increased a hundredfold and grammar burgeoned, as verbal communication enabled people to learn not only from their own experience, but from the experience of their friends and relations. Then, the invention of writing enabled people to learn from the recorded experiences of past generations and people they had never met, promoting development of the language of ideas.

Just 2,500 years ago, all this language came together in the greatest explosion of literary genius the world has ever known: in just fifty years, the playwrights Sophocles, Euripides, Aeschylus and Aristophanes, the historians Thucydides and Herodotus, the philosophers Socrates and Plato, were all active in a community the size of Geelong. It was the dawn of the VCE syllabus.

As inevitably happens after a great burst of creative energy, the academy then stepped in. Creativity gave way to scholarship. The buzz-words of the day were 'analysis', 'taxonomy' and 'category', and when they had finished with the stars, the plants and the animals, they turned their attention to the works of Sophocles and his mates, sorting



the words into categories like nouns, verbs and adjectives in an attempt to see how language worked. It was the first ever attempt at descriptive grammar.

However, their work was soon put to practical use. If these were the grammatical rules the great writers followed, anyone could become a great writer by following the rules. In an instant, descriptive grammar gave birth to prescriptive grammar. For more than five hundred years, literary Greek stood still. The Greek of the New Testament, for example, is almost totally comprehensible to a student of classical Greek. In terms of time difference, it is as if current English writers eschewed today's English in favour of a language which was essentially that of Chaucer. In short, Greek became a dead language.

Astonishingly, the same thing happened to Latin. The Latin grammarians, however, made much less attempt to be descriptive. They simply took the categories discovered by the Greeks and the literature of the Augustan Age – Cicero, Catullus, Virgil and Livy – and inserted the one into the other.

The fit was reasonably close, and the result was the same. While the Latin of the streets moved on down the various paths which were to lead to Italian, Spanish, French and so on, literary Latin stood still, held in place by the grammarians. The Vulgate version of the Bible, written *circa* 350, is in a Latin which would have been incomprehensibly archaic to ninety percent of the *vulgus* it was supposed to serve. When its authors found that the babble coming in through the window differed from the forms prescribed by the grammarians, they followed the grammarians. It was a sort of grammatical fundamentalism, trusting the authority of a book against the evidence of the real world.

And so Latin, too, became a dead language. Not an extinct language, because it went on being the language of the Church, of the learned professions, of commerce and of diplomacy, for another millennium. And this worked precisely because it was dead. All you had to do was to master the rules laid down by the grammarians, and you could write in a language which would be understood all over Christendom.

So it was that when King Henry VIII took time off from wenching and established Grammar Schools, it was the grammar of Latin that was taught. And when people started talking about the grammar of English, it was the grammar of Latin that they used as a model, taking the words

of Chaucer and Shakespeare and shoe-horning them into its analytical apparatus.



And that was what Johnson was looking for when he wrote his *Dictionary* entries on grammar. It was a fascinating topic for the kind of mind which likes cryptic crosswords, but of almost no value to writers in general, and none to those who sought the secrets of literary elegance.

When he wrote his definition of grammar, therefore, Johnson was faced with a paradox: here was an art addressing issues which occupied the very centre of his being, the speaking and writing of English, something he ought to love and cherish; but it had been subverted by its own professional practitioners and turned into a mindless exercise in rote learning.

This did not impinge too much on his main work, the compilation of the *Dictionary*, because the only contribution of school-learned grammar was in its vocabulary: the names of the parts of speech, etc. For this, the traditional categories worked tolerably well.

However, Johnson talks frequently of the practical value he hoped his dictionary would have, in helping people with both their reading and their writing. So one might have hoped that Johnson, realising that the grammar taught in the schools was failing to provide good guidance, would use his entries on grammatical terms to offer some new insights on vexed grammatical issues.

He was well aware that there were many such issues: his entry on *solecism*, on your sheet,<sup>1</sup> includes the following illustration from Addison:

There is scarce a solecism in writing which the best author is not guilty of, if we be at liberty to read him in the words of some manuscript.

It seems that even in those days vigilant printers saved authors from ridicule.

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<sup>1</sup> The sheets of examples prepared by Nick Hudson and distributed at the lecture are included here, immediately following this Paper (pages 74-77).

