



# Introduction: Samuel Johnson after three hundred years, and beyond

## Citation

Weinbrot, Howard D. 2009. Introduction: Samuel Johnson after three hundred years, and beyond. Harvard Library Bulletin 20 (3-4): 1-8.

## Permanent link

<http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:42669197>

## Terms of Use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA>

## Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.  
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#).

[Accessibility](#)

# Introduction

## Samuel Johnson After Three Hundred Years, and Beyond

*Howard D. Weinbrot*

WE NOW HAVE EXPERIENCED SOME THREE HUNDRED YEARS of Johnsonian biography, study, discussion, and friendly squabbles over meaning. We also have experienced historical, political, formal, Freudian, Marxist, colonial, imperial, lexicographic, and many other kinds of analyses of his major and minor works. Readers may legitimately ask, What more there is to learn about Samuel Johnson? The distinguished Johnsonians in the following essays offer some tentative answers to that question. They presented their papers at the Houghton Library's remarkable "Johnson at 300" symposium on August 27–29, 2009. Professor James Engell delivered his paper just prior to the appended annual dinner meeting of the Johnsonians.<sup>1</sup>

### 1.

The contributors range across many aspects of Johnson's career and achievement. Nicholas Hudson's "Johnson and Revolution" carefully considers Johnson's comments on the Revolution of 1688, locates these within his age's political attitudes, and assesses his contribution to the concept of "revolution." In so doing, Hudson finds fluidity within the concepts of Whig and Tory, whose values change over time. Some Whigs thought James II's forced abdication a restoration of the ancient constitution. More radical Whigs thought it a timid reform that should have gone much further. Tories gradually moved away from Jacobite principles like passive obedience and divine right. They settled for a strong monarch whom they hoped to have found in George III, and whom they defended from radicals' attacks. Within these contexts, if Johnson was at

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the Houghton symposium and the Johnsonian dinner, see J. T. Scanlan, "The Houghton Library Symposium," *Johnsonian News Letter* 61 (2010): 20–23. The same number includes memorials of the Pembroke College, Oxford, and Lichfield celebrations during the handsome three-week birthday party in the months around Johnson's birth, September 18, 1709, new style.

*Howard D. Weinbrot* 1

all “Jacobite” it was more likely to have been in his later than in his early years, and associated with the continuity of George III’s part in the constitution rather than James II’s. This need for a powerful, constitutional, royal presence probably would have put Johnson on Edmund Burke’s side regarding the French Revolution, in which Burke in effect repudiated his criticisms of the throne in the 1770s.

James Basker’s “Johnson and Slavery” has three important functions. It demonstrates Johnson’s antipathy to slavery and the ways in which it manifested itself in his life, writings, and relationship with his black servant and surrogate son Francis Barber. It distinguishes between Johnson’s views and Boswell’s, who was both indifferent to the plight of slaves and unsympathetic to critics of slavery like Johnson. It also recovers elements of what Basker calls “the story Boswell never told”—namely, the legal brief Johnson wrote on behalf of the slave Joseph Knight that Boswell claimed to have misplaced and that he reproduced only as a difficult-to-find addendum to the *Life of Johnson’s* second edition. Basker also considers Johnson’s twenty-five year membership in Bray’s Associates, a charity that funded schools for black children in the slave colonies. We have a new perspective not only on Johnson’s attitude toward racial slavery, but also on the ways in which Boswell, among other biographers, may have obscured that morally urgent aspect of Johnson’s mind and art.

James Engell’s “Johnson on Blackmore, Pope, Shakespeare—and Johnson” adds new insights regarding the *Lives of the Poets* in general and the often ignored “Life of Blackmore” in particular. Johnson both insisted that Blackmore be included and quoted liberally from his works. Johnson regularly contrasts Blackmore’s virtuous life which he praises and, *Creation* excepted, his poetry which he laments. Pope was personally malignant but a great poet. Blackmore was personally virtuous but a mediocre poet. This aspect of the *Lives* represents one of Johnson’s insufficiently acknowledged and perhaps disturbing critical and psychological insights: the relationship between literary genius and moral virtue may be more than uncertain.

