

## INTRODUCTION

Samuel Johnson, the greatest English man of letters, was born in Lichfield (about 120 miles N.W. of London) on 18 September, 1709. As many accounts of his life are available, it will be enough to provide the following sign-posts:

1717-25	Attends Lichfield Grammar School
1726-28	Works in his father's bookshop in Lichfield
1728	Enters Pembroke College, Oxford
1729	Leaves Oxford without a degree
1730-33	In Lichfield, Market Bosworth, and Birmingham
1735	Marries Elizabeth Porter ('Tetty'), a widow of 46 Opens a school in Lichfield
1737	Makes his way to London with David Garrick
1738	13 May publishes <i>London: A Poem</i> .

As *London* and *The Vanity of Human Wishes* are based on two of Juvenal's satires, something should be said about the Roman poet. *Decimus Iunius Iuvenalis* (born about A.D. 60; died some time after 130) came from Aquinum, a town about 80 miles S.E. of Rome. Very little is known of his life. He published his first book of satires (nos. 1-5) under Trajan about A.D. 110 and his fourth book (nos. 10-12) under Hadrian about 125. To judge from his work he experienced a good deal of frustration and disappointment, but the tradition that he spent some years in exile is not well supported.

After enjoying little success in his lifetime, Juvenal came into fashion in the fourth century, survived the vicissitudes of the dark ages, and began to attract interest again after the eleventh century.<sup>1</sup> The first printed edition appeared at Rome before the end of 1469.<sup>2</sup> Translations began in England with the version by Sir Robert Stapylton (1647), but this was easily surpassed by Dryden's brilliant rendering of five satires, including nos. 3 and 10, in 1693. Though Johnson was familiar with Dryden's work, he chose to write in a rather different tradition, namely that of imitation. This he called 'a kind of middle composition between translation and original design, which pleases when the thoughts are unexpectedly applicable and the parallels lucky'.<sup>3</sup> Speaking from memory, Johnson thought the

<sup>1</sup> See Hightet, chapters 28-32.

<sup>2</sup> See C.F. Bühler, 'The Earliest Editions of Juvenal', *Studies in the Renaissance* 2 (1955) 84-95.

<sup>3</sup> 'Life of Pope' in *The Lives of the Poets*, ed. G.B. Hill, Oxford 1905, iii, 176. In Pope's early editions Horace's Latin was printed *en face* for purposes of reference, and where *London* came closest to Juvenal Johnson saw to it that the reader had the Latin lines before him. So reproducing the original in the present edition is not merely a pedantic exercise.

tradition had begun with Rochester and Oldham, but it can be seen in embryonic form as early as Wyatt (1503-42). The theory was enunciated by Denham and Cowley in the 1650's and applied in Cowley's 'The Country Mouse' (1663). Similar ideas were gaining ground in France, where Boileau published a collection of satires, based loosely on Horace and Juvenal, in 1666. The example of Cowley and Boileau was followed by Rochester and Oldham in the 1670's, and the latter's 'up-dated' version of Juvenal 3 supplied several hints for Johnson's *London*. Dryden expressed misgivings about imitation in the preface to his translation of Ovid's *Epistles* (1680), but at least four imitations of Juvenal appeared between 1683 and 1694, and Horace was even more popular. The greatest achievements in the genre, however, belonged to the next century. Between 1712 and 1714 Swift adapted two Horatian epistles and one satire; and Pope's wonderful *Imitations of Horace*, eleven in all, appeared in the five years preceding *London*.<sup>4</sup>

Johnson wisely decided to avoid Horace, but he took up the challenge by turning to Juvenal, a writer whom he knew in three different ways: through a direct study of the Latin text, through the translations and imitations mentioned above, and through the scholarly comments which had appeared in the major editions since the renaissance. In this mass of material he found two main conceptions of Juvenal. The first saw him as primarily a moralist, whose castigation of a decadent, pagan society made him acceptable to Christian readers. The second saw him chiefly as a wit, whose devastating and often indecent attacks could be savoured with malicious pleasure. Johnson was acknowledging both points of view when he described the peculiarity of Juvenal as 'a mixture of gaiety and stateliness, of pointed sentences [i.e. sharp and perceptive epigrams] and declamatory grandeur'.<sup>5</sup> The actual proportions of the mixture, whether because of theme, mood, or age, varied somewhat as between Satire 3 and Satire 10; and the reader will find an even wider variation in Johnson's response. But in any case it is clear from what has been said of Juvenal's place in the English tradition that Johnson had strong literary reasons for attempting his imitations.

He also had historical reasons. Like Pope, he was living in a period when the parallel between England and Rome (in social structure, institutions, and cultural outlook) could be exploited in a very striking way, so as to produce works which were both literary allusions and at the same time independent, eighteenth-century poems. More particularly, since, in the years 1737-38, Johnson was vehemently opposed to Walpole's government, he was all the more receptive to Juvenal's angry condemnation of vice and corruption in Roman public life. Admittedly Juvenal was not, properly speaking, a *political* satirist; he never advocated a return to the republican constitution; nor did he attack contemporary figures of any political

importance. (What he did was to use the notorious dead as *exempla* of folly and wickedness.) Nevertheless, from the early seventeenth century, he was widely admired as the 'opposition satirist' *par excellence*, and Dryden was following a long tradition when he praised him as 'a zealous vindicator of Roman liberty'.<sup>6</sup>