But Johnson gave no actual example of a common solecism, still less any advice on avoiding them. The *Dictionary* offers some help in avoiding barbarisms – the bad choice of individual words – but none in avoiding solecisms – breaches of the conventions of grammar.

An example can be found in the grammatical difference between identical words ending in -ing, for example, between *I am walking* and *I like walking*, or between a walking doll and a walking stick. It is a question on which many modern grammars flounder, but traditional Latin-based grammar is clear. But the relevant terms, *participle* and *gerund*, are very poorly defined, and without any suggestion that they have any manifestation in English, still less that they might have helped explain some vexed points in English grammar.

This is in strange contrast to the way in which he handles the vocabulary of natural philosophy, what we now call science. I have on other occasions talked about Johnson's keenness to understand contemporary scientific discovery, with entries on electricity, longitude, animal taxonomy and the barometer, which reveal the significance as well as the facts of recent discoveries.

Johnson seems to have decided that a dictionary was no place for advice on grammar. Indeed, many of the technical terms of grammar, including those used in the long essay on English grammar which was included in the book, are not in the *Dictionary* at all.



Which brings me to consideration of this essay on Grammar. I had read parts of it before on odd occasions, but had found it less than engaging. However, if I was to explore Johnson's views on grammar, I had to read it properly.

It opens with a clear statement of content:

GRAMMAR, which is the art of using words properly, comprises four parts: Orthography, Etymology, Syntax, and Prosody.

He recognises that these four headings represent a traditional approach, and opens with an apology for adopting it:

In this division and order of the parts of grammar I follow the common grammarians, without inquiring whether a fitter distribution might not be found. Experience has long shown this method to

be so distinct as to obviate confusion, and so comprehensive as to prevent any inconvenient omissions. I likewise use the terms already received, and already understood, though perhaps others more proper might sometimes be invented. Sylburgius, and other innovators, whose new terms have sunk their learning into neglect, have left sufficient warning against the trifling ambition of teaching arts in a new language.

This last point is well made. Several modern grammarians, realising that the categories of traditional grammar provide a bad framework for an analysis of English grammar, have tried to popularise new sets of labels. But I know of no dictionary which does not stick with the old ones, nor in fact of any new coinage which has been adopted outside the narrow circle of the coiner's apprentices.

## Orthography

The first topic is orthography, that is, spelling. This was a relatively trivial topic for the Roman grammarians, since they drew on a body of literature which had, for reasons which need not detain us, a quite astonishing uniformity of spelling.

Johnson was dealing with a body of literature whose writers had no such discipline, and it is one of Johnson's greatest achievements that his decisions about what was and what was not the correct spelling have largely become law. So I hoped for some further insight into the way in which he made his choices.

The long and laborious letter-by-letter analysis which follows is occasionally fascinating for the insight it gives into eighteenth-century pronunciation. For example, he mentions the word *herb* as one of very few where the aspirate is not sounded, and this is the only such word, I suspect, where American usage and British part company, the Americans, as so often, preserving eighteenth-century purity. And he tells his readers to say *advertisement*, not *advértisement*. But the essay is almost totally unhelpful with respect to guidance which might improve the reader's spelling. To illustrate this point, you will find on your sheets a large sample, containing some wisdom about the letter E.

I cannot leave this topic without mentioning two of those little gems of possible wisdom which one blunders into from time to time. I was seeking in vain any comment from Johnson on the pronunciation

of the prefix *re-*. The pattern today is clear enough: there are a lot of old words which are Latin-derived, in which the *re-* has a weak sense, and the *e* has a short sound, as in *refer* or *reference*. However, in new coinage the *re-* has a strong sense, namely ‘again’, and it is pronounced ‘ree’, as in *repossess*. Johnson recorded over a hundred such words, but makes no comment on their pronunciation.

It then occurred to me to check whether there were any such words in Shakespeare. The answer is that there are twelve such words, one or two of which, like *retell*, appear several times. But the interesting thing is that in the First Folio edition they are consistently distinguished from the others by being hyphenated. I can only explain this by suggesting that Shakespeare was anxious to give his actors an instant pronunciation guide to these words, to make sure that they did not, as an ABC newsreader did the other night, get them wrong. He read, ‘Joe Blow was expected to resign from the Kangaroos, but has since resigned ... sorry, I think that should have been “has since re-signed”’. The current fashion of leaving out all hyphens has a price.