Allen Reddick’s “Vindicating Milton: Poetic Misprision in Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language*” is one of this volume’s three contributions to the study of the 1755 *Dictionary*. Reddick carefully navigates through what he regards as Scylla and Charybdis readings of Johnson’s illustrative quotations. In his judgment, they neither reflect Johnson’s own considered opinions on all matters, nor are meaningless evocations of words designed only to clarify usage. Nonetheless, in some cases the illustrative quotations suggest certain patterns. His essay attempts to trace the ways in which Johnson uses and in some cases misuses Milton’s poetry. These may imply Johnson’s attitudes towards Milton and political and literary history. Certain quotations may perhaps seem ironic or mock-heroic at Milton’s expense. Reddick argues that the *Dictionary* participates in the transformation of Milton from the once republican and dangerous political activist to the great epic poet he had become in the national canon. Johnson also uses one of Pope’s key lines to suggest a critique of Milton.

Jack Lynch's "Modes of Definition in Johnson and His Contemporaries" hopes to begin resolution of a paradox in studies of Johnson's lexicography: his definitions are the least examined element of that great work. Lynch compares and contrasts Johnson's mode of proceeding with those by nine other English lexicographers from Robert Cawdrey (1604) to Charles Richardson (1818–1837). Examining the frequency of nine modes of definitions in Johnson's *Dictionary* and those other works from the early seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries makes it possible to see the extent of Johnson's originality in defining English words. Johnson's methods generally were consistent with those of the other lexicographers, though he makes greater use of the antonym than they do. He also shows less interest in the genus-differentiae style of definition, in which a word is defined by giving its kind and the differences from others of its kind. Lynch's tentative conclusions suggest new ways further to examine Johnson's definitions in his book of definitions.

Lynch also has assembled an important bibliography of studies that focus on Johnson's *Dictionary* from the publication of James H. Sledd and Gwin J. Kolb's seminal *Dr. Johnson's Dictionary: Essays in the Biography of a Book* (1955) to 2009, the Johnson 300 year and the varied celebrations in his honor. Johnson's *Dictionary* indeed is among the single most analyzed texts in the English language. As Lynch's bibliography shows, it has been discussed in at least eight countries beyond those for which English is the native language.

We have, then, new light on Johnson's general view of monarchy, politics, civil rights, and human freedom. We see how the biography of a minor poet reflects Johnson's larger concept of the tenuous relationship between a good life and good art. We also see two of his lexical methods: how to define words, and how to use illustrative quotations. These sometimes altered quotations may have reflected, if not influenced, Milton's changing reputation from regicide to transcendent epic poet. The substantial bibliography of *Dictionary* studies denotes its importance in the history of the English language and of lexicography in general.

## 2.

The wealth of these and other Johnsonian interventions suggests that the more we learn the more we need to learn. Few of us, for example, knew that in 2005, the *Dictionary's* 250th anniversary, the Church of England anointed Johnson as a minor saint. December 13 in the *Book of Common Worship* now includes "Samuel Johnson, Moralist, 1784." That month of course includes exalted religious company and events central to Christian worship. Though I cannot gild the handsome lily of sanctification, I hope to add a little to that increasing store of knowledge about Johnson and his contexts. I briefly consider an essentially ignored commentator and journal-editor with whom Johnson was in occasional contact. I am referring to Thomas Bellamy and his *General Magazine*

Howard D. Weinbrot 3

and *Impartial Review* (1787–1792). Much of the *General Magazine* also is important in the history of the eighteenth-century stage, in the textual propagation of Shakespeare's plays, and, for our purposes, with discussion of Johnson's religion, publication of his sermons and prayers. These were the subject of an especially rich and packed session at the Houghton symposium.