We do not know exactly why Johnson was so hostile to Walpole. The satirist's 'Toryism' is hardly the answer; such labels are vague and unreliable, and in any case Walpole's most powerful critics were Whigs. More probably we should think of the influence exerted by Savage, Guthrie, Harry Hervey, and the writers of *The Craftsman*. From listening to these men, the young Johnson, 'embittered at his failures in the Midlands and still unsure of himself in Grub Street', was disposed to blame his misfortunes on 'the system'; and Walpole *was* the system.<sup>7</sup> Such personal factors also animated Johnson's reading of Juvenal. After all the privations he had known, he felt a profound affinity with the Roman poet who, more vividly than any other, had conveyed the sting of failure and poverty. As an illustration of this affinity one thinks first of the central section of *London*, with its massive line SLOW RISES WORTH BY POVERTY DEPRESS'D. But the same deep feelings lie behind his reflections on the scholar's life in *The Vanity of Human Wishes*. Mrs Piozzi tells how, when he read these lines to his friends at Streatham, 'he burst into a passion of tears'.<sup>8</sup>

For such reasons as these, which all shade into one another, Johnson went to work. Thanks to the investigations of two modern scholars,<sup>9</sup> we can now suggest with some confidence that he used the Delphin edition (Prateus, 1684) along with the notes of the variorum commentary (Schrevelius, 1684). He seems to have worked to a large extent from memory – an astonishing feat, even in that age. And he was so familiar with the two commentaries that he sometimes embodied their notes in his imitations.

Having finished the work by about the end of March, Johnson wrote to Edward Cave, publisher of the *Gentleman's Magazine*, ostensibly acting on behalf of a needy friend. He was confident, he said, that Cave would reward it 'in a different manner from a mercenary bookseller, who counts the lines he is to purchase and considers nothing but the bulk'. He went on to add the following offer: 'As I am sensible I have transcribed it very coarsely, which, after having altered it, I was obliged to do, I will, if you please to transmit the sheets from the press, correct it

6 'A Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire' in Dryden's *Essays*, ed. W. P. Ker, Oxford 1926, ii, 87. This view of Juvenal is well documented by H. D. Weinbrot, *Augustus Caesar in 'Augustan' England*, Princeton 1978, chap. 5. I attempted to show how unhistorical it was in *The Satires of Horace*, Cambridge 1966, 258-73.

7 For these ideas I am indebted to Greene, chap. 4, especially pp. 91 and 106.

8 Mrs Piozzi, *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson*, LL.D., 1786, 50.

9 See Bloom and Bloom (1).

4 For an informative account of imitation in English poetry see Brooks.

5 'Life of Dryden' in *Lives*, ed. Hill (see n.3 above) i, 447.

for you, and take the trouble of altering any stroke of satire which you may dislike.' Cave accepted the poem, but suggested that the name of Robert Dodsley, a better-known publisher, should appear on the title page. Dodsley agreed and paid Johnson ten guineas for the copyright. As it happened, *London* was published on the same morning as Pope's 1738, so that, as Boswell remarked, 'England had at once its Juvenal and Horace as poetical monitors'. Pope's reaction to *London* was, we are told, 'candid and liberal'. 'He requested Mr Richardson . . . to endeavour to find out who this new author was. Mr Richardson, after some inquiry, having informed him that he had discovered only that his name was Johnson, and that he was some obscure man, Pope said, "He will soon be *déterré*".'<sup>10</sup>

A comparison of *London* with Juvenal *Sat.* 3 shows that Johnson has expanded the opening scene, the first part of the speaker's diatribe, and the later picture of the countryside, whereas he has shortened the woes of poverty and the dangers of city life. The passages on foreign residents, and the two epilogues, are more or less equal.

1. Juvenal begins by relating Umbricius' decision to leave Rome for Cumae, an old Greek colony on the coast, now rather deserted. He approves of the decision, listing some of the hazards of Roman life. Finally he describes the scene just outside the Porta Capena (1-20). Johnson gives a longer list of hazards and significantly alters the poet's reflections at the point of departure (Greenwich); for while Juvenal contrasts the squalid area outside the Porta Capena with what it was like in the days of King Numa (and makes a characteristic joke about the pious gentleman's love-life), Johnson is more respectful in his nostalgia, recalling the great days of Elizabeth when England was powerful abroad and internally sound. In this way he adds a *political* dimension (1-30).

2. Umbricius claims that Rome is a place where social nonentities grow rich by following sordid occupations. What room is there for him? He cannot lie or cheat (21-57). Thales omits the element of class resentment but imports political comment, satirising treasonable speeches in parliament, the stage licensing act, Walpole's *Gazetteer*, and the dispensing of patronage (31-90).

3. Umbricius' picture of country life, though favourable, is far from idyllic. Phrases like 'learn to love your hoe', 'to regale a hundred Pythagoreans' (i.e. vegetarians), and 'to become the owner of one lizard' (a somewhat minute piece of livestock) keep enchantment at a safe distance. Thales' vision (210-23) is longer and altogether more idealized, e.g. 'There ev'ry bush with nature's music rings, / There ev'ry breeze bears health upon its wings'.

4. In Juvenal the poor man's indignities are described at greater length (126-89). Some of the complaints, however, would have struck Johnson as morally dubious, e.g. what use is there in paying one's morning respects to rich old ladies

when a great magistrate has got there first? And how scandalous it is that an upstart can afford to seduce a Roman matron when a decent citizen can barely pay for a whore! Again, Juvenal's amusing and rather patronising description of a country festival (171-9) is omitted by Johnson, who expands instead the idea of migration found in Juvenal vv. 162-3. Even these lines of escapist yearning contain a thrust at the activities of Spain (173).

5. Rather surprisingly, Johnson declines to render Juvenal's marvellously vivid description of Rome's traffic (232-67) and the objects hurled from open windows (268-77). (Did he consider the subject-matter too low?) Also, in talking of nocturnal violence, he leaves out Juvenal's quotation of the young blade's abuse with its class contempt and race hatred (292-6). The more even tenor of Johnson's style is apparent in his rather limited variation of question, exclamation, and reported speech. The contrast can be seen by simply looking at the punctuation of Juvenal's text.

