



8-1-1933

An Evaluation of Dr. Samuel Johnson as a Literary Critic

Anna Mary Ackermann

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.und.edu/theses>

Recommended Citation

Ackermann, Anna Mary, "An Evaluation of Dr. Samuel Johnson as a Literary Critic" (1933). *Theses and Dissertations*. 4501.

<https://commons.und.edu/theses/4501>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, and Senior Projects at UND Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of UND Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact und.common@library.und.edu.

AN EVALUATION
OF
DR. SAMUEL JOHNSON AS A LITERARY CRITIC

695
1

A Thesis
Presented in Candidacy for the
Degree of Master of Arts

by
ANNA MARY ACKERMANN

LIBRARY
UNIVERSITY OF NORTH DAKOTA

Grand Forks
University of North Dakota
August 1933

T1933
A18

THIS THESIS, presented by ANNA MARY ACKERMANN as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MASTER OF ARTS at the University of North Dakota, is hereby approved by the committee under which she has carried on her work:

James E. Cox
Chairman

Donald H. Nicholson

J. V. Breitwieser

78806

28 Oct '33 bdg 1.45

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER I Dr. Johnson's Qualifications and Disqualifications and Standards of Literary Criticism	
Qualifications	3
Disqualifications	4
Standards	6
CHAPTER II Dr. Johnson's Literary Standards Applied and Com- pared with those of Contemporary and Subsequent Critics	
Early and Middle Seventeenth Century	
Milton	14
Shakespeare	17
Bacon	20
Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Century	
Pope	22
Congrave	24
Swift	25
Middle and Late Eighteenth Century	
Gray	28
Goldsmith	29
Fieldong	30
GENERALIZATION AND CONCLUSIONS	35
BIBLIOGRAPHY	37

INTRODUCTION

That Dr. Samuel Johnson was the greatest literary critic of the eighteenth century is a generally accepted opinion. However, since he had no great precedents in men or principles to guide him¹, since he therefore formulated his own principles, and since consequently these principles are the composite results directly of his own personality and training, and indirectly of the "garrulous, gossipy, prejudiced"² age in which he lived, the value of his criticisms becomes a different matter entirely.

It is not my purpose to panegyryze nor to condemn so notable a character as Dr. Johnson, but to make an evaluation of his literary criticisms when taken out of their eighteenth century setting and placed on their own merits.

Obviously an examination of all that that eminent critic said and wrote about writers, contemporary and precedent to his age, and their productions would be too extensive an undertaking for a study of this kind. Hence I have based my study on his criticism of three representative writers, a poet, a dramatist, and a prose writer, from each of three successive periods,--the first half of the seventeenth, the late seventeenth and early eighteenth, and his contemporary period. After noting Dr. Johnson's qualifications and disqualifications, and after establishing his literary standards, I have studied his critical opinions of these men and their works in the light of his standards, and compared them with

¹Fletcher, C.R.L., The Development of English Prose Style, 1881,
p. 19

²Cox, J.E., Quarterly Journal of the University of North Dakota,
Fall, 1931

the opinions of other eighteenth century and later critics. From these comparisons I have drawn my conclusions as to the value of Dr. Johnson's literary criticisms.

CHAPTER I

DR. JOHNSON'S QUALIFICATIONS AND DISQUALIFICATIONS
FOR AND STANDARDS OF LITERARY CRITICISM

Dr. Johnson possessed many qualifications that we should expect to find in a competent critic. We no longer agree with Pope that only "such teach others who themselves excell³"; nevertheless, we must concede that writing ability is an asset to any person, be he critic or not, and that Dr. Johnson had that ability. Translations, political tracts, letters, prayers, prologues, prefaces, parliamentary debates, epitaphs, essays, travel, drama, poetry, and a dictionary are listed among his writings, many of which are now of interest only to the scholar. Some of his works, however, such as his Lives of English Poets, particularly the Lives of Dryden and Pope; his Dictionary; some of his Essays of the Rambler and the Idler; and his Rasselas still hold a place of merit in the literary world in spite of the fact that they are frequently criticised for their wordiness and ponderous style. His Journey to the Western Isles of Scotland, Boswell, himself a Scotchman, pronounces as correct, judicious, and instructive observations of the people.⁴

Furthermore when one considers that Dr. Johnson wrote the Dictionary alone in four years, that he wrote fifty-two Lives, filling three large volumes, almost exclusively from memory, that he frequently "dashed off" his essays on the spur of the moment while the printer's messenger waited; that he always wrote under pressure and physical distress; then, indeed must one marvel at the man's ingenuity and concede that he was a writer of no mean ability.

3. Pope, The Essay on Criticism

4. Boswell's Johnson, Ed. Hill, Vol. 2, pp. 341-349

His formal education which terminated at the end of his third year at Oxford was well supplemented by a strong reasoning power and a remarkably retentive memory. He was a good Greek scholar, spoke Latin with wonderful fluency and elegance, and he was a reader of French literature. Very few men had seen a greater variety of characters, and none could observe them better. He associated with persons of the most widely different manners, abilities, rank, and accomplishments.⁵ He was absolutely free from meanness and jealousy. His knowledge of literary history was extensive,⁶ and no man had a higher regard for literature than Johnson, or was more determined in maintaining the respect which he justly considered as due to it.⁷

Quite as important as the qualifications of a critic are his disqualifications, and of these Dr. Johnson had his share. He was fundamentally a classicist, a sincere and zealous communicant of the High Church and a champion of monarchical principles, which he would not tamely suffer to be questioned; he was steady and inflexible in maintaining the obligations of piety and virtue both from a regard to the order of society and from the veneration for the Great Source of all order; he was correct and stern in his tastes, all of which tended to give the Doctor a narrow and prejudiced view. To any casual reader of Dr. Johnson it becomes apparent that he held most tenacious prejudices against Whigs, Americans, foreigners particularly Scotchmen, actors, and religious

5 Boswell's Johnson, Ed. Hill, Vol. 3, p. 24-25

6 Johnsonian Miscellanies, Ed. Hill, Vol. 1, p. 298

7 Boswell's Johnson, Ed. Hill, Vol. 3, p. 348

dissenters especially Presbyterians; and it may be safely asserted that a man having so many prejudices will also be victim to personal prejudices; and all prejudices detract from the value of his judgment and criticism.