The second irrelevant gem illustrates the orthographical chaos Johnson successfully resolved. It is also on your sheets. As you will see, its author, the seventeenth-century Scottish schoolmaster and spelling reformer Alexander Hume, believed that the word we know as *where* should be spelt ‘quhere’. He tells us how, over an English dinner table, he presented his argument as a syllogism, with a proposition, an assumption and a conclusion. His proposition was that all words should be spelt as they were pronounced. His assumption was that the word started with an aspirated guttural, *quher*. His conclusion was that its spelling should start not with the labial *w* but with the guttural *q*. He got an unappreciative response from his host: ‘The proposition I understand; the assumption is Scottish, and the conclusion false.’ ‘Quherat al laughed...,’ says Alexander ruefully.

## Etymology

The second topic in Johnson’s Grammar is etymology, and opens with a significantly broader definition than the modern one:

Etymology teaches the deduction of one word from another, and the various modifications by which the sense of the same word is diversified; as horse, horses; I love, I loved.

In the definition of this word in the body of the *Dictionary*, Johnson gives primacy to the meaning we understand, but he then adds:

2. The part of grammar which delivers the inflections of nouns and verbs.

This is a topic I knew as ‘accidence’, the study of inflections, which is the core of the traditional syllabus in Latin grammar. So I looked up what he had to say about this word. It is very odd indeed:

*accidence*: The little book containing the first rudiments of grammar, and explaining the properties of the eight parts of speech.

And, the Etymology section in the Grammar essay starts not with either of the two topics he mentioned in the opening paragraph, but with – dramatic pause – the properties of the eight parts of speech.

At least, the properties of five of them. Half the great length of this section is taken up with discussion of (in this order) articles, nouns, adjectives, pronouns and verbs, and what he says about them is about as trivial and unhelpful as it is boring. Anyway, it seems that after dealing with five of the eight, Johnson wearied of the task, and moved on to the question of inflection.

In Latin, almost every word was inflected, and learning up to one hundred inflections of every verb and thirty-six of every adjective was the first task of the grammar school.

How could this be replicated in English, which has hardly any inflection at all? The answer is simple: Johnson generates an account which is even more trivial, unhelpful and boring than the one about the Parts of Speech.

Of the derivation of our words, the core sense in which we use the word *etymology* today, he has almost nothing to say.

## Syntax

So we come to the third section of Johnson’s essay on Grammar, the section headed Syntax.

Syntax concerns the rules for putting individual words together into sentences. In Latin grammar, syntax is largely the rules for choosing the correct inflection of each word used from the dozens of more or less plausible candidates and hundreds of implausible ones. But this task is

less arduous in English, given the paucity of inflection we have already noted.

English grammar, by contrast, is all about word order. Thus the sentence ‘Girls like boys’ contains exactly the same words as the sentence ‘Boys like girls’, but subject and object are identified by the word order.

Similarly, in the absence of case and gender inflection, the relationship between nouns and their attendant adjectives and adjectival phrases can often be ambiguous, so we have to take great care with word order to save us from the proverbial ‘table for a woman with carved legs’, or the one we see all over town: ‘When flashing watch for pedestrians.’

Whether English grammar has almost no syntax or is nothing but syntax is a semantic quibble. However, if word order is not regarded as part of syntax, a new topic has to be added to the traditional repertoire.

Johnson takes a minimalist view:

The established practice of grammarians requires that I should here treat of the Syntax; but our language has so little inflection, or variety of terminations, that its construction neither requires nor admits many rules. Wallis, therefore, has totally neglected it; and Jonson, whose desire of following the writers upon the learned languages made him think a syntax indispensably necessary, has published such petty observations as were better omitted.

He then produces five petty observations of his own. You will find them on your handouts. And that, believe it or not, is the totality of his treatment of Syntax. Word order never gets a mention, here or anywhere.

## **Prosody**

And so we come to the final section of the essay, on Prosody. Johnson starts with a sort of apology:

It is common for those that deliver the grammar of modern languages, to omit the Prosody. But as the laws of metre are included in the idea of grammar, I have thought proper to insert them.

