

Moralism in a Mad World: Samuel Johnson's "Business of the Biographer"

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Abstract

One of the most prolific authors of the eighteenth-century, Samuel Johnson, strives toward moral writing, especially in *The Rambler* and *The Idler* periodicals, where he considers such topical studies as biography and conceptions of reality. While exploring Johnson's publications on moralism, a contradiction between his public statements and personal actions was uncovered. This contradiction begged investigation into the validity and authority of Johnson's moralism while asking the age-old question of why writers write.

Samuel Johnson is famed for consistently choosing as his subject-manner "the moral and psychological relationships of one human being with another" (Grundy, 16). He strives toward moralistic authorship, especially in *The Rambler* and *The Idler* periodicals, where he explores such topical studies as biography and conceptions of reality. He caters his writing tone to suit the needs of the topic which he writes and the eighteenth-century audience he writes to. Johnson investigates biography written to reveal the holistic truth of a person's life, whether authors should be good people, and the prevalent problem of appearances differing from reality. His friend, James Boswell, had long prepared for the lofty task of creating Johnson's biography by interviewing him and travelling by his side. Boswell spent over eight years creating his Johnsonian epic, which begins with the unfulfilled desire that Johnson had "written his own life, in conformity with the opinion which he has given, that every man's life may be best written by himself" (19). Boswell seeks to answer the same inquiry as this essay, which is to survey Johnson's moral and psychological sense of self. Many critics discuss Johnson's personality, business drive, and moralism; yet in truth, unresolved inconsistencies between Johnson's actions and public statements challenge the validity of his moralizing ideals.

In *The Rambler* 60, "On Biography," Johnson's critical point is that to respect the person in question and learn from them, a documentation of one's life must remove the mask he wears in public to reveal his vices and his virtues (773). Instead of simply displaying one's publicly known events and traits, a biographer should drop the mask by revealing the person's ordinary routine – how he lived his life daily and how his private actions reflect on his public sentiments (772-3). In *The Idler* 84, also on biography, Johnson claims that one should record his own life, in private, without the intention to publish it (par. 10). A person knows himself best and can write his life with the clearest truth and familiarity, and when not aiming to publish his record, can be "presumed to tell truth, since falsehood cannot appease his own mind" (par. 10). Johnson's articles on the art of biography argue for the necessary unveiling of a person's life, including faults and graces, and best practices for executing an honest memoir.

However, according to two accounts from Boswell, Johnson contradicts the biographical notions above. Firstly, Boswell recounts Johnson's haphazard attempts to write about his own life, most of which Johnson burnt in the days leading to his death (*Johnson*). His actions make one question his state of mind, both when claiming the import and proper method of biography, and more, his decision to rid the world of his self-written memoir. Secondly, in conversation with Boswell, Johnson uttered: "No man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money" (*Johnson*). When taken at face value, the quote makes one question how Johnson can be a trustworthy moralist if his aim is solely to profit off his words. On the other hand, one must consider the context in which he made his claim. A particular emotion, event, or reflection likely inspired the verdict. Johnson may not have realized that his judgement contradicted his public statements on personal biography. For, if one is a prat for writing without the aim to profit, why would one, in intentional privacy, chronicle his life? Johnson's contradicting opinion on profitable authorship and his private actions are cause to question the authority of his virtue.

Boswell precedes Johnson's quote on lucrative publishing, stating: "he [Johnson] uniformly adhered to that strange opinion, which his indolent disposition made him utter" (*Johnson*). That is, Johnson consistently believed that people only write for money (the strange opinion). Assuming Boswell's observation correct, his particular mood (indolence) caused him to slip, to endure a lazy or careless tongue, and "utter" aloud this sentiment which he typically kept to himself. Boswell also *disagrees* with Johnson's opinion, going so far as to argue that any person "versed in the history of literature" will deny the truth of it (*Johnson*). Indeed, many authors historically can attest to the challenging career choice; however, as periodicals were born in London's eighteenth-century and "became one of the best ways for a working writer to earn a living" (Black 669), Johnson used the opportunity to "rise from poverty and obscurity" (759). While noting Johnson's entrepreneurship, Roy Porter, a British historian, uses the same quote from Johnson to emphasize the dogma in "conceiving of authorship as a trade" (246). In reading Johnson as being proud of the profitability of writing, Porter skims over Boswell's observation of Johnson's "strange opinion" and "indolent disposition." As Johnson relates, his "fortune" and "temper" placed him on a discriminate path in life (*Rambler* 60, 772). That is, Johnson's controversial opinion on professional writing ultimately relates to his societal influences and to his nature.