Dr. Johnson was a voluble member of a voluble club in a voluble age. Talk was the chief work, exercise, and play of this group; hence much of what was said, was said playfully, often thoughtlessly, purely for entertainment, ostentation, or for the sake of argument; and was never meant to be taken seriously. Johnson himself admitted that nobody, at times talked as laxly as he did.⁸

Dr. Johnson loved argument and would often take the wrong side just for the sake of argument. "He could reason close or wide as he saw best for the moment, for he owned he sometimes talked for victory."⁹ Boswell reports that he would often divert himself by confounding those who thought themselves obliged to say tomorrow what he said yesterday. Garrick when he was extolling Bryden, an admitted favorite of Johnson's, professed himself mortified when Dr. Johnson suddenly challenged him to produce twenty lines in a series that would not disgrace the poet and his admirers. Garrick produced a passage he had once heard the Doctor commend, in which he now found sixteen faults.¹⁰ At another time when he had expressed his preference for the Catholic religion to the Presbyterian, Boswell says, "but it is not improbable that if one had taken the other side he might have reasoned differently."¹¹ Once he said, I

⁸ Johnson, Samuel, *Tour of the Hebrides*, Ed. Chapman, p. 398

⁹ Boswell's Johnson, Ed. Hill, Vol. 5, p. 17

¹⁰ Ibid Vol. 5, p. 185

¹¹ Ibid Vol. 2, p. 119

would not give half a guinea to live under one form of government rather than another. It is of no moment to the happiness of the individual,"¹² which is directly opposed to his fundamental Toryism and aversion to democratic principles. In addition to being voluble and capricious, Dr. Johnson was ostentatious. He loved to display his wit and talent and could not brook defeat in an argument, even when he had taken the wrong side. Assuredly such a capricious nature was not an asset to a judicious critic.

Dr. Johnson sets forth his idea of criticism in the following allegory: "CRITICISM, from whom they derive their claim to decide the fate of writers, was the eldest daughter of LABOUR AND TRUTH: she was at her birth committed to the care of JUSTICE and brought up by her in the palace of WISDOM,"¹³ and the task of the critic he believes is to

establish principles; to improve opinion into knowledge; and to distinguish those means of pleasing which depend upon known causes and rational deduction, from nameless and inexplicable elegancies which appeal wholly to the fancy, from which we feel delight but know not how to produce it, and which may well be termed the enchantress of the soul. Criticism reduces those regions of literature under the dominion of science which have hitherto known only the anarchy of ignorance, the caprices of fancy, and the tyranny of prescriptions.¹⁴

Nowhere does Dr. Johnson summarize those principles which he feels it the task of criticism to establish. Consequently it becomes necessary to examine some of his criticisms in order to establish the standards whereby he judged. He entertained strong dis-

¹² Boswell's Johnson, Ed. Hill, Vol. 2, p. 191

¹³ Works of Samuel Johnson, Ed. Murphy, Vol. 4, p. 15, Rambler 3

¹⁴ Ibid Vol. 5, p. 119-123

Rambler 92

likes for some poetic qualities and forms. Satirists he describes as "lampooners of mankind who exhaust their virulence upon imaginary crimes, which as they never existed, can never be amended."¹⁵ It is the nature of personal invectives to be soon unintelligible; and the author that gratifies private malice, destroys the future efficacy of his own writings, and sacrifices the esteem of succeeding times to the laughter of the day.¹⁶ His attitude toward blank verse is unmistakable in such statement as: "The disgust which blank verse, encumbering and encumbered, superadds to an unpleasing subject, soon repels the reader."¹⁷ "Blank verse left merely to its numbers has little operation either on the ear or on mind."¹⁸ "Sublime and solemn prose gains little by a change to blank verse;"¹⁹ To mythology he allowed no merit. Of Granville he said, "He is forever amusing himself with the puerilities of mythology;"²⁰ of Butler, "Of the ancient poets every reader feels the mythology tedious and oppressive;"²¹ and of Dryden, "He makes frequent use of mythology, and sometimes connects religion and fable too closely without distinction."²² "The employment of allegorical persons always excites conviction of its own absurdity,"²³ he says, and then adds, "Allegories drawn to great length will always break."²⁴ Alliteration he considers below the grandeur of a poem that endeavors sublimity,²⁵ and burlesque he describes as

15 Works of Samuel Johnson, Ed. Murphy, Vol. 7, Idler 45

16 Johnson, Samuel: Shakespeare, Ed. Raleigh, p. 87

17 Johnson's Lives of English Poets, Ed. Hill, Vol. 3, p. 346

18 Ibid Vol. 1, p. 237

19 Ibid Vol. 2, p. 264

20 Ibid Vol. 2, p. 294

21 Ibid Vol. 1, p. 213

22 Ibid Vol. 1, p. 462

23 Ibid Vol. 3, p. 233

24 Ibid Vol. 1, p. 236

25 Ibid Vol. 3, p. 439

a proportion between the style and the sentiments, or between the adventitious sentiments and the fundamental subject. It therefore, like all bodies compounded of heterogeneous parts, contains in it a principle of corruption. All disproportion is unnatural and from what is unnatural we can derive only the pleasure which novelty produces. We admire it a while as a strange thing; but when it is no longer strange, we perceive its deformity.²⁶

The sonnet, however adapted to the Italian language, he thinks "has never succeeded in ours, which having greater variety of termination requires the rhymes to be often changed."²⁷ Sacred poetry seemed pale and ineffectual beside the realities of Christian religion. To him "human imagination could not hope to compete with the divine."²⁸ "It seems natural for a young poet to initiate himself by pastorals," suggests Doctor Johnson, "because they require no experience and admit no subtle reasoning or deep inquiry."²⁹

Sense of universal pleasure has invited numbers without numbers to try their skill in pastoral performances, in which they have generally succeeded after the manner of other imitators, transmitting the same images in the same combination from one to another, till he who reads the title of a poem may guess the whole series of the composition. Nor will man after reading thousands of these find his view of nature enlarged.³⁰

Johnson had no sense of the higher and subtler graces of romantic poetry, and he had a comical indifference to the beauties of nature. "That was the best garden," he said, "which produced the most roots and fruit."³¹ "A blade of grass was always a blade of grass to him whether in one country or another."³² He describes