PROSODY comprises orthoepy, or the rules of pronunciation; and orthometry, or the laws of versification.

Now, it was good of him to explain what orthoepy and orthometry are, because neither word is in the *Dictionary* proper.

Orthoepy, however, appears to be narrower in compass than pronunciation, being all about accent, in the 'accentuation' sense, what we commonly now call 'stress'. On which syllable of a word does the accent fall?

This is a point of importance to poets, if the rhythm of their lines is to match the natural accentuation of the individual words. But I find it hard to imagine that any poet would have felt grateful to Johnson for his lists of words in the various possible patterns. Could they conceivably be unaware of the stress patterns of these words? If they were in doubt, would they plough through all this verbiage for the applicable rule, when nine times out of ten they would not find it? And, if they found some rule which departed from their own usage, would they modify their own usage on the authority of our hero? I find all these propositions incredible.

The second part of the section on prosody is about versification, which effectively means metre. It opens:

Versification is the arrangement of a certain number of syllables according to certain laws.

The feet of our verses are either iambick, as *alóft*, *créate*; or trochaick, as *hóly*, *lófty*.

There then follows a list of the possible number of syllables in an iambic or trochaic line, in each case illustrated by one or more examples. And not just short examples: a single line might well suffice to make the point, but Johnson quotes up to thirty. He concludes:

To these measures and their laws, may be reduced every species of English verse.

Can he be serious? There is no mention of the dactyl, although dactyls occur in many of the trochaic lines he quotes; only a brief mention of anapaests, though anapaests appear in his own iambic lines; and no mention, either in this section or in the body of the dictionary, of the spondee, despite its major place in Latin prosody, a fact of which he cannot possibly have been unaware.

One wonders how his friend Garrick would have read

Full fathom five thy father lies...



or for that matter

To be or not to be, that is the question.

Indeed, I cannot help concluding my observations on the prosody section with the dactylic version of Hamlet's Soliloquy supplied by an Italian friend of mine:

Tó be or| nót to be. | Zát is ze | quést-y-on.  
Véth-er tis | nób-ler in | zé mind to | sóff-re ze  
Slínks and a- | róuz of | óut-raǵǵy- | ówzer for- | tóon-a...

He is the only person I know who might have benefited from our hero's wisdom on the subject.

There is just one paragraph more to the essay:

Thus have I collected rules and examples, by which the English language may be learned, if the reader be already acquainted with grammatical terms, or taught by a master to those that are more ignorant. To have written a grammar for such as are not yet initiated in the schools, would have been tedious, and perhaps at last ineffectual.



Now, I hope you are all asking yourselves the question, 'Why did Johnson write this drivel, and how did it come to be published?'

The first point to note is that authors in those days had no editor standing between them and the printer, making sure they didn't make a fool of themselves. Today, an editor would have taken our hero aside and said 'Come off it, Sam. This is a load of rubbish and you know it.'

And Sam would have said, 'Yes, I know it and you know it, but every book like this has to have an essay on Grammar in it. The problem is not that what I have written is crap, it is that grammar is crap. English doesn't have any grammar.'

Now, before you say 'Johnson cannot have been that stupid', just remember how Johnson treated the word *grammar* in the *Dictionary*. He illustrated the definition with a series of quotations which declared it to be ineffective and socially evil. And this was a well-balanced account of the word, because in 1750 grammar meant not only *the subject matter* but also *the teaching method*, which was rote learning of the conjugation of verbs, of the declension of nouns and adjectives, and

of the rules under which they come together. And if that was what grammar was, then English did indeed have little or no grammar.

The second point to note is that these pages may well be among the last to have been written. The normal practice at that time was to typeset and print the core text of a book before compiling what are now called the prelims: title page, contents list, foreword and introduction. So they may well have been written against the clock by a very tired man, or by one or more of a tired man's assistants. To start talking about the eight parts of speech, get as far as the fifth and then move on to the next topic is totally uncharacteristic of our hero. Similarly, to illustrate what is meant by a line of six syllables by quoting thirty such lines suggests a last minute dash to fill the final folio.

The third point to note is that Johnson made a critical error right at the outset in adopting the traditional syllabus. He declared that 'Experience has long shown this method to be ... so comprehensive as to prevent any inconvenient omissions.' In fact, it enabled him to omit any mention of the key feature of English grammar – word order.