The *General Magazine* included several items regarding Johnson, Boswell, Mrs. Piozzi, and other members of Johnson's wide circle. Bellamy was a demonstrable Johnsonophile, in part because of what seems like a psychological and almost stylistic sympathy. As he says in the *Rambler*-like "Introductory Essay" to the *General Magazine*, "Certain it is, that the miseries of millions may be attributed to those amusements which idleness never fails to throw in the way of such as have leisure to be idle" (1 [June, 1787]: 6). Thereafter, he tells readers that his *Magazine* must not have any moral impurities. It is "intended to convey, sentiments of purity and of truth" (6 [1792]: sig. A3<sup>r</sup>). Bellamy's later *Monthly Mirror* praises Johnson's periodical essays as the lone worthy heirs of Addison and Steele, whose animation, genius, and soul had disappeared in their later imitators: Johnson carried his unparalleled "profundity of thought and subtlety of discrimination" into his *Rambler* papers.<sup>2</sup>

Though Bellamy himself was not profound, he played a significant if small part in the later eighteenth-century literary world. He busied himself in managing the *General Magazine* and other entrepreneurial publishing ventures. He wrote stories, a play, and poems; he engaged artists for numerous engravings and organized much of the layout for the *General Magazine*; he selected portions of Shakespeare's plays that regularly were printed with each number; and he supervised the reviews of recent publications, some of which I suspect he wrote himself.<sup>3</sup> Unlike Johnson's major biographers, Bellamy had no stake in Johnsonian sibling rivalries, and unlike Boswell he is able to praise Mrs. Piozzi for her contributions to Johnson's milieu. In January 1788 Bellamy reviews Mrs.

2 *The Monthly Mirror: Reflecting Men and Manners, with Strictures on Their Epitome, the Stage* 1 (1795): iv–v.

3 Bellamy's biographical details are best found in Elizabeth Sarah Villa-Real Gooch's memoir prefixed to his posthumously published *The Beggar Boy: A Novel, in Three Volumes . . . By the Late Mr. Thomas Bellamy. To which are now prefixed, Biographical Particulars of the Author* (London: Earl & Hemet, 1801). She insists that an unnamed reviewer was responsible for all of the *General Magazine*'s many reviews (1: xxii–xxiii). I am indebted to Isobel Grundy for alerting me to this work. Given the virtual congruence with the reviews' judgments and Bellamy's known beliefs regarding Johnson, it is at the least plausible that Bellamy wrote them or had a hand in them. He certainly approved of their warm praise of all matters Johnsonian. I use the shorthand of "Bellamy" as Johnson's reviewer, especially given the personal contact implicit in the reviews. *The Monthly Mirror* reviewed *The Beggar Boy* and offered two corrections to Villa-Real Gooch's account: Bellamy broke with Dibdin before, not after, the publication of his *Miscellanies*, and he received the major portion of the income from *The Monthly Mirror* for the last five years of his life. See the *Mirror* 12 (December 1801): 181–182.

#### 4 *Samuel Johnson After Three Hundred Years, and Beyond*

Piozzi's *Letters to and from the late Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* Any information regarding that good man, he says, "must be greatly acceptable to all who know how to appreciate the value of such communication." Unfortunately, the many who criticized Mrs. Piozzi's *Anecdotes of Johnson* (1786) and Boswell's *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Johnson* (1786) forgot "that nothing true can be known tending to disgrace him" (2 [January, 1788]:143). There are other remarks in defense of Mrs. Piozzi and her works, as there are of Johnson. I will focus briefly on Bellamy's, or his reviewer's, observations regarding Johnson's sermons.

John Taylor's *A Letter to Samuel Johnson, LL.D. on the subject of a Future State* (1787) responded to Johnson's remark that he would rather have a state of torment than of annihilation.<sup>4</sup> Taylor fears that such a view could disrupt tender minds, and he engages Johnson in posthumous discourse which he was fortunate enough not to hear in the Great Beyond. For Bellamy, Taylor's remarks are nothing but clichéd "common pulpit discourse." He thus only regrets "that instead of Taylor writing to Johnson, Johnson did not write to Taylor." If Taylor wants to do some good, he should publish "certain *Sermons*, said to be in his possession, and to be written by the literary Colossus, to whom this letter is addressed" (*General Magazine* 1 [June, 1787]: 18).