²⁶ Johnson's Lives of English Poets, Ed. Hill, Vol. 1, p. 218

²⁷ Ibid Vol. 1, p. 169

²⁸ Brown, J. E., The Critical Opinions of Samuel Johnson, p. XX

²⁹ Johnson's Lives of English Poets, Ed. Hill, Vol. 3, p. 224

³⁰ Works of Samuel Johnson, Ed. Murphy, Vol. 4, p. 210 Rambler 36

³¹ Johnsonian Miscellanies, Ed. Hill, Vol. 1, p. 323

³² Johnsoniana, Ed. Napier, P. 40

a beautiful glen as "sufficiently verdant."³³ "Walking in a wood when it rained was the only rural image he pleased his fancy with; for he says, 'after one has gathered the apples in an orchard, one wishes them well baked and, removed to a London eating house for enjoyment.'"³⁴

In morals and criticisms it will ever be to his praise that he has assailed all sentimentalism and licentiousness. In literature he did more than any of his contemporaries to create a pure and invigorating atmosphere. According to him genius can attain "no greater felicity than that of having purified intellectual pleasure, separated mirth from indecency, and wit from licentiousness,"³⁵ for, "The wickedness of a loose or profane author is more atrocious than that of the giddy libertine, or a drunken ravisher, not only because it extends its effects wider, as a pestilence that taints the air is more destructive than poison infused in a draught, but because it is committed with cool deliberation."³⁶ He says,

books written chiefly to the young, the ignorant, and the idle, to whom they serve as lectures of conduct, and introductions into life, are the entertainment of minds unfurnished with ideas, and therefore easily following the current of fancy; not informed by experience and consequently open to every false suggestion and partial account; that the highest degree of reverence should be paid to youth, and that nothing indecent should be suffered to approach their eyes or ears.³⁷

Among the powers that constitute a poet, Dr. Johnson places invention first, for he says, "No man was ever great by imitation."³⁸

³³ Roscoe, E. B., Aspects of Dr. Johnson, Ed. Cambridge, p. 103

³⁴ Johnsonian Miscellanies, Ed. Hill, Vol. 1, p. 323

³⁵ Johnson's Lives of English Poets, Ed. Hill, Vol. 2, p. 126

³⁶ Works of Samuel Johnson, Ed. Murphy, Vol. 5, p. 38

³⁷ Ibid Vol. 4, p. 18, Rambler 4

³⁸ Ibid Vol. 3, p. 316

"The imitator treads in a beaten walk, and with all his diligence can only hope to find a few flowers or brambles untouched by his predecessor, the refuse of contempt, or omission of negligence."³⁹

Johnson disliked a blind imitation of ancient writers, especially when the imitation consisted of obsolete words without the exclusion of later modes or of expression, thus producing something that was neither ancient nor modern.

Johnson's attention to precision and clearness in expression was remarkable. "There is a mode of style," he says, "for which I know not that the masters of oratory have yet found a name; a style by which the most evident truths are obscured that they can no longer be perceived, and the most familiar propositions so disguised that they cannot be known."⁴⁰

Few faults of style, whether real or imaginary, excite the malignity of a more numerous class of readers than the use of 'hard' words. Every writer, however, does not write for every reader. Many subjects of general use may be treated in a different manner as the book is intended for the learned or the ignorant. It is but by necessity that every science and every trade has its peculiar language. Words are hard only to those who don't understand them; and the critic ought always to inquire whether he is incommoded by the fault of the writer or by his own.⁴¹

He was at all time jealous of infractions upon the "genuine" English language, and prompt to repress colloquial barbarisms.⁴²

"Language," says Dr. Johnson, is a dress of thought; and as the noblest mean or most graceful action would be degraded and obscured

³⁹ Works of Samuel Johnson, Ed. Murphy, Vol. 5, p. 85

⁴⁰ Ibid Vol. 7, pp. 116-120, Idler 116

⁴¹ Ibid Vol. 7, p. 228, Idler 7

⁴² Boswell's Johnson, Ed. Hill, Vol. 3, p. 69

by a garb appropriated to the gross employments of rustics or mechanics; so the most heroic sentiments will lose their efficacy and the most splendid ideas drop their magnificence, if they are conveyed by words commonly used upon low and trivial occasions, debased by vulgar mouths, and contaminated by inelegant application."⁴³

One of the greatest sources of poetical delight is description, or the power of presenting pictures to the mind,⁴⁴ says Dr. Johnson, and "if a poem have for its purpose only pleasure and not instruction it must be brief."⁴⁵ Rhyme he considers not a necessary adjunct to true poetry, but adds, "He that thinks himself capable of astonishing may write blank verse, but those that hope only to please must condescend to rhyme."⁴⁶ "The quality which Dr. Johnson values above all others in poetry is truth. "Truth," he says, indeed is truth, and reason is reason; they have an intrinsic and unalterable value, and constitute that intellectual gold which defies destruction."⁴⁷ Finally, a poem must have poetic unity for the attainment of which the poet must "acquaint himself with this law of poetical architecture, and take care that his edifice be solid as well as beautiful; that nothing stands single or independent, so that it may be taken away without injuring the rest, but that from foundation to the pinacles one part rest firm upon another."⁴⁸

-
- 43 Johnson's Lives of the English Poets, Ed. Hill, Vol. 1, pp 58-59
 44 Ibid Vol. 1, p 51
 45 Ibid Vol. 2, p 263
 46 Ibid Vol. 1, p. 194
 47 Ibid Vol. 1, p. 59
 48 Works of Samuel Johnson, Ed. Murphy, Vol. 5, p. 394, Rambler 39

Of fiction he says, "Where truth is sufficient to fill the mind, fiction is worse than useless; the counterfeit debases the genuine."⁴⁹ Biography he believed should be true and should be written soon after the death of the subject, for "if a life be delayed till interest and envy are at an end, we may hope for impartiality, but must expect little intelligence; for the incidents which give excellence to biography are of a volatile and evanescent kind, such as soon escape the memory and are rarely transmitted by tradition."⁵⁰ "Nobody can write a life of a man, but those who have eaten and drunk and lived in social intercourse with him."⁵¹

The dramatist's important quality, he declares to be ability "to introduce a set of characters so diversified in their several passions and interest, that from the clashing of this variety may result many necessary incidents; to make these incidents surprising and yet natural, so as to delight the imagination without shocking the judgment of a reader; and finally to wind up the whole in a pleasing catastrophe, produced by those very means which seem most likely to oppose and prevent it."⁵² "The connection of importance with trivial incidents, since it is not only common but perpetual in the world may surely be allowed upon the stage, which pretends only to be the mirror of life."⁵³ "In the construction of his drama," he says of Rowe, "there is not much art; he is not a nice observer of the Unities."⁵⁴