6. In Juvenal's section on foreigners (58-125) prejudice is evoked by the sarcastic use of Greek terms, Greek names, and Greek mythology, by the implication that the immigrants are so much refuse washed down by the river or blown in by the wind, and by the employment of sexual or excretory images to point a rhetorical climax. In this last respect Johnson is much less coarse (in spite of 'sewer', 'clap', and 'whore'). He also gives the passage a patriotic tone by complaining in sonorous and elevated style that the Englishman has abandoned his native virtues (99-106 and 117-22).

*London* as a whole is less cynical than its model. It conveys a strong desire for integrity in politics and social life, and calls for a foreign policy which will uphold ancient traditions of national greatness. The country's ills at home and abroad are naively ascribed to Walpole's corrupt and supine administration – an error which Johnson later confessed.<sup>11</sup> And the vision of rural life is decidedly rosy. One must remember, however, not just that *London* is a young man's poem, but that even in 1738 it reflected only the dominant mood of the writer, not his total view. In spite of its vileness, the city had many attractions. Johnson was happy to stay there, and he once remarked in a famous pronouncement that 'when a man is tired of London, he is tired of life'.<sup>12</sup>

The main stages in the next period of Johnson's life are as follows:

1739	Stays with Dr John Taylor at Ashbourne in Derbyshire
1740	Mortgages the family house in Lichfield Returns to London; works for the <i>Gentleman's Magazine</i>
1742	Assists in the preparation of James's <i>Medicinal Dictionary</i> Begins to catalogue the Harleian Library

<sup>11</sup> See Hawkins, *Life of Johnson*, 514; Boswell i, 131.

<sup>12</sup> Boswell iii, 178.

10 The material in this paragraph comes from Boswell i, 121 and 128-9.

- 1743 Writes his *Account of the Life of Richard Savage*  
 1746 Undertakes to compile a *Dictionary of the English Language*  
 1748 November, completes *The Vanity of Human Wishes*.

The rest of Johnson's life, during which he became a national celebrity, does not come within the scope of this commentary. He died on 13 December 1784 and was buried in Westminster Abbey.

Boswell tells us that most, if not all, of *The Vanity of Human Wishes* was written at Hampstead, where Mrs Johnson had lodgings. 'The fervid rapidity with which it was produced is scarcely credible. I have heard him say that he composed seventy lines of it in one day, without putting one of them upon paper till they were finished. I remember when I once regretted to him that he had not given us more of Juvenal's satires, he said he probably should give more, for he had them all in his head; by which I understood that he had the originals and correspondent allusions floating in his mind, which he could, when he pleased, embody and render permanent without much labour. Some of them, however, he observed, were too gross for imitation.'<sup>13</sup>

Johnson sold the copyright to Dodsley for fifteen guineas, and it was published in January 1749.

Readers may find it instructive to make a detailed comparison with Juvenal's tenth satire. The main points are as follows:

#### *Juvenal*

- 1-53 (53)** Introduction: most prayers are misguided and, if answered, harmful; various 'blessings', including eloquence, strength, wealth, and political status; the contrasting attitudes of Heraclitus and Democritus.
- 54-113 (60)** Political power: the downfall of Tiberius' powerful minister, Sejanus.
- 114-32 (19)** Eloquence: the fate of Cicero and Demosthenes.
- 133-87 (55)** Military glory: how Hannibal, Alexander, and Xerxes ended their careers.
- 188-288 (101)** Long life: physical decay, mental decay, the deaths of friends and relatives; Nestor, Priam, and others.
- 289-345 (57)** Beauty: the moral and physical dangers threatening handsome young men; Silius and Messalina.
- 346-66 (21)** Conclusion: prayers for Stoic virtues do no harm, but are unnecessary.

#### *Johnson*

- 1-72 (72)** Introduction: mankind's follies are observed from a vantage-point above the earth; the known world now stretches from China to

<sup>13</sup> Boswell i, 192-3.

Peru; abstract nouns take the place of people, giving more stately and inclusive generalisations; the idea of a deity who derives malicious amusement from human foolishness is evaded by substituting Vengeance for God; Democritus becomes a much more dignified figure.

- 73-134 (62)** Political power: the fall of Wolsey; Juvenal's vulgarity and jeering insults are replaced by melancholy reflection on the vanity and transience of power.
- 135-74 (40)** Learning: this section is expanded in a way which reflects the poet's own interest and experience; the *exempla* are briefly and respectfully mentioned; no attempt is made to reproduce Juvenal's liveliness and malice.
- 175-254 (80)** Military glory: Charles XII of Sweden, Xerxes, Charles Albert of Bavaria. Instead of sneering at these great leaders, Johnson ponders sadly on their futility.
- 255-318 (64)** Long life: Johnson is fully aware of the dreary absurdity of old age, but he shortens Juvenal's catalogue of afflictions; he omits his obscenity; and he does not harp with such merciless insistence on physical indignities.
- 319-42 (24)** Beauty: the dangers which threaten beautiful girls. Johnson again avoids Juvenal's obscenity; he develops no *exempla*; and he confines himself entirely to heterosexual follies and their cost.
- 343-68 (26)** Conclusion: a positive Christian affirmation, including the values of faith (363), hope (343) and love (361), none of which appears in Juvenal.

Boswell observed 'His *Vanity of Human Wishes* has less of common life, but more of a philosophical dignity than his *London*. More readers, therefore, will be delighted with the pointed spirit of *London*, than with the profound reflection of the *Vanity of Human Wishes*. Garrick, for instance, observed in his sprightly manner, with more vivacity than regard to just discrimination, as is usual with wits, "When Johnson lived much with the Herveys, and saw a good deal of what was passing in life, he wrote his *London*, which is lively and easy. When he became more retired, he gave us his *Vanity of Human Wishes*, which is as hard as Greek. Had he gone on to imitate another satire, it would have been as hard as Hebrew." But the *Vanity of Human Wishes* is, in the opinion of the best judges, as high an effort of ethic poetry as any language can show.'<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Boswell i, 193-4.