So warm a hope for excellent sermons was unusual. *The Monthly Mirror* later complained that many such collections suffer either from poor style, commonplace observations, or dull spirit. They "are soon laid aside: the reader does not find the edification he hoped to meet with."<sup>5</sup> That is not Johnson's case. In April 1788 Bellamy warmly reviews the sermon *For the Funeral of his Wife, Published by the Rev. Samuel Hayes*, and again asks that the other sermons be published. He has indeed "frequently heard Dr. Taylor in the pulpit; but, four-fifths of the discourses he delivered were certainly written by Dr. Johnson" (1 [April, 1788]: 199).

Bellamy gets his wish. In June 1788 he reviews the *Thirteen Sermons on different Subjects, Left for Publication by John Taylor, LL.D.* He both praises Johnson and scolds

4 Boswell so records on September 12, 1773 in Skye: "No wise man will be contented to die, if he thinks he is to fall into annihilation: for however unhappy any man's existence may be, he yet would rather have it, than not exist at all." Johnson also discussed annihilation when on September 16, 1777, he considered Hume's indifference to death. The topic reappears on April 15, 1788, when Johnson reasserts that "mere existence is so much better than nothing, that one would rather exist even in pain, than not exist." For these, see *Boswell's Life of Johnson, Together with Boswell's Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides and Johnson's Diary of a Journey into North Wales*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, rev. L. F. Powell, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934–1950), 5:180 (Skye, from the *Journey*), 3:153 (re: Hume), 3:295–296 (mere existence). Thomas Taylor reprints the *Letter* and briefly discusses contemporary response to it. See Taylor, *A Life of John Taylor LL. D. of Ashbourne* (London: St. Catherine Press and J. Nisbet, [1911]), 27–48.

5 *The Monthly Mirror* 18 (October 1804): 251. This reviews Samuel Clapham's collection of *Sermons, Selected and Abridged Chiefly from Minor Authors . . . For the Use of Families* (London: F. C. and J. Rivington et al., 1804). Clapham's collection is an exception to the general rule.

Taylor for appearing to take credit for Johnson's work. These are among the forty that Johnson himself said he had written:

Why his name is not prefixed to them, we are at a loss to guess; and we are equally at a loss to guess why the Sermon on the death of his wife is not added to the number. These are not *all* the Sermons Taylor had of Johnson's composition: and it is greatly to be wished that the remainder of that great man's Discourses may be recovered from the different hands in which they are lodged. It ought, however, to be generally understood, that these *are* the Sermons of Johnson, for there are some who would read his Discourses, and might thereby reap great advantages, who cannot be tempted to peruse those of an ecclesiastic, especially an ecclesiastic of so little celebrity as Dr. Taylor, who ought himself to have been the Editor of these Discourses, or to have instructed Mr. H[ayes] to avow the author. (*General Magazine* 2 [June, 1788]: 311)

In August 1789 Bellamy celebrates the appearance of twelve more of Johnson's "discourses," together with the Tetty memorial sermon also "left for publication." Johnson's admirers may again "rejoice!" The admirable religious belief, style, and moral sentiments make plain that these are Mr. Rambler's invaluable issue. Bellamy goes beyond celebration. He again shows that he both knew Johnson and his work. As for the sermon on Tetty's death, we hear, he himself "well recollects, Dr. Taylor preaching or rather reading at Ashborne, in Derbyshire, before what is called a 'Benefit Society,' about the year 1777" (3 [August, 1789]: 354).

Bellamy's *General Magazine and Impartial Review* demonstrates that response to Johnson's religious tracts after his death was a lively topic of interest.<sup>6</sup> Bellamy and others resented Taylor's apparent pilfering of Johnson's proper intellectual canon. Scholarship on eighteenth-century religion, and on Johnson's role in that religion, have become important parts of historical reclamation, within which Bellamy's *General Magazine* plays its modest role.