49 Johnson's Lives of English Poets, Ed. Hill, Vol. 3, pp. 437-438

50 Works of Samuel Johnson, Ed. Murphy, Vol. 4, p. 347

51 Boswell's Johnson, Ed. Hill, Vol. 2, p. 191

52 Works of Samuel Johnson, Ed. Murphy, Vol. 3, p. 87

53 Ibid Vol. 6, p. 83

54 Spittal, J. K., Contemporary Opinions of Samuel Johnson, p. XXII

The final criteria of all literature according to Dr. Johnson is that it must be interesting, "for of what use can a work be that will not be read."⁵⁵ "His Supreme Court of Literary Judicature was life."⁵⁶ Therefore the ultimate objective of an author, be he poet or prose writer, is "either to teach what is not known, or to recommend known truths by his manner of adorning them; either to let new light in upon the mind, and open new scenes to the prospect or to vary the dress and situation of common objects; so, as to give them fresh grace and more powerful attraction, to spread such flowers over the regions through which the intellect has already made its progress as may tempt it to return, and take a second view of things hastily passed over or negligently regarded."⁵⁷

By the way of summary, then Dr. Johnson objected to satire, blank verse, alliteration, burlesque, sacred poetry, wordiness, imitation, extended allegory, pastoral, fiction, and anything which savored of indecent or immoral, sentimentality, or affectation. He had no appreciation of nature. He approved of originality, description, didacticism, poetic unities, rhyme in poetry, truth, unity, percision, and interest.

The application of these literary standards, in the light of Dr. Johnson's personality, to individual men and their works becomes the subject of the next chapter.

55 Johnson's Lives of English Poets, Ed. Hill, Vol. 3, p. 420

56 Brown, E. J., The critical Opinions of Samuel Johnson, p. XXII

57 Works of Samuel Johnson, Ed. Murphy, Vol. 4, p. 13

CHAPTER II

DR. JOHNSON'S LITERARY STANDARDS APPLIED AND
COMPARED WITH THOSE OF CONTEMPORARY
AND SUBSEQUENT CRITICS

Early and Middle Seventh Century Writers

For the purpose of study and comparison of Dr. Johnson's literary standards as applied to writers of the early and middle seventeenth century, Milton, Shakespeare, and Bacon have been selected as outstanding in the respective fields of poetry, drama, and prose. What has Dr. Johnson to say of these three men? Milton he admires as a poet, and with one exception, praises his poetry highly. Paradise Lost he characterizes as "a poem which, considered with respect to design may claim the first place, and with respect to performance the second, among the productions of the human mind."⁵⁸ "Paradise Regained, he says, "is in many parts elegant and everywhere instructive."⁵⁹ L'Allegro, II Penseroso, Comus, and Samson Agonistes all receive favorable comment; but Lycidas he condemns unreservedly for its diction, its classical allusions, and its lack of truth. "This poem has yet a grosser fault," he says; "with these trifling fictions are mingled the most awful and sacred truths, such as ought never to be polluted with such irreverend combinations. The shepherd, likewise, is now a feeder of sheep, and afterwards an ecclesiastical pastor, a superintendent of a Christian flock. Such equivocations are always unskillful, but here they are

58 Johnson's Lives of English Poets, Ed. Hill, Vol. 1, p. 170

59 Ibid

Vol. 1, p. 188

indecent and at least approach impiety. Surely no man could have fancied that he read Lycidas with pleasure had he not known the author."⁶⁰

The diction is harsh, rhymes uncertain, and the numbers displeasing. What beauty there is we must therefore seek in the sentiments and images. It is not to be considered as the effusion of real passion; for passion runs not after remote allusions and obscure opinions. Passion plucks no berries from the myrtle and ivy, nor calls upon Arethuse and Mincius, nor to tell of rough satyrs and fauns with cloven heel....In this poem there is no picture for there is no truth, there is no art; for there is nothing new....Whatever images it can supply are long ago exhausted and its inherent improbability forces dissatisfaction on the mind.⁶¹

His criticisms of Milton's diction he softens by adding, "What ever be the faults of his diction he cannot want the praise of copiousness and variety; he was master of his language in its full extent and has selected the melodious words with such diligence that from his book alone the art of English poetry might be learned;⁶² and his criticism of his versification he mitigates by saying, "But whatever be the advantages of rhyme I cannot prevail myself to wish that Milton had been a rhymer."⁶³ "Contending angels may shake the regions of heaven in blank verse.....Those asperities, therefore, that are venerable in the Paradise Lost are contemptible in Blenheim."⁶⁴ He gives Milton credit for showing originality, unbounded imagination,⁶⁵ and for expression of truth which "is superior to

-
- 60 Johnson's Lives of English Poets, Ed. Hill, Vol. 1, p. 165
 61 Ibid Vol. 1. pp. 163-165
 62 Ibid Vol. 1, p. 191
 63 Ibid Vol. 1, p. 194
 65 Johnsonian Miscellanies, Ed. Hill, Vol. 2, p. 165
 66 ~~Johnson's Lives of English Poets, Ed. Hill, Vol. 1, p. 174~~

all rule."⁶⁶

Other criticisms of Milton do not vary to any appreciable extent from those of Dr. Johnson. Paradise Lost, Addison in 1710, ranks higher than the Iliad or the Aeneid with regard to the epic qualities, one action, entire action, and great action.⁶⁷ With reference to the diction in the same poem he says, "Milton by using words of his own coinage, and by the choice of the noblest words and phrases which our tongue would afford him, has carried our language to a greater height than any of the English poets have ever done before or after him, and made the sublimity of his style equal to that of his sentiments."⁶⁸ "Of the same poem Swift in 1732 says, "It gained ground merely by its merit."⁶⁹ In 1779 Cowper wrote Unwin, "Was there ever anything so delightful as the music of Paradise Lost? Variety without end and never equalled unless perhaps by Virgil." The American Critic, William Dean Howells in 1895 says, "I read Milton's Paradise Lost and found in it a splendour and a majestic beauty that justified to me the fame it wears."⁷⁰ Of Samson Agonistes we read less favorable criticisms; as "the least successful effort of the genius Milton,"⁷¹ "uninviting both in its theme and the treatment of it,"⁷² "has more of the antique spirit than any production of any other modern poet."⁷³ Of Lycidas we see such remarks as, "of all Milton's small poems Lycidas is the great-