## Text

For *London*, apart from a few very minor corrections, I have followed the text printed in Dodsley's *Collection of Poems* (1748) vol. 1. This was the basis of all texts, except that of 1750, for over thirty-five years. The 1750 edition was a quarto reprint of the uncorrected first edition of 1738 and has no independent value. According to James Boswell the younger, Johnson made a few notes and alterations on a copy (now lost) of this inferior edition, and Boswell transcribed these marginalia onto his own copy of the 1789 edition of the *Poetical Works*. Since five of Boswell's six explanatory notes and all four of his new variants (at 5, 131, 218, and 241) had already been incorporated in Hawkins' edition of the *Works* in 1787, it is usually assumed that Hawkins too had access to Johnson's notes. There are, in addition, three emendations in Hawkins (at 74, 122, and 251) which were not recorded by Boswell. Should these also be ascribed to Johnson? Some scholars are doubtful; some go further and question whether Boswell's variants really come from Johnson. Could they, perhaps, have originated with Hawkins? Those who wish to pursue these problems should consult Moody (2) 23 and 31-5. In the present edition I have mentioned these later readings in the notes but have not admitted them to the text. Even if they do come from Johnson himself, ten years are enough, one may think, for a poem to assume its final form. After that it should be immune to further tinkering on the part of its author. This somewhat arbitrary position is easier to sustain when, as here, the later variants are either trivial or inferior.

As for *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, I have adhered to Dodsley's text of 1755, except in a few matters of spelling and punctuation. Again James Boswell the younger recorded some variants. Ten were taken from the first edition of 1749; of the remaining six (at 41, 138, 167, 268, 293, and 298), five had already appeared in Hawkins. Four other, rather feeble, emendations in Hawkins (at 199, 250, 340, and 348) were not recorded by Boswell. This time Boswell does not state explicitly that he is transcribing Johnson's handwriting, but in three instances (268, 293, and 298) he does add the words 'corr MSS' after the variant. For details the reader is referred to Moody (2) 24-30. Once again I have mentioned all these cases in the notes but have not printed them in the text.

Except in proper names, capitals are used only in clear instances of personification. There are, admittedly, doubtful cases, but it seemed better to attempt some distinction than to print every noun with a capital – a practice which tends to distract the modern reader without conveying any appreciable nuance.

The figures in square brackets in the left hand margin are intended to serve as a guide to the corresponding sections in Juvenal.

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**Samuel Johnson. London: A Poem in Imitation of the Third Satire of Juvenal. London, 1738; rev. 1748.**

*Early editions of the poem*

- 1738<sup>1</sup> First edition: R. Dodsley, 1738 (12 May). Folio.  
Dodsley bought the copyright of the poem from Johnson for 10 guineas. Johnson later remarked to Boswell, “I might perhaps have accepted less, but that Paul Whitehead had a little before got ten guineas for a poem and I would not take less than Paul Whitehead” [Smith 1].
- 1738<sup>2</sup> Second ed., revised: R. Dodsley, 1738 (ca. 20 May). Folio and octavo.  
66 lines excerpted in the Gentleman’s Magazine (May 1738): 269.  
Dublin ed.: George Faulkner, 1738. Octavo.  
Third ed.: R. Dodsley, 1738 (15 July). Folio.  
Fourth ed.: R. Dodsley, 1739. Folio.
- 1748<sup>1</sup> Revised ed. in Dodsley’s Collection of Poems (1748), 1:101 (2nd ed. 1748; 1:192) [= 1748<sup>2</sup>].
- 1751-82 “All subsequent editions of Dodsley [1751, 1755, 1758, 1763, 1765, 1766, 1770, 1775, 1782] follow this text, as do Two Satires by Samuel Johnson, Oxford, 1759; The Art of Poetry on a New Plan, 1761, II.116; The Beauties of English Poesy, ed. Goldsmith, 1767, I.59; A Select Collection of Poems, Edinburgh, 1768, 1772, I.50; Davies, Miscellaneous and Fugitive Pieces, 1773, 1774, II.300; D. Junii Juvenalis et A. Persii Flacci Satirae, ed. Knox, 1784, p. 373; Poetical Works, 1785, p.1” (Yale 46).
- 1750 Fifth ed.: R. Dodsley, 1750. Quarto. (reverts to text of first ed.)  
Probably many years after 1750 (Smith), “Johnson used a copy of this on which to make changes and add notes, forgetting the revisions he had already made. This copy, which has now disappeared, Hawkins used for his text in Works, 1787, XI.319. . . . James Boswell the younger did see the annotated copy, and in 1793 or later transcribed Johnson’s revisions and notes into a copy of the 1789 edition of Johnson’s poems, a volume owned by the late D. Nichol Smith” (Yale 46-47).
- 1785 Poetical Works.
- 1787 Works. Ed. Sir John Hawkins.  
Incorporates the ms. revisions (lines 5, 131, 218, 241) and all but one of the notes made by Johnson to a copy of 1750.
- 1789 Poetical Works.
- 1816 Works. Ed. Alexander Chalmers.  
Johnson’s ms. note to line 194 “was first printed in Works, 1816” (Yale 47).

*Abbreviations used in notes*

- Brady = Frank Brady and W. K. Wimsatt, ed. Samuel Johnson: Selected Poetry and Prose. Berkeley: U of California P, 1977.
- Greene = Donald Greene, ed. The Oxford Authors: Samuel Johnson. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984.
- Smith = David Nichol Smith and Edward L. McAdam, ed. The Poems of Samuel Johnson. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1941.

Yale = E. L. McAdam, with George Milne, ed. Poems. Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, Vol. VI. New Haven: Yale UP, 1964.

Both Smith and Yale use the text of “London” in Dodsley’s Collection of Poems (1748<sup>1</sup>), corrected by Johnson’s manuscript revisions and notes (made to a copy of 1750), for their editions. They also silently correct typographical errors.