Porter defines the atmosphere of the Georgian period with "struggle, tension, and conflict," and reveals that "beneath the perfectly powdered wig, emotional and psychological disorder seethed" (98). England being "notorious as the world suicide capital" and Johnson's "fear of losing his wits" (Porter 99) exemplify the societal problem. Boswell describes the discourse of Johnson's mental state beginning in his early twenties (a common onset age for modern mood disorders). At nineteen, Johnson became prone to a "morbid melancholy" that fluxed through his lifetime and included symptoms as "irritation, fretfulness, ... [and] gloom" (*Johnson*). At multiple points in his text, Boswell describes Johnson's temperament as melancholic, malady, or *mollia tempora fandi* ('times favourable for speaking,' that is, for Johnson to speak and no one else), which made it impossible to debate with him once he asserted a judgement (*Johnson*). For example, whilst arguing about Bishop Berkeley's theory of subjective idealism (that only abstract constructs exist, not materials things), Johnson concluded by kicking a stone and exclaiming, "I

refute it *thus*" (Boswell 333). Suffice it to say, he could occasionally be difficult to converse with. Being prone to depressive episodes affected Johnson's mental faculties, a matter which gave him great anxiety; indeed, the "disturbance or obscuration" of his reason was "the evil most to be dreaded" (*Johnson*). Johnson had the utmost reverence for literature; regardless, Boswell validates and demonstrates Johnson's tendency toward caprice and the cycle that his mental illness often caused, affecting his writing.

Paul Korshin, an eighteenth-century British literature scholar, believes in Johnson's moralistic virtuosity and uses multiple *Rambler* articles to evidence his claim. Specifically, Korshin notes Johnson's unresolved debate over "whether an author had to be a good man writing good things" (55), a topic Johnson explores to differing degrees in many of his articles, including *Rambler* 60 and *Idler* 84. Korshin uses Johnson's biographical studies of poets Richard Savage and John Milton to demonstrate that one can discuss a person's life, vice and all, while accepting one's literary excellence despite their questionable characters (55-7). Both men are flawed in their views of virtue and modes of living, and Johnson battles those flaws while writing their memoirs (55-7). Korshin purports that Johnson accomplishes his moral goal of displaying vice and virtue in biography as opportunities to learn from mistakes and successes.

Korshin analyzes Johnson's articles on biography and concludes that the "subject of biography does not have to be a good person" (60). In fact, no person's biography should be all good, for vice is an inescapable part of human nature and should be evinced to learn from others' mistakes (Johnson, *Rambler* 60, 772-74). By grappling with that long-time question of writers needing to be good men, Johnson contributes to "wars of truth," evolves his opinions over time, and continually aims to "hold out the light of reason, whatever it may discover" without letting "envy, interest, or censure," that is, personal bias, obscure his biographical observations (Korshin 56-7, 60). Korshin makes a strong argument for Johnson's virtuous intentions, however, one cannot be sure that Johnson's intentions were successfully executed, nor whether his frequent depressive episodes hindered his ability to see his own bias.

Keeping in line with Johnson's business mindset as mentioned by Porter, Korshin outlines *The Rambler* as an "entrepreneurial undertaking" (51). Johnson succeeded in competing with and surpassing popular periodicals of the eighteenth-century like Joseph Addison and Richard Steele's *The Spectator*, capturing a following, and expanding his authorial reach (51-3, 57). As Johnson aptly remarks, "men excel each other only by prudence and by virtue" (*Rambler* 60, 773). So, Johnson seemingly exceeded Addison and Steele by his sensibility and excellent moral qualities, particularly when writing on topics such as the morality and lives of authors. His reputation appeared to transcend even pioneers of the periodical written "to morally improve their audience" (Black 669). His success as a moral writer in the periodical industry speaks to his ability to gain financially from publications.