He might, of course, have noticed this omission when he wrote, 'our language has so little inflection, or variety of terminations, that its construction neither requires nor admits many rules.' He might have asked himself what it was that distinguished well-constructed from badly-constructed sentences in English, since something certainly did. And he might then have realised that the absence of inflection placed more reliance on syntax, not less; that English was, in fact, the syntactic language *par excellence*.

But he didn't. Or so the evidence seems to suggest.

Now, there is another explanation. Let us suppose that he not only realised that the traditional approach was pointless and inappropriate, but also realised that a radically new approach to grammar would draw critical attention away from his major achievement, the *Dictionary* itself, and he would spend the next ten years arguing about the nature of English grammar.

He was then left with two options: to say nothing about grammar, or to write on grammar within the traditional assumptions. To have said nothing would have opened him to the charge of negligence, so he thought of a clever way of making his point: he would produce a

grammar which would demonstrate the absurdity of the traditional approach, a pastiche on all the existing grammars. And he would then see whether anyone had the wit to notice what he had done.

So he deliberately peppered the text with errors, inconsistencies and contradictions, embellished it with parodies of the traditional grandiose claims to have covered every possible point, and generated the perfect teaching tool. And nobody saw the joke.

The idea may seem far-fetched, an example of conspiracy theory rather than a serious hypothesis. However, before you dismiss it, please consider the following.

For all practical purposes, inflection survives only in the personal pronouns – I, me, my, mine, we, us, our, ours, and so on. So, what does Johnson say? It's on your sheet: 'Our adjectives and pronouns are invariable.' Yet he uses the pronouns three lines further down to illustrate case inflection.

There is absolutely no way in which Johnson could have done this other than to prove, if he ever had to do so, that he was not being serious.

I rest my case.

From  
A Dictionary of the English Language  
by Samuel Johnson

GRAMMAR

The science of speaking correctly; the art which teaches the relations of words to each other.

We make a countryman dumb, whom we will not allow to speak but by the rules of grammar. (Dryden)

Men, speaking language according to the grammar rules of that language, do yet speak improperly of things. (Locke)

*Varium et mutabile semper femina*, is the sharpest satire that ever was made on woman; for the adjectives are neuter, and *animal* must be understood to make them grammar. (Dryden)

GRAMMAR SCHOOL

A school in which the learned languages are grammatically taught.

Thou hast most traitorously corrupted the youth of the realm in erecting a grammar school. (Shakespeare's Hen. VI)

The ordinary way of learning Latin in a grammar school I cannot encourage. (Locke)

SOLECISM. n.s. [σολοικισμός.]

Unfitness of one word to another; impropriety in language. A barbarism may be in one word, a solecism must be of more.

There is scarce a solecism in writing which the best author is not guilty of, if we be at liberty to read him in the words of some manuscript. Addison

ETYMOLOGY

1. The descent or derivation of a word from its original; the deduction of formations from the radical word; the analysis of compound words into primitives.

2. The part of grammar which delivers the inflections of nouns and verbs.

A'CCIDENCE

The little book containing the first rudiments of grammar, and explaining the properties of the eight parts of speech.

JSA Seminar 7 June 2008 / 1

From  
**A Grammar of the English Language**  
by Samuel Johnson

GRAMMAR, which is the art of using words properly, comprises four parts: Orthography, Etymology, Syntax, and Prosody.

In this division and order of the parts of grammar I follow the common grammarians, without inquiring whether a fitter distribution might not be found. Experience has long shown this method to be so distinct as to obviate confusion, and so comprehensive as to prevent any inconvenient omissions. I likewise use the terms already received, and already understood, though perhaps others more proper might sometimes be invented. Sylborgius, and other innovators, whose new terms have sunk their learning into neglect, have left sufficient warning against the trifling ambition of teaching arts in a new language.

**[Orthography, sample text]**

E.

E is the letter which occurs most frequently in the English language.

E is long, as in sc[e]n[e]; or short, as in c[e]llar, s[c]parate, c[e]lebrate, m[e]n, th[c]n.