The text below is based on Yale (= 1748<sup>1</sup>) but notes significant variations found in other editions. I relegate Johnson’s ms. revisions to the footnotes, so as to present a text closer to what actually circulated publicly in the eighteenth century. Yale also includes references (which I omit) to revisions found in the fragmentary manuscript of Johnson’s rough draft of the poem (consisting of a single large sheet, it was rediscovered in about 1945).

I omit, however, the reprinting of corresponding passages of Juvenal’s original Latin; these can be found in Smith and Yale. “Johnson insisted that the passages in Juvenal’s satire which he had followed most directly ‘must be subjoined at the bottom of the page, part of the beauty of the performance (if any beauty be allowed it) consisting in adapting Juvenal’s sentiments to modern facts and persons.’ Herein he was following a common habit and in particular the practice of Pope, who in the original editions of some of his Imitations of Horace had the corresponding passages in the original printed on the left-hand page” [Smith 1-2].

Juvenal’s Third Satire had earlier been adapted in an English “imitation” by John Oldham in 1682; it had also been translated into English by John Dryden in 1693. “There is little in common between Oldham’s and Johnson’s poems, beyond the similarity unavoidable in imitations of the same original” [Smith 2], though both Oldham and Johnson indulge in gallophobic denunciations as substitutes for Juvenal’s decrying of Greek influence on Roman society. (Pope, too, in his imitation of Horace, makes French cultural influence stand in for the Greek cultural dominance denounced by his original.) Juvenal’s poem subsequently also inspired Samuel Derrick’s *The Third Satire of Juvenal, translated into English verse* (1755) and Edward Burnaby Greene’s *The Satires of Juvenal Paraphrastically Imitated, and adapted to the Times* (1763) [Smith 3]. In discussing modern “imitations” of ancient poetry his “Life of Pope” (1781), Johnson himself argues that “between Roman images and English manners there will be an irreconcilable dissimilitude, and the work will be generally uncouth and party-coloured; neither original nor translated, neither ancient nor modern” [quoted in Smith 4]; against this, one might place Oliver Goldsmith’s judgment, made with respect to Johnson’s *London*, in *The Beauties of English Poesy* (1767) that “Imitation gives us a much truer idea of the ancients than even translation could do” [quoted in Smith 3]. In any case, “imitations” of classical poems were popular in English for about eighty years from the 1680s till past the midpoint of the eighteenth century.

More generally, “what was preeminently a social satire expressing disgust with the inequalities, the follies and the rottenness of city life, and exalting by contrast the conditions which are surmised to prevail in the country, becomes in Johnson’s hands largely a political satire. His antipathy to Walpole’s administration is given free scope in the allusions to [pusillanimity in the face of Spanish depredations,] excise, the abuse of pensions, the tyranny of the licensing laws, and the servitude of a thoughtless age. . . . *London* could be regarded by the ‘patriots’ as a political



Their ambush here relentless ruffians lay, 15  
And here the fell attorney prowls for prey;  
Here falling houses thunder on your head,  
And here a female atheist talks you dead.

While Thales waits the wherry that contains  
Of dissipated wealth the small remains, 20  
On Thames's banks, in silent thought we stood,  
Where Greenwich smiles upon the silver flood:  
Struck with the seat that gave Eliza birth,  
We kneel, and kiss the consecrated earth;  
In pleasing dreams the blissful age renew, 25  
And call Britannia's glories back to view;  
Behold her cross triumphant on the main,  
The guard of commerce, and the dread of Spain,  
Ere masquerades debauch'd, excise oppress'd,

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*Line 16 fell*] Cruel.

*Line 19 wherry*] A narrow river vessel. [Brady]

*Line 23 Eliza*] "Queen Elizabeth born at Greenwich" [Johnson's note, printed in 1787]. Elizabeth I was a heroine for the Opposition to Walpole because of her success against the Spanish. Greenwich on Thames was then "an outlying village" and is now "a district of London" [Brady]; "Johnson was lodging at Greenwich when he wrote the poem" [Smith].

*Line 27 her cross*] England's flag, the red cross of St. George.

*Line 29 excise*] Like customs duties, a tax on commodities, but applying to home products as well as, when originally established in 1643, to some foreign products. Later, the term came to be restricted to taxes applied to home products only, a "sort of inland customs" as Adam Smith put it in 1776 (*OED*). Walpole's attempt to increase excise taxes in 1733, following on earlier excises and duties passed in 1724 and 1732, prompted a concerted opposition campaign that caused him to withdraw the measure and led to a significant diminishment of Walpole's majority in the House of Commons in the election of 1734. Walpole's proposal was designed to reduce the tax burden on the landed classes by shifting much of it onto the mercantile classes and "consumers" as a whole. The opposition to excises stemmed not only from the pecuniary tax itself but also from the fact that its enforcement involved granting "extensive powers of search to revenue officers, and a wide jurisdiction to magistrates and excise commissioners. The Englishman's right to privacy on his own property, and also to trial by jury, were put at risk. An entire genre of horror stories, retailed in the press and depicted in broadsheets and prints, exploited such fears" (Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People* [1989], 29). In his *Dictionary* (1755), Johnson defines "excise" as "A hateful tax levied upon commodities, and adjudged not by the common judges of property, but wretches hired by those to whom excise is paid" [Smith].