### 3.

Given Bellamy's occasional presence in Johnson's company, he plays a useful part as well in correcting the notion that Johnson either was indifferent or hostile to the dramatic and to the painters' arts. Bellamy contributes to our ongoing skepticism that Boswell's

<sup>6</sup> Bellamy was less keen on Johnson's *Prayers*, whose third edition he reviewed in 1796: They are the thoughts of a great man, but the prayers vary little, make the same pleas and repeated hopes for, this time, satisfaction of regularly offered resolutions. Nonetheless, "the private devotions of our great moralist evince all that fervour of genuine piety, which may be traced throughout his works." See *Monthly Mirror* 7 (June 1796): 98.

Johnson is the “real” Johnson. Here are episodes that Bellamy records in his memoir of the well-known later eighteenth-century portrait painter and actor William Parsons.

Parsons often was in David Garrick’s company as he entered the final phases of his stage career. Garrick was aware that his powers were waning, and “has often said, ‘PARSONS I will take my leave of the town, before its gradual absence whispers that falling off, of which I am but too conscious: this is one of JOHNSON’s good natured hints, but I’ll profit by it.’<sup>7</sup>” Parsons’s Johnson does not regularly mock Garrick and actors in general. Instead, he emerges as an amiable guide aware of Garrick’s vulnerabilities and of the audience’s and fame’s fickle nature. This Johnson understands the nature of audience as well as readers’ responses. He understands the vanity of human wishes and how best to advise a proud, admired friend and companion who needs to cope with inevitable decline and often unkind nature’s signal of retreat.

We see a non-Boswellian Johnson as well when he appears in another context to which he was supposedly hostile. Bellamy dabbled in poetry, music, and, at first reluctantly, visual arts. Parsons stiffens his spine, urges him to try portraiture, and encourages him as soon as he has paint and canvas at hand. After some feeble efforts, Bellamy improves enough to present an image to a group of exalted men of arts and letters, including Sir Joshua Reynolds, Johnson, and Goldsmith. Reynolds cannot take his eyes off the painting. Goldsmith says that it “was composed by a great man”:

“I do not know what you mean by composed,” said Sir JOSHUA, “but it is the worst thing I ever saw in my life.” “Why do you take so much notice of it then?” said GOLDSMITH. “Oh! Sir,” said Dr. JOHNSON, “physicians always love to analyse the faces.” “My reason,” said Sir JOSHUA, “for noticing that picture is, that though taken altogether it is a very contemptible performance, yet the man who painted it has an uncommon correct eye for colouring.” “There’s a compliment for you, DIBDIN,” said GOLDSMITH “why don’t you make your best bow?” It finished by Sir JOSHUA’s advising me to persevere, and promising to lend me some landscapes as models for my imitation.<sup>8</sup> (68)

This is not Boswell’s bellicose, domineering master of London’s written and spoken word. Johnson is characteristically perceptive, but he nonetheless is one speaker among several. He is deferential to Sir Joshua, the true leader of the group, whose knowledge of

7 Bellamy, *The Life of Mr. William Parsons, Comedian, Written by Thomas Bellamy* (London, 1795), 19. Subsequent citations are given in the text. Bellamy reissued the memoir in volume 2 of his *Miscellanies in Prose and Verse* (London, 1795). Both the *Life* and the *Miscellanies* were printed for the author rather than by an established bookseller under his own name.

8 See Bellamy’s *Parsons*, 78. Goldsmith’s mention of Charles Dibdin indicates that Bellamy’s then-friend, the composer and musician Charles Dibdin, was part of the group. Villa-Real Gooch makes plain that Bellamy was a congenial companion: *Beggar Boy*, 1: xxxix, xlv–xlvi.



portraiture and ability to evaluate and encourage are at the heart of the episode. Nor is Goldsmith the amusing Boswellian dupe, but an approximately equal conversationalist who, like Johnson, wisely yields to the renowned specialist.

Bellamy's Garrick-episode shows us Johnson's wisdom recollected in anxiety and his good nature put to practical use. His Reynolds-episode shows us Johnson's role as part of a social group, rather than as the voice of the group. He was a member of the chorus rather than the solo basso profundo in each case. Thomas Bellamy enlarges our knowledge of Johnson. His image as the Great Cham of literature wants fleshing out with yet unreclaimed aspects of Johnsonian contexts. This is true as well for our understanding of Johnson's religion in general and of his sermons in particular. As Bellamy said in *The General Magazine and Impartial Review*, "every reader, who has either taste or virtue, will read them with avidity, and, we hope, with advantage" (3 [August, 1789]: 355). Bellamy's living and posthumous relationship with Johnson allows us to see him, or perhaps even glance at him, without the familiar characterizations by Boswell, Hawkins, and Piozzi.