66 Johnson's Lives of English Poets, Ed. Hill, Vol. 1, p. 174

67 Addison, Spectator 267

68 Ibid 285

69 Swift, Letter to Sir Charles Wogan

70 Howells's, William Dean, My Literary Passions, p. 239

71 Macaulay, Thomas B., 1825, Edinburgh Review, Critical and Miscellaneous Essays

72 Montgomery, James, 1843, The Poetical Works of Milton

73 Goethe, Johann Wolfgang, 1830, Conversation with Eckermann, tr. Oxenford, Vol. 2, p. 220

est favorite with me."⁷⁴ "In Lycidas we have reached the high water mark of English poetry and of Milton's own production."⁷⁵ Of Milton in general, Mathew Arnold says, "In the sure and flowerless perfection of his rhythm and diction his is as admirable as Virgil or Dante."⁷⁶

Thus we see, that with the exception of his slight overvaluation of Samson Agonistes and his under condemnation of Lycidas, a close correlation of Dr. Johnson's criticism with that of other critics.

Shakespeare, like Milton, is praised by Johnson on the whole, but still he finds much in him to criticize. He refers to Shakespeare as "The sovereign of the drama."⁷⁷ "His excellence," he says, "is not the fiction of a tale but a representation of life... His heroes are men. The love and hatred, the hopes and fears of his chief personages are such as are common to other human beings."⁷⁸ "His characters are so copiously diversified and some of them so justly pursued that his works may be considered as a map of life, a faithful miniature of human transactions; and he that had read Shakespeare with attention will perhaps find little new in the crowded world."⁷⁹ The dialogue of this author is often so evidently

74 Hazlitt, William, 1818, Lecture on English Poets, Appendix

75 Pattison, Mark, 1879, Milton (English Men of Letters) pp. 27-28

76 Arnold, Mathew, 1888, Milton, The Century, Vol. 36, p. 54

77 Johnson's Lives of the English Poets, Ed. Hill, Vol. 1, p. 454

78 Works of Samuel Johnson, Ed. Murphy, Vol. 3, p. 89

79 Ibid Vol. 3, p. 89

determined by the incident which produces it, and is pursued with so much ease and simplicity that it seems scarcely to claim the merit of fiction, but to have been gleaned by diligent selection out of common conversation and common occurrences."⁸⁰

However, Johnson did not consider Shakespeare faultless, for he says, "Shakespeare never has six lines together without a fault."⁸¹

"The style of Shakespeare was in itself ungrammatical, perplexed, and obscure."⁸² Contrary to all critics up to his time, Johnson defended Shakespeare for his neglect of the dramatic unities, and for his use of tragic-comedy. "The editors of Shakespeare prior to Johnson assumed without question the correctness of the doctrines of dramatic unities as orthodox gospel."⁸³ There was no one to say a good word for the tragic-comedy until Johnson came forward to plead its cause...he professed himself inclined to believe that he who regarded no other laws than those of nature would take under his protection the tragic-comedy."⁸⁴ His plots he criticises as often too loosely formed and as lacking moral purpose. His view of Shakespeare may best be summarized in these words: "The composition of Shakespeare is a forest, in which oaks extend their branches, and pines tower in the air interspersed sometimes with weeds and brambles, and sometimes giving shelter to myrtles and to roses; filling the eye with awful pomp and gratifying the mind with endless diversity; "or in these, "Shakespeare opens a mine which contains gold and di-

⁸⁰ Works of Samuel Johnson, Ed. Murphy, Vol. 2, p. 120

⁸¹ Boswell's Johnson, Ed. Hill, Vol. 2, p. 110

⁸² Ibid Vol. 4, p. 222

⁸³ Lounsbury, Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist, p. 130

⁸⁴ Ibid p. 137

amonds in unexhaustible plenty, though clouded by incrustations, debased by impurities, and mingled with a mass of meaner minerals."⁸⁵

A comparison to show the analogy of Dr. Johnson's criticisms and those of subsequent critics in the case of a man whose reputation has become so well known and so firmly established as is Shakespeare's would be superfluous here. The surprising fact of the matter is that we obtained so accurate a criticism as Dr. Johnson's in the eighteenth century, for during that period the attitude toward Shakespeare is one largely of indifference as is witnessed by the virtual absence of quotations from and references to Shakespeare in the voluminous eighteenth century literature. If anyone expressed himself at all, it was generally in the form of a panegyric, or as during the rise of the sentimental comedy when a few third and fourth rate sentimentalists like Nat Lee, Naham Tate, George Coleman, and even the great actor, David Garrick, attempted to improve the Shakespearean tragedies by making them conform with a depraved eighteenth century taste for the demand of poetic justice. It is when viewed against such a background that the intelligent and critical attitude, the first of its kind, toward Shakespeare as shown by Dr. Johnson in his Shakespeare and on Shakespeare in his Lives of English Poets becomes truly significant and shows Dr. Johnson, the literary critic, at his best.

⁸⁵ Works of Samuel Johnson, Ed. Murphy, Vol. 2, p. 141

Bacon: the last of this group of three, also found favor with Dr. Johnson. His Essays Johnson characterizes as being "the observations of a strong mind operating upon life; and in consequence you find there what you seldom find in other books."⁸⁶

Boswell tells us that Johnson admitted Bacon to be a favorite author with him.⁸⁷ In his publications he also expresses his liking for Bacon in the following quotations: "Bacon attained to degrees of knowledge scarcely ever reached by any other man."⁸⁸ "Bacon seems to have pleased himself chiefly with his Essays, which come home to men's business and bosoms," and of which, therefore, he declares his expectations that they will live as long as books last.⁸⁹

Other critics have paid such tributes as these to Bacon: "A man for the greatness of genius and compass of knowledge did honor to his age and country. He had a sound comprehensive knowledge of Aristotle, with all the beautiful lights, graces, and embellishments of Cicero. One does not know which to admire most in his writings, the strength of reason, force of style, or brightness of imagination."⁹⁰ Take Lord Bacon alone, who I believe of all our writers except Newton is most known to foreigners, and to whom Sir Philip Sydney was a puny child in genius."⁹¹ "Who is there that upon hear-

86. Boswell's Johnson, Ed. Hill, Vol. 3, p. 22on3

87 Ibid Vol. 3, p. 194

88 Works of Samuel Johnson, Vol. 9, p. 61, Adventurer 85

89 Ibid Vol. 6, p. 226, Rambler 106

90 Addison, Joseph, 1710, The Tatler, No. 267

91 Walpole, Horace, 1758, Letter to David Hume, July 15, Letters, Vol III, p. 151

ing the name does not instantly recognize everything of genius the most profound, everything of literature the most extensive, everything of discovery the most penetrating, everything of observation on human life, the most distinguishing and refined?⁹² "He was one of the greatest men this country has to boast, and his name deserves to stand, where it is generally placed, by the side of those of our greatest writers."⁹³ The highest literary merit of Bacon's Essays is their combination of charm and of poetic prose with conciseness of expression and fulness of thought.⁹⁴ "In Bacon's sentences we may often find remarkable condensation of thought in few words. One does not have to search for two grains of wheat hid in two bushels of chaff."⁹⁵ His work abounds in illustrations, analogies, striking imagery."