Or English honour grew a standing jest. 30  
 A transient calm the happy scenes bestow,  
 And for a moment lull the sense of woe.  
 At length awaking, with contemptuous frown,  
 Indignant Thales eyes the neighb'ring town.  
 Since worth, he cries, in these degen'rate days, 35  
 Wants ev'n the cheap reward of empty praise;  
 In those curs'd walls, devote to vice and gain,  
 Since unrewarded science toils in vain;  
 Since hope but soothes to double my distress,  
 And ev'ry moment leaves my little less; 40  
 While yet my stedly steps no staff sustains,  
 And life still vig'rous revels in my veins;  
 Grant me, kind heaven, to find some happier place,  
 Where honesty and sense are no disgrace;  
 Some pleasing bank where verdant osiers play, 45  
 Some peaceful vale with mature's paintings gay;  
 Where once the harass'd Briton found repose,  
 And safe in poverty defy'd his foes;  
 Some secret cell, ye pow'rs, indulgent give.  
 Let —— live here, for —— has learn'd to live. 50  
 Here let those reign, whom pensions can incite

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*Line 30 English honour grew a standing jest*] “An allusion to the peaceful policies of the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Walpole. His opponents [in the “patriot” opposition (cf. line 52)] called them cowardly” [Brady]; Walpole’s “alleged failure to protect British merchant ships from depredations by Spanish coast guards” was a standard topic of Opposition rhetoric [Greene].

*Line 35* The rest of the poem is a speech by Thales [Smith].

*Line 37 devote*] Devoted; doomed.

*Line 38 science*] Learning.

*Line 41 stedly*] “steady” (in *edd.* 1-5).

*Line 45 osiers*] Willows.

*Line 47 Where once the harass'd Briton found repose*] “The ancient Britons retreated to Wales when the Saxons and other Germanic tribes invaded England” [Brady].

*Line 50* “Fred Springer-Miller has pointed out that this line is a close paraphrase of Boileau: ‘Que George vive ici, puisque George y sait vivre’ (*Satire*, I.34), and suggested that ‘George,’ i.e. George II, be supplied for the blanks. [*Notes and Queries* 196 (1951): 497]” [Yale].



And lull to servitude a thoughtless age. 60  
     Heroes, proceed! what bounds your pride shall hold?  
 What check restrain your thirst of pow'r and gold?  
 Behold rebellious virtue quite o'erthrown,  
 Behold our fame, our wealth, our lives your own.  
     To such, a groaning nation's spoils are giv'n, 65  
 When publick crimes inflame the wrath of heav'n:  
 But what, my friend, what hope remains for me,  
 Who start at theft, and blush at perjury?  
 Who scarce forbear, tho' Britain's Court he sing,  
 To pluck a titled poet's borrow'd wing; 70  
 A statesman's logick unconvinc'd can hear,  
 And dare to slumber o'er the Gazetteer;  
 Despise a fool in half his pension dress'd,  
 And strive in vain to laugh at H—y's jest.  
     Others with softer smiles, and subtler art, 75  
 Can sap the principles, or taint the heart;  
 With more address a lover's note convey,  
 Or bribe a virgin's innocence away.  
 Well may they rise, while I, whose rustick tongue  
 Ne'er knew to puzzle right, or varnish wrong, 80

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Greene has pointed out that 'warbling eunuchs' on a 'silenced stage' make the best Irish bull Johnson ever committed in print" [Yale].

*Line 65 a groaning nation's spoils are giv'n* "the Plunder of a Land is giv'n" (in *edd. 1, 5, 1787*).

*Line 73 Gazetteer*] "The paper which at that time contained apologies for the Court" [Johnson's note, printed in 1787]. The *Daily Gazetteer*, est. in 1735, was funded by the ministry.

*Line 74 H—y's*] "Clodio's" (in 1787). "H—y's jest" probably stands for "the Revd John 'Orator' Henley, a public buffoon and a supporter of Walpole" [Greene]; he was "an eccentric preacher noted for his crude jests at the Opposition" [Brady]; Pope called him "Preacher at once, and zany of thy age" (*Dunciad* III.206) [Yale]. The allusion was earlier identified as directed at "John Lord Hervey (1696-1743), supporter of Walpole and confidant of the Queen" [Smith], but McAdam later accepts the argument in favor of Henley (first made in Donald Greene's *The Politics of Samuel Johnson*, p.308) [Yale]. "The authority for Hawkins's reading, 'Clodio,' is unknown but . . . 'Clodio,' at least, is in keeping with the non-specific names of Thales, Orgilio, and Balbo" [Yale].

*Line 77 address*] Skill.

*Line 80 puzzle*] Confuse.

Spurn'd as a begger, dreaded as a spy,  
Live unregarded, unlamented die.

For what but social guilt the friend endears?  
Who shares Orgilio's crimes, his fortune shares.  
But thou, should tempting villainy present 85  
All Marlborough hoarded, or all Villiers spent;  
Turn from the glittering bribe thy scornful eye,  
Nor sell for gold, what gold could never buy,  
The peaceful slumber, self-approving day,  
Unsullied fame, and conscience ever gay. 90

The cheated nation's happy favorites, see!  
Mark whom the great caress, who frown on me!  
London! the needy villain's general home,  
The common shore of Paris and of Rome;  
With eager thirst, by folly or by fate, 95  
Sucks in the dregs of each corrupted state.  
Forgive my transports on a theme like this,  
I cannot bear a French metropolis.

Illustrious Edward! from the realms of day,

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*Line 81 begger*] "beggar" (in *edd. 1, 5*).

*Line 86 Marlborough*] "The great general, John Churchill, first Duke of Marlborough (1650-1722), made an immense financial profit during his campaigns against the French in the War of the Spanish Succession (1702-11)" [Brady]. In his "Life of Swift" (1781), Johnson writes, "That is no longer doubted, of which the nation was then first informed, that the war was unnecessarily protracted to fill the pockets of Marlborough, and that it would have been continued without end if he could have continued his annual plunder" [Smith].

*Line 86 Villiers*] "George Villiers, 2nd Duke of Buckingham [1628-87], who wasted a fortune and died in squalor" [Greene]. Villiers is the "Zimri" of Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel*; cf. also Pope's *Of the Use of Riches* (1732), ll.299-314 [Smith].