Further, many thought that, considering the title and periodical form, Johnson wrote his essays as unprepared last-minute pieces. The title of the periodical, *Rambler*, appears to suggest so; the word 'ramble' is commonly known as an idea of wandering without a sense of direction, especially in speech ("Ramble"). Korshin believes Johnson's "choice of title seems

almost accidental” and somewhat adventurous (51), or it may have simply been witty. Boswell observes that Johnson was so skilled in literature and memory that he wrote most compositions in one “rapid exertion” with no need of a second draft (*Johnson*). Thus, Johnson seems to be rambling for profit.

However, Boswell above most others experienced Johnson’s dedication to truth, as detailed in his *Life of Johnson*. Korshin discerns that Johnson had his topics planned months in advance (51-2), while other critics note that *The Rambler* articles’ “stark clarity” carefully observes and describes human nature (Black 760). All three accounts insist Johnson put deep thought into his articles. So, despite a potential gap between word and deed, Johnson’s authorial entrepreneurship does not negate his desire to write on moral matters, but rather is a necessary outcome of living in eighteenth-century London.

Moreover, at a time when Johnson was at his worst, suffering from poverty and severe depression to the point of near mania, he was described as popular and merry (Boswell, *Johnson*). This deceiving interpretation of Johnson’s internal state, Boswell notes, “is a striking proof of the fallacy of appearances” (*Johnson*). In conversation with Johnson on this account of himself, Johnson confirmed that he was troubled and was fighting with literature as his weapon of defense. In a later discussion with Boswell on Johnson’s caprice, Johnson argued that attempting to think oneself out of a melancholic mood is “madness;” it is better to distract one’s mind with books. Again, his respect and dependence on the written word is seen, and its use as a tool against Johnson’s afflictions may be recognized as a defense against bias interfering with his morality. Boswell acknowledges the frequent grip that Johnson’s illness held on him, yet merely states: “that his own diseased imagination should have so far deceived him, is *strange*” (italics added). However, Johnson’s disposition was not strange, it was common, especially when considering Porter’s analysis of London society in this historical moment. Outsiders regularly misunderstood Johnson’s character, a matter which he observes and reflects on in his discussions of public persona, transparency, and biography.

Johnson draws out the essence of biography as a genre in his *Rambler* and *Idler* papers, wherein he identifies the need to unmask one’s “mistakes and miscarriages, escapes and expedients,” or vices and virtues (*Rambler* 60, 772-3). Johnson’s behaviour contradicts his statements on biography by expressing antithetical views on private reflection and professional publication. Where Boswell expresses both Johnson’s best and worst tendencies, Korshin defends Johnson’s staunch morals, and Porter exposes the connection between a sick society and Johnson’s psychological ailments. Johnson’s imperfections produce concerns regarding the degree to which his bias affected his writing, and whether his intention to profit from publishing hindered the moral messages he intended to share.

Despite ulterior motives to write, such as competition and living-wages, Johnson displays a natural aptitude for reading and writing. Further, he uses his love of literature, London, and people to influence a betterment of society through his powerful words. Johnson had a moral stake in publishing; he suffered from the same sickness which a vast majority of his society endured, and he needed to earn a living. His need to make money did not negate his intended

moralism, rather, Johnson attempted to use his genius and illness to ameliorate not only his self, but the widest audience he could reach. Boswell, after over a thousand pages, remarks of humanity, “Man is, in general, made up of contradictory qualities ... [and] Johnson exhibited an eminent example” of this observation (1399). Samuel Johnson refused to allow one definitive interpretation of his life, but one thing is clear: his love of truth drove his motivation to write and persistently confronted his health and financial barriers.

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