On the merits of Bacon, therefore, there seems to be no appreciable disagreement between Dr. Johnson and other English critics.

92 Burke, Edmund, 1794, Speech on the Impeachment of Warren Hastings, May 28

93 Hazlitt, William, 1820, Lectures on the Literature of the Age of Elizabeth, p. 215

94 Brook, Stopford A., 1896, English Literature, p. 109

95 Halleck, Rueben Post, 1900, History of English Literature, pp. 124, 125

Late Seventeenth Century and Early Eighteenth Century Writers

Whether Dr. Johnson will continue in this period with the sound criticism that he displayed in the previous period becomes of immediate interest. Pope, Congreve, and Swift are three writers who represent respectively poetry, drama, and prose of this period. Pope, Dr. Johnson praised to the exclusion of practically all adverse criticism. "No other English poet," he says, "ever brought so much sense into the same number of lines with equal smoothness, ease, and poetical beauty."⁹⁶ "His frequent references to history, his allusions to various kinds of knowledge, and his images selected from art and nature, with his observations on the operations of the mind and the modes of life, show an intelligence perpetually on the wing, excursive, vigorous, and diligent, eager to pursue knowledge, and attentive to retain it."⁹⁷ Pope's use of mythology and pastoral form he denounces but excuses him for the latter on grounds of youth, fine versification,⁹⁸ and excellent power of language.⁹⁹ Of his Homer he says, "it is the greatest work of the kind that has ever been produced."¹⁰⁰ His general impression of Pope is shown in his eulogistic statement: "If Pope be not a poet where is poetry to be found?"¹⁰¹

Other critics are less enthusiastic in their praise of Pope.

96	Boswell's Johnson, Ed. Hill, Vol. 5, p. 393 n2
97	Ibid Vol. 2, p. 41n1
98	Ibid Vol. 2, p. 97
99	Ibid Vol. 2, p. 97n3
100	Ibid Vol. 3, p. 291
101	Ibid Vol. 4, p. 54

Except for The Rape of the Lock Johnson stands alone as an ardent admirer of Pope. Of that poem, the American Critic, James Russell Lowell, says, "The whole poem more truly deserves the name of Creation than anything Pope ever wrote;"¹⁰² and Hallecksays, "It is Pope's masterpiece."¹⁰³ His Homer which is highly praised by Johnson is very adversely criticised by other critics. "A portrait endowed with every merit excepting that of likeness to the original;"¹⁰⁴ "there have been other versions as unfaithful but none so well executed in so bad a style,"¹⁰⁵ between Pope and Homer there is interposed the mist of Pope's literary artificial manner, entirely alien to the plain naturalness of Homer's manner;"¹⁰⁶ "surely a very false and though ingenious and talented, yet bad translation,"¹⁰⁷ are some of the observations on that translation.

As a poet Joseph Wharton says, "in that species of poetry where Pope excelled he is superior to all mankind; I only say that this species of poetry is not the most excellent one of the art."¹⁰⁸ "If, indeed, by a great poet we mean one who gives the utmost grandeur to our conception of nature, or the utmost force to the passions of the heart, Pope was not in this sense a great poet,"¹⁰⁹ says William Hazlitt, Lord Byron truthfully characterizes his poetry as verse which falls apart into brilliant didactic epigrams and

¹⁰² Lowell, James Russell, 1871-90, Prose Works, Ed. Riverside, Vol. 5, p. 249

¹⁰³ Halleck, Rueben Post, 1900, History of English Literature, p. 255

¹⁰⁴ Gibbon, Edward, 1794, Memoirs of My Life and Writings

¹⁰⁵ Southy, Robert, 1835, Life of Cowper, Vol. 1, p. 313

¹⁰⁶ Carlyle, Thomas, 1831, Odyssey, Note Book by Froude, Vol. 2, p. 78

¹⁰⁷ Arnold, Mathew, 1861, On Translating Homer, pp. 11, 21

¹⁰⁸ Warton, Joseph, 1757, Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope, Preface

¹⁰⁹ Hazlitt, William, 1818, Lectures of English Poets, Lect. IV

maxims in the form of couplets. Perhaps the best we can say for him is that "he stands high and stands firmly in the second class."¹¹⁰ Hence we must conclude that Dr. Johnson raised Pope on too high a pedestal.

Johnson's criticism of Congreve takes a middle course. As we should expect, he condemns the immorality of plays, for he says, "their perusal will make no man better; their ultimate effect is to represent pleasure in alliance with vice and to relax those obligations by which life should be regulated."¹¹¹ He concedes that he has merit of the highest kind, that he is an original writer, who has borrowed "neither the models of his plot nor the manner of his dialogue." His characters he describes as commonly fictitious and artificial with "very little of nature and not much life." His productions are the works of a "mind replete with images, and quick in combination."¹¹² In his condemnation of the immorality of Congreve's plays, Johnson is ably supported in such statements as "his comedies are steeped in vice;"¹¹³ "Congreve's muse was about as bad as any muse that ever misbehaved herself."¹¹⁴

On the other hand Congreve was highly commended for his wit,

110 McCarthy, Justin, 1890, A History of the Four Georges, Vol. 2, p. 262

111 Johnson's Lives of English Poets, Ed. Hill, Vol. 2, p. 222

112 Ibid Vol. 2, p. 228

113 Collier, William Francis, 1861, A History of English Literature, p. 252

114 Trollope, Anthony, 1879, Thackeray (English Men of Letters) p. 159

sparkling dialogue, and polish by such men as Dryden, Swift, Hazlitt, Leigh Hunt, George Meredith, Macaulay, and Thackeray. Perhaps the best summary of Congreve, the dramatist, is the one of Edmund Gosse in which he says, "Congreve balances, polishes, sharpens his sentences till they seem like a set of instruments prepared for an electrical experiment; the current is his unequalled wit, and it flashes and leaps without intermission from the first scene to the last. The result is artificiality and almost from the outset,--from the moment that Congreve's manner ceased to dazzle with its novelty something was felt even by his contemporaries to be wanting. The something no doubt was humanity, sympathy, and nature."¹¹⁵ Thus we find Dr. Johnson well supported in all his contentions concerning Congreve.