*Line 94 shore*] "sewer" (in *1758, 1763-82, 1787*); in the *Dictionary* (1755), Johnson writes that "shore" is "properly *sewer*" and "sewer" is "now corrupted to *shore*" [Smith]. "Johnson transfers Juvenal's imprecations against the baleful influence of Greek immigrants in Rome to the French" [Greene]; John Oldham's imitation of Juvenal (1682) has: "the common-shore, / Where France does all her filth and ordure pour" [Yale].

*Line 98 French metropolis*] I.e., "a London whose customs imitate French ones" [Brady].

*Line 99 Edward*] "Edward III (1312-77) was famous for his victories over the French [e.g., at Crécy]" [Brady].

*Line 99 realms of day*] Heaven.

The land of heroes and of saints survey; 100  
 Nor hope the British lineaments to trace,  
 The rustick grandeur, or the surly grace;  
 But lost in thoughtless ease, and empty show,  
 Behold the warrior dwindled to a beau;  
 Sense, freedom, piety, refin'd away, 105  
 Of France the mimick, and of Spain the prey.  
     All that at home no more can beg or steal,  
 Or like a gibbet better than a wheel;  
 Hiss'd from the stage, or hooted from the court,  
 Their air, their dress, their politicks import; 110  
 Obsequious, artful, voluble and gay,  
 On Britain's fond credulity they prey.  
 No gainful trade their industry can 'scape,  
 They sing, they dance, clean shoes, or cure a clap;  
 All sciences a fasting Monsieur knows, 115  
 And bid him go to hell, to hell he goes.  
     Ah! what avails it, that, from slav'ry far,  
 I drew the breath of life in English air;  
 Was early taught a Briton's right to prize,  
 And lisp the tale of Henry's victories; 120  
 If the gull'd conqueror receives the chain,  
 And flattery subdues when arms are vain?  
     Studious to please, and ready to submit,  
 The supple Gaul was born a parasite:  
 Still to his int'rest true, where'er he goes, 125  
 Wit, brav'ry, worth, his lavish tongue bestows;  
 In ev'ry face a thousand graces shine,  
 From ev'ry tongue flows harmony divine.

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*Line 104 beau*] Dandy, fop.

*Line 108 gibbet . . . wheel*] "Hanging and breaking on the wheel were the British and French methods of execution respectively" [Brady, following Smith].

*Line 112 fond*] Foolish.

*Line 116* Cf. in Dryden's translation of Juvenal, "And bid him go to Heav'n, to Heav'n he goes" [Smith].

*Line 120 Henry's victories*] "The victories of Henry V (1387-1422) over the French [e.g. at Agincourt]" [Brady].

*Line 122 And flattery subdues when arms are vain?*] "And what their armies lost, their cringes gain?" (in *edd.* 1-5); "vain." (in 1748); "flattery prevails" (in 1787).

These arts in vain our rugged natives try,  
Strain out with fault'ring diffidence a lye, 130  
And gain a kick for aukward flattery.

Besides, with justice, this discerning age  
Admires their wond'rous talents for the stage:  
Well may they venture on the mimick's art,  
Who play from morn to night a borrow'd part; 135  
Practis'd their master's notions to embrace,  
Repeat his maxims, and reflect his face;  
With ev'ry wild absurdity comply,  
And view each object with another's eye;  
To shake with laughter ere the jest they hear, 140  
To pour at will the counterfeited tear;  
And as their patron hints the cold or heat,  
To shake in dog-days, in December sweat.  
How, when competitors like these contend,  
Can surly virtue hope to fix a friend? 145  
Slaves that with serious impudence beguile,  
And lye without a blush, without a smile;  
Exalt each trifle, ev'ry vice adore,  
Your taste in snuff, your judgment in a whore;  
Can Balbo's eloquence applaud, and swear 150  
He gropes his breeches with a monarch's air.

For arts like these preferr'd, admir'd, caress'd,  
They first invade your table, then your breast;  
Explore your secrets with insidious art,  
Watch the weak hour, and ransack all the heart; 155  
Then soon your ill-plac'd confidence repay,

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*Lines 129-31* “The only triplet in Johnson’s mature verse” [Yale].

*Line 131 gain*] “get” (Johnson’s MS. revision, 1787).

*Line 143 dog-days*] “Late summer days when Sirius (the Dog Star) was prominent” [Brady].

*Line 150 Balbo*] “There are no grounds for identifying this ‘stammerer’ with any one speaker” [Smith].

*Line 151 gropes*] “Used in the obsolete sense ‘to touch with the hand, take hold of, grasp.’ This line is quoted in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as the latest example of this use” [Smith]. This remark, and the *OED* entry on “grope,” seem unnecessarily cautious: the “indecent” sense of the term is attested by the *OED* for 1664 but this sense is labeled “obsolete.” It is not, of course, obsolete and there is no reason to suppose that it does not also color Johnson’s usage here.

*Line 152 preferr'd*] Given public office or promotion [Brady].

Commence your lords, and govern or betray.  
 By numbers here from shame or censure free,  
 All crimes are safe, but hated poverty.  
 This, only this, the rigid law pursues, 160  
 This, only this, provokes the snarling muse;  
 The sober trader at a tatter'd cloak,  
 Wakes from his dream, and labours for a joke;  
 With brisker air the silken courtiers gaze,  
 And turn the varied taunt a thousand ways. 165  
 Of all the griefs that harrass the distress'd,  
 Sure the most bitter is a scornful jest;  
 Fate never wounds more deep the gen'rous heart,  
 Than when a blockhead's insult points the dart.  
 Has heaven reserv'd, in pity to the poor, 170  
 No pathless waste, or undiscover'd shore;  
 No secret island in the boundless main?  
 No peaceful desart yet unclaim'd by Spain?  
 Quick let us rise, the happy seats explore,  
 And bear oppression's insolence no more. 175  
 This mournful truth is ev'ry where confess'd,  
 SLOW RISES WORTH, BY POVERTY DEPRESS'D:  
 But here more slow, where all are slaves to gold,  
 Where looks are merchandise, and smiles are sold,  
 Where won by bribes, by flatteries implor'd, 180  
 The groom retails the favours of his lord.  
 But hark! th' affrighted crowd's tumultuous cries  
 Roll thro' the streets, and thunder to the skies;  
 Rais'd from some pleasing dream of wealth and pow'r,  
 Some pompous palace, or some blissful bow'r, 185  
 Aghast you start, and scarce with aking sight,  
 Sustain th' approaching fire's tremendous light;  
 Swift from pursuing horrors take your way,  
 And leave your little all to flames a prey;  
 Then thro' the world a wretched vagrant roam, 190  
 For where can starving merit find a home?