It is always short before a double consonant, or two consonants, as in v[e]x, p[e]plexity, re[c]nt, m[e]dlar, s[e]ptile, s[e]peat, c[e]llar, c[e]ssation, h[e]ssing, f[e]ll, f[e]lling, d[e]bt.

E is always mute at the end of a word, except in monosyllables that have no other vowel, as the; or proper names, as Penelope, Phebe, Derbe; being used to modify the foregoing consonants, as since, once, hedge, oblige; or

to lengthen the preceding vowel, as b[e]n, b[e]n[e]; c[e]n, c[e]n[e]; p[e]n, p[e]n[e]; t[e]n, t[e]n[e]; r[e]n, r[e]n[e]; p[e]n, p[e]n[e]; f[e]n, f[e]n[e]; c[u]n, c[u]n[e]; t[e]n, t[e]n[e].

Almost all words which now terminate in consonants eoded anciently in e, as year, yearc; wildness, wildness; which e probably had the force of the French e feminine, and constituted a syllable with its associate consonant; for in old editions words are sometimes divided thus, clea-re, fel-le, knowled-ge. This e was perhaps for a time vocal or silent in poetry as convenience required; but it has been long wholly mute. Camden in his Remains calls it the silent e.

It does not always lengthen the foregoing vowel, as g[o]ve, f[i]ve, g[i]ve.

It has sometimes in the end of words a sound obscure, and scarcely perceptible, as open, shapen, shotten, thistle, participle, metre, lucre.

This faintness of sound is found when e separates a mute from a liquid, as in rotten, or follows a mute and liquid, as in cattle.

E forms a diphthong with a, as near; with i, as deign, receive; and with u or w, as new, stew.

Ea sounds like e long, as mean; or like ee, as dear, clear, near.

Ei is sounded like e long, as seize, perceiving.

Eu sounds as u long and soft.

E, a, u, are combined in beauty and its derivatives, but have only the sound of u.

E may be said to form a diphthong by reduplication, as agree, sleeping.

Eo is found in yeoman, where it is sounded as o short; and in people,

where it is pronounced like ee

**[Etymology, sample text]**

Etymology teaches the deduction of one word from another, and the various modifications by which the sense of the same word is diversified; as horse, horses; I love, I loved.

**[Syntax, the complete text]**

The established practice of grammarians requires that I should here treat of the Syntax; but our language has so little inflection, or variety of terminations, that its construction neither requires nor admits many rules. Wallin, therefore, has totally neglected it; and Jonson, whose desire of following the writers upon the learned languages made him think a syntax indispensably necessary, has published such petty observations as were better omitted.

The verb, as in other languages, agrees with the nominative in number and

person; as, Thou fliest from good; He runs to death.

Our adjectives and pronouns are invariable.

Of two substantives the noun possessive is in the genitive; as, His father's glory; The sun's heat.

Verbs transitive require an oblique case; as, He loves me; You fear him.

All prepositions require an oblique case; as, He gave this to me; He took this from me; He says this of me; He came with me.

**[Prosody, sample text]**

It is common for those that deliver the grammar of modern languages, to omit the Prosody. But as the laws of metre are included in the idea of grammar, I have thought proper to insert them.

PROSODY comprises orthoepy, or the rules of pronunciation; and orthometry, or the laws of versification.

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The feet of our verses are either iambick, as aloft, create; or trochaick, as holy, lofty.

**[Last paragraph.]**

Thus have I collected rules and examples, by which the English language may be learned, if the reader be already acquainted with grammatical terms, or taught by a master to those that are more ignorant. To have written a grammar for such as are not yet initiated in the schools, would have been tedious, and perhaps at last ineffectual.



From  
OF THE  
ORTHOGRAPHIE AND CONGRUITIE  
OF THE BRITAN TONGUE

A Treates, noe shorter then necessarie,  
for the Schooles,

Be  
ALEXANDER HUME.