Of Swift, Dr. Johnson had no appreciation; practically all his comments concerning his works are unfavorable, and the few which are favorable are qualified. His style he describes as simple,¹¹⁶ arrogant and dictatorial, and shallow.¹¹⁷ When Johnson insisted that Swift was a shallow fellow, and Sheridan replied by saying, "I always thought the Dean a very clear writer," Johnson retorted, "All shallows are clear." In the poetical works of Dr. Swift, he declares "there is not much upon which a critic can exercise his powers."¹¹⁹ "Swift had an unnatural delight in the physically impure such as every other tongue utters with unwillingness,

115 Gosse, Edmund, 1897, Short History of Modern English Literature, p. 191

116 Boswell's Johnson, Ed. Hill, Vol. 2, p. 220n1

117 Johnson's Lives of the English Poets, Ed. Hill, Vol. 3, p. 60

118 Boswell's Johnson, Ed. Hill, Vol. 5, p. 49n2

119 Johnson's Lives of English Poets, Ed. Hill, Vol. 3, p. 65

and of which every ear shrinks from mention."¹²⁰ Of Gulliver's Travels he said, "When once you have thought big men and little men it is easy to do all the rest."¹²¹ The only thing of importance that Swift wrote in which Johnson found anything he considered worth while was The Tale of a Tub, and of this he doubted Swift's authorship, for he says it was eminently superior to all his other works and continues, "if Swift really wrote The Tale of a Tub he should have hanged himself after he had written it."¹²² He insisted repeatedly that Swift had a higher reputation than he deserved, was inferior to his contemporaries, and "expires a driv'ler and a show."¹²³

In his condemnation of Swift, Dr. Johnson stands practically alone. Down through the years his statements are refuted in no unmistakable terms; such as, "the greatest genius of his age;"¹²⁴ Swift's style is in its line perfect;"¹²⁵ "by far the greatest man of that time;"¹²⁶ "for the qualities of sheer wit and humor Swift had no superior, ancient or modern."¹²⁷ Gulliver's Travels, undeniably the most extensively read of Swift's works, which was scorned by Dr. Johnson is described by other critics as: "the great workooof Swift,"¹²⁸ the most admirable satire ever conveyed."¹²⁹ Thus we find

120 Johnson's Lives of English Poets, Ed. Hill, Vol. 3, p. 242

121 Boswell's Johnson, Ed. Hill, Vol. 2, pp. 365

122 Johnsonian Miscellanies, Ed. Hill, Vol. 2, pp. 331

123 Works of Samuel Johnson, Ed. Hill, Vol. 1, p. 165

124 Addison, Joseph, 1705, Inscription to Presentation Copy of Travels in Italy.

125 Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, 1818, Miscellanies, Aesthetic and Literary, Ed. Ashe, pp. 128, 181

126 Carlyle, Thomas, 1828, Lectures in the History of Literature, Lect. X. P. 177

127 Hunt, Leigh, 1846, Wit and Humor

128 Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, Wit and Humor, Miscellanies, Aesthetic and Literary, Ed. Ashe p. 128

129 Stanhope, Philip Henry Earl, 1836-58, History of England from the Peace of Utrecht to the Peace of Versailles, Vol. 2, p. 228

Dr. Johnson practically unsupported in his opinions of Dean Swift.

Dr. Johnson seems to have erred more seriously in this period than in the previous one. Where in the early seventeenth century we found him at variance with his fellow critics on two of the works of one writer, we find him in this period at variance on one writer and agreeing only partially on another.

Middle and Late Eighteenth Century

The question now arises, will Johnson's divergence of opinion continue to increase as we approach his own period? Poetry, drama, and prose are respectively represented in this period ~~of~~ by Johnson's contemporaries, Gray, Goldsmith, and Fielding.

Gray is no general favorite with Dr. Johnson, He says there are but two good stanzas in Gray's poetry which are in his Elegy in a Country Churchyard. Of the Bard he says, "To select a singular event and swell it to a giant's bulk by fabulous appendages of spectres and predictions, has little difficulty, for he that forsakes the probable may always find the marvelous, and it has little use; we are affected only as we believe. I do not see that The Bard promotes any truth, moral or political."¹³⁰ Throughout all of his criticism of Gray's works we find such disparaging comments as "In all Gray's odes there is a kind of cumberous splendour which we away;"¹³¹ "the language is too luxuriant;"¹³² "the second stanza exhibiting Mar's car and Jov's eagle is unworthy of further notice;"¹³³ "Gray thought his language poetical as it was more remote from common use."¹³⁴ Upon Gray's narratives of travel, Johnson passes favorable comment, as follows: "He that reads epistolary narrative wishes that to travel, and to tell his travels, had been more of his employment."¹³⁵

-
- | | |
|-----|--|
| 130 | Johnson's <u>Lives of English Poets</u> , Ed. Hill, Vol. 3, p. 438 |
| 131 | Ibid Vol. 3, p. 437 |
| 132 | Ibid Vol. 3, p. 434 |
| 133 | Ibid Vol. 3, p. 436-438 |
| 134 | Ibid Vol. 3, p. 435 |
| 135 | Ibid Vol. 3, p. 428 |

Of the Elegy William Hazlitt said, "It is one of the most classical productions that ever was penned by a refined and thoughtful mind."¹³⁶ And Walter Savage Landor predicted that it would be read as long as any work of Shakespeare.¹³⁷ Of his Odes Coleridge said, "I think there is something majestic in Gray's Installation Ode." As a poet, Edmund Gosse considers Gray the most important between Pope and Wordsworth.¹³⁹ Thus once again we see Dr. Johnson at variance with his brother critics.