That spirit of inquiry is shared by all the contributors to this volume, as it was shared by all the contributors to the Houghton's "Johnson at 300" symposium. Johnson after three hundred years is not the Johnson after two hundred years or any other celebratory number. Perhaps we are coming a bit closer to the benevolent complexity of Johnson's reputation, character, and achievement. To the question, then, What more is there to learn about Samuel Johnson? the answer must be a very great deal.

## Contributors

THOMAS A. HORROCKS is Associate Librarian of Houghton Library for Collections. He received his PhD in history from the University of Pennsylvania, where he focused on early American history, the history of the book in American culture, and the history of medicine in early America. He is the author of *Popular Print and Popular Medicine: Almanacs and Health Advice in Early America* (2008), and editor of *A Monument More Durable than Brass: The Donald & Mary Hyde Collection of Dr. Samuel Johnson* (2009). Co-editor of *The Living Lincoln* (2011), a book of essays on Abraham Lincoln, he is currently writing a biography of James Buchanan.

HOWARD D. WEINBROT is Ricardo Quintana Professor of English and William Freeman Vilas Research Professor in the College of Letters and Science, University of Wisconsin, Madison. His latest books are *Menippean Satire Reconsidered: From Antiquity to the Eighteenth Century* (2005) and *Aspects of Samuel Johnson* (2005). He is currently finishing a book entitled *Literature, Religion, and the Evolution of Culture, 1660–1780*.

---

JAMES G. BASKER is the Richard Gilder Professor of Literary History at Barnard College, Columbia University, and President of the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History. His publications include *Amazing Grace: An Anthology of Poems about Slavery 1660–1810* (2002) and *Early American Abolitionists: A Collection of Anti-Slavery Writings 1760–1820* (2005). His scholarly edition of *Roderick Random* is forthcoming in 2012 for the Georgia Edition of the Works of Tobias Smollett. He is currently writing a book provisionally entitled *Samuel Johnson, Abolitionist: The Story Boswell Never Told*.

JAMES ENGELL is Gurney Professor of English and professor of comparative literature at Harvard University, where he served as chair of the Department of English from 2004 to 2010. Author and editor of numerous books on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature and criticism, current issues in higher education, and environmental studies, he has published several articles and book chapters on Johnson, edited *Johnson and His Age* (1984), and is a member of the editorial committee of the Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson. Among his regular course offerings are ones covering all genres of eighteenth-century British literature.

NICHOLAS HUDSON, professor of English at the University of British Columbia, is the author of two books on Johnson, *Samuel Johnson and Eighteenth-Century Thought* (1988) and *Samuel Johnson and the Making of Modern England* (2003). He has also written *Writing and European Thought, 1660–1830* (1994), co-edited (with Aaron Santesso) *Swift's Travels: Eighteenth-Century British Satire and its Legacy* (2009), and published numerous essays on eighteenth-century thought and culture. He is currently completing a new book, *A Long Revolution: Social Hierarchy and Literary Change, 1660–1832*.

JACK LYNCH is professor of English at Rutgers University in Newark, New Jersey. He is the author of *The Age of Elizabeth in the Age of Johnson* (2002) and *Deception and Detection in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (2008), and editor of *The Age of Johnson: A Scholarly Annual*. He is now editing *Samuel Johnson in Context* for Cambridge University Press.

ALLEN REDDICK is professor of English literature at the University of Zürich. His publications on Samuel Johnson include *The Making of Johnson's Dictionary 1746–1773* (2nd. rev. ed., 1996) and *Samuel Johnson's Unpublished Revisions to His Dictionary of the English Language* (2005). His current research involves the description and analysis of books distributed throughout the world by the eighteenth-century republican Thomas Hollis in support of “liberty” causes.