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*Line 161 the snarling muse*] The muse of satire [Brady].

*Line 173 unclaim'd by Spain?*] “The Spaniards at this time were said to make claim to some of our American provinces” [Johnson’s MS. note, 1787]. Again, Johnson’s discourse, in keeping with the typical British outlook of the time, reverses the actual situation: the British colony of Georgia (est. 1732), and before that traders and settlers from the Carolinas, encroached onto territory long claimed by the Spanish as “Guale”—to say nothing of its native inhabitants, such as the Yamasee and Santee Indians, who had been extirpated by the British after the Yamasee war of 1715.



Some hireling senator's deserted seat;  
 And stretch thy prospects o'er the smiling land,  
 For less than rent the dungeons of the Strand; 215  
 There prune thy walks, support thy drooping flow'rs,  
 Direct thy rivulets, and twine thy bow'rs;  
 And, while thy beds a cheap repast afford,  
 Despise the dainties of a venal lord:  
 There ev'ry bush with nature's musick rings, 220  
 There ev'ry breeze bears health upon its wings;  
 On all thy hours security shall smile,  
 And bless thine evening walk and morning toil.  
     Prepare for death, if here at night you roam,  
 And sign your will before you sup from home. 225  
 Some fiery fop, with new commission vain,  
 Who sleeps on brambles till he kills his man;  
 Some frolick drunkard, reeling from a feast,  
 Provokes a broil, and stabs you for a jest.  
 Yet ev'n these heroes, mischievously gay, 230

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*Line 213 Some hireling senator's deserted seat*] "The country house of some peer or MP who has a government appointment in Westminster" [Greene].

*Line 214 prospects*] Views.

*Lines 216-23* One might contrast this pastoral evocation of the countryside with Johnson's remarks in his "Life of Savage" (1744): "As he [Savage] was ready to entertain himself with future Pleasures, he had planned out a Scheme of Life for the Country, of which he had no Knowledge but from Pastorals and Songs. He imagined that he should be transported to Scenes of flow'ry Felicity, like those which one Poet has reflected to another, and had projected a perpetual Round of innocent Pleasures, of which he suspected no Interruption from Pride, or Ignorance, or Brutality" [Smith]. One might also note the disappointing encounter with the shepherd's life and rustic simplicity in Johnson's *Rasselas* (1759) and *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* (1775).

*Line 218 beds*] "grounds" (Johnson's MS. revision, 1787).

*Line 223 thine*] "thy" (in *edd.* 1755-82). In his *Dictionary* (1755) (A Grammar of the English Tongue—Of Pronouns), Johnson remarks, "*mine* and *thine* were formerly used before a vowel, as *mine amiable Lady*; which though now disused in prose, might be still properly continued in poetry" [Smith].

*Line 223 toil*] Pronounced "tile": "oi" was usually pronounced "i" (as in "line") [Brady].

*Line 226 new commission vain*] "A newly commissioned army officer" [Brady].

*Line 227 sleeps on brambles*] I.e., sleeps uneasily [Brady], as on thorns [Yale].

Lords of the street, and terrors of the way;  
Flush'd as they are with folly, youth and wine,  
Their prudent insults to the poor confine;  
Afar they mark the flambeau's bright approach,  
And shun the shining train, and golden coach. 235

In vain, these dangers past, your doors you close,  
And hope the balmy blessings of repose:  
Cruel with guilt, and daring with despair,  
The midnight murd'rer bursts the faithless bar;  
Invades the sacred hour of silent rest, 240  
And plants, unseen, a dagger in your breast.

Scarce can our fields, such crowds at Tyburn die,  
With hemp the gallows and the fleet supply.  
Propose your schemes, ye Senatorian band,  
Whose Ways and Means support the sinking land; 245  
Lest ropes be wanting in the tempting spring,  
To rig another convoy for the k—g.

A single jail, in Alfred's golden reign,  
Could half the nation's criminals contain;  
Fair justice then, without constraint ador'd, 250  
Held high the steady scale, but drop'd the sword;

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*Line 234 the flambeaux's bright approach*] “the rich were lighted on their way home by servants or linkboys carrying torches (flambeaux)” [Brady].

*Line 235 train*] Retinue.

*Line 241 plants*] “leaves” (Johnson's MS. revision, 1787).

*Line 242 Tyburn*] “The customary place of execution in eighteenth-century London [till 1783]” [Brady].

*Line 245 Ways and Means*] “A cant term in the House of Commons for methods of raising money” (Johnson's MS. note, 1787).

*Line 247 rig another convoy for the k—g*] Johnson satirizes “George II's frequent visits to his mistress, Amalie von Wallmoden, in Hanover” [Greene].

*Line 248 Alfred*] Alfred the Great, King of the West Saxons (849-899 CE).

*Line 251 Held high the steady scale, but drop'd the sword*] “Sustain'd the ballance, but resign'd the sword” (in *edd.* 1-5); “deep'd” (in 1755-85); “sheath'd” (in 1787); “drop'd” (emendation in Yale, based on MS. note, “. . . but dropp'd the sword,” in copy of *A Classical Arrangement of Fugitive Pieces* [1763] at Yale Univ. [see Smith]).