To clere this point, and alsoe to reform an error bred in the south, and now usurped be our ignorant printeres, I wil tel quhat befel my self quhen I was in the south with a special gud frende of myne. Ther rease, upon sum accident, quhither quho, quhen, quhat, etc., sould be symbolized with q or w, a hoat disputation betuene him and me. After manie conflictes (for we ofte encountered), we met be chance, in the citie of Baeth, with a Doctour of divinitie of both our acquaintance. He invited us to denner. At table my antagonist, to bring the question on foot amangs his awn condisciples, began that I was becum an heretik, and the doctour spering how, answered that I denyed quho to be spelled with a w, but with qu. Be quhat reason? quod the

*Doctour.* Here, I beginning to lay my grundes of labial, dental, and guttural soundes and symboles, he snapped me on this hand and he on that, that the *doctour* had mikle a doe to win me room for a syllogisme. Then (said I) a labial letter can not symboliz a guttural syllab. But w is a labial letter, quho a guttural sound. And therfoer w can not symboliz quho, nor noe syllab of that nature. Here the *doctour* staying them again (for al barked at ones), the proposition, said he, I understand; the assumption is Scottish, and the conclusion false. Quherat al laughed, as if I had bene dryven from al repleye, and I fretted to see a frivolouse jest goe for a solid answer.





# The London Bach: A Musical Interlude

(a stub paper)

Barbara Niven

Eighteenth century London was very much part of the European music scene, a major stop on the rapidly growing concert circuit. Henry Purcell and William Boyce, to name but two prominent English composers, were as highly regarded as any Continent-based musician and of course the expatriate G. F. Handel was headquartered in London. So it was that Johann Christian Bach, eleventh and youngest son of Johann Sebastian Bach, came to London in the middle of the eighteenth century and stayed there. He came to be known as ‘the London Bach’ or ‘the English Bach’.

Johann Christian Bach was born in Leipzig on 5 September 1735. His father died when he was fifteen so Johann Christian became the ward of his eldest brother, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, and studied music with him for the next five years. He then spent seven years in Italy, where he studied opera before going to London in 1762 under a twelve month contract as musical director of the Italian opera house, the King’s Theatre. He settled permanently in London, and when he died at the early age of 46, among those who mourned him was his admirer and friend of nearly twenty years, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (born 1756).

The Hanoverian court of George III and Queen Charlotte, herself of German birth, attracted many German musicians and J. C. Bach joined them as the Queen’s music instructor soon after arriving in London. He dedicated many compositions to the Queen.

J. C. Bach was probably the most famous member of the Bach family during the eighteenth century; he was certainly the most cosmopolitan and was sufficiently important to be included by Johnson’s friend, Dr Charles Burney, in his *History of Music*. J. C. Bach is credited with having influenced Mozart’s early musical style and is notable for composing many works for the recently-invented forte piano before it became universally popular. Unlike his father, Johann Christian preferred the piano to the harpsichord and many of his concertos were designed to be played on either instrument.

In the following anecdote, told by Fanny Burney, J. C. Bach is the butt of a Johnsonian witticism:

My sister then played another duet, accompanied by my father, to which Mrs Thrale seemed very attentive; and all the rest quietly resigned. But Dr Johnson had opened a volume of the British Encyclopedia, and was so deeply engaged, that the music, probably, never reached his ears.

When it was over, Mrs Thrale, in a laughing manner, said, 'Pray, Dr Burney, will you be so good as to tell me what that song was, and whose, which Savoi sung last night at Bach's concert, and which you did not hear?'

My father confessed himself by no means so able a diviner, not having had time to consult the stars, though he lived in the house of Sir Isaac Newton. But anxious to draw Dr Johnson into conversation he ventured to interrupt him with Mrs Thrale's conjuring request relative to Bach's concert.

The Doctor, comprehending his drift, good-naturedly put away his book, and, see-sawing, with a very humorous smile, drolly repeated, 'Bach, sir? – Bach's concert? – And pray, sir, who is Bach? – Is he a piper?'

You may imagine what exclamations followed such a question.

Mrs Thrale gave a detailed account of the nature of the concert, and the fame of Mr Bach; and the many charming performances she had heard, with all their variety, in his rooms.

When there was a pause, 'Pray, madam,' said he, with calmest gravity, 'what is the expence for all this?'

'O,' answered she, 'the expence is – much trouble and solicitation to obtain a subscriber's ticket – or else, half-a-guinea.'

'Trouble and solicitation,' he replied, 'I will have nothing to do with! – but, if it be so fine, – I would be willing to give,' – he hesitated, and then finished with – 'eighteen pence.'

Ha! Ha! – Chocolate then being brought, we returned to the drawing room.

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