Goldsmith was generally appreciated by Johnson, but as a man he was sometimes severely, justly so, criticised by him. On the whole, however, he favored most of what Goldsmith wrote. Of his essays he says, "There is no man who can pen an essay with such ease and elegance as Goldsmith."¹⁴⁰ "Sir, he has the art of compiling and of saying everything he has to say in a pleasing manner."¹⁴¹ "His genius is great but his knowledge small."¹⁴² Take him as a poet, as a comic writer, or as an historian, he stands in the first class."¹⁴³

In his opinions of Goldsmith, Dr. Johnson finds himself well supported by his immediate friend and contemporary, James Boswell

136 Hazlitt, William, 1818, Lectures on English Poets, Lecture VI
 137 Landor, Walter Savage, 1843, Notes Out of Letters, Life by For-
 ester, p. 570

138 Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, 1833, Table Talk, Ed. Ashe, Oct. 23

139 Gosse, Edmund, 1888, A History of Eighteenth Century Literature,
 pp. 235-236

140 Boswell's Johnson, Ed. Hill, Vol. 2, p. 304n4

141 Ibid Vol. 2, p. 273

142 Ibid Vol. 2, p. 225

143 Ibid Vol. 2, p. 271

who says, "No man had the art of displaying with more advantage as a writer whatever literary acquisitions he made."¹⁴⁴ Sir Walter Scott in 1823 said, "Goldsmith did everything happily."¹⁴⁵ Edmund Gosse in 1897 says, "he was a poet of great flexibility and sensitiveness; his single novel is full of humor and nature; as a dramatist he succeeded brilliantly in an age of failure; he is one of the most perfect essayists."¹⁴⁶

Fielding was not ranked very high as a writer by Dr. Johnson. One one occasion he said, "The virtues of Fielding's heroes were the vices of a truly good man."¹⁴⁷ Another time he said, "Harry Fielding never drew a good character."¹⁴⁸ When Hannah Moore in 1780 alluded to some witty passage in Tom Jones, Johnson replied, "I am shocked to hear you quote from so vicious a book. I am sorry you read it, a confession which no modest lay should every make. I scarcely know a more corrupt work."¹⁴⁹ Johnson often compared Fielding's works with those of Richardson, very much to the discredit to the former. Oneone such occasion Fielding being mentioned he exclaimed, that he was a "blockhead;" and upon Boswell's expressing astonishment, he said what he meant by blockhead was that he was a barren rascal. When Boswell argued that he draws very natural pic-

144 Boswell's Johnson, Ed. Hill, Vol. 1, p. 477

145 Scott, Sir Walter; Table Talk, Ed. Ash, p. 22

146 Gosse, Edmund, Short History of Modern Literature, pp. 253-254

147 Boswell's Johnson, Ed. Hill, Vol. 2, p. 56

148 Ibid Vol. 2, p. 199n2

149 Ibid Vol. 2, pp. 200n

tures of human life Johnson replied, "Sir, it is a very low life. Richardson used to say had he not known who Fielding was, he should have believed he was a hostler. Sir, there is more knowledge of the heart in one letter of Richardson's than in all Tom Jones."¹⁵⁰ Boswell believed that Johnson had an unreasonable prejudice against Fielding, and says, "I cannot refrain from repeating here my wonder at Johnson's excessive and unaccountable depreciation of one of the best writers that England has produced. Tom Jones had stood the test of public opinion with such success, as to have established its great merit, both for the story, the sentiments, and the manners and also the varieties of diction so as to leave no doubt of its having an animated truth of execution throughout."¹⁵¹ The issue of immorality which Johnson raises regarding Tom Jones is well answered by Coleridge; "A young man whose heart or feelings can be injured or even his passions excited by aught in this novel is already thoroughly corrupt."¹⁵² Sir Walter Scott believes that perusal of Tom Jones has not added one libertine to the large list, who would not have been such, had it never been printed.¹⁵³ Carlyle in 1823 describes Fielding's novels as "genuine things."¹⁵⁴ Coleridge in 1834 expresses himself thus: "To him(Fielding) up after Richardson is like emerging from a sick room heated with stoves into an open lawn on a breezy day in May."¹⁵⁵ These critics are ably supported by

150 Boswell's Johnson, Ed. Hill, Vol. 2, pp. 199-200

151 Ibid Vol. 2, p. 201

152 Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, 1832, Notes on Books and Authors, Miscellaneous, Aesthetic, and Literary, Ed. Ashe, p 337

153 Scott, Sir Walter, 1820, Henry Fielding

154 Carlyle, Thomas, 1823, Early letters, Ed. Norton, p. 293

155 Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, Table Talk, Ed. Ashe, p. 294

such later critics as James Russell Lowell in 1893, George Saintsbury in 1895, and Edmund Gosse, in 1897.

This brief comparison would indicate that Dr. Johnson is not a very reliable critic of his contemporaries, having agreed with other critics on only one writer and that one a personal friend and fellow club member.

GENERALIZATION AND CONCLUSIONS

After having examined Dr. Johnson's Literary standards and specific criticisms of nine men representing the fields of poetry, drama, and prose over a period of approximately one hundred and fifty years, after having compared these criticisms with those of contemporaneous and subsequent critics, after having subjected both authors and criticisms to Dr. Johnson's infallible court, Time and Public, we may come to some reasonable understanding of Dr. Johnson and his place as a critic among critics. Chapter II discloses in the comparison of his criticisms with those of others, a wide divergence of opinion in case of Milton's Lycidas in the case of Swift; and in the cases of Fielding and Gray.

The reasons for the disagreement between Johnson and other critics and public opinion in the case of three such writers as Swift, Fielding, and Gray warrants special consideration. National prejudice could not have played a large part in the matter. Swift was born in Ireland, but so was Goldsmith. Religious prejudices could not have been the dominating fact, for no writer's religious conceptions were further from those of Johnson than were Pope's or Goldsmith's. Political prejudice could not have been the determining element, for surely none of these men differed more widely from Dr. Johnson's views in this matter than did Milton. In the case of Swift, Sheridan has conjectured that it may have been because Swift did not make any effort to assist Dr. Johnson in getting a Degree from the Irish University. In the case of Fielding he may have been somewhat influenced by Richardson Fielding's rival, who was a close

personal friend of Dr. Johnson's and on several occasions gave him pecuniary assistance. Considering this, together with the overestimation by Dr. Johnson of such of contemporary writers as Richardson, Burney, and Akenside, we feel justified in considering that personal prejudice must have influenced the Doctor in his judgment of his contemporaries. Indeed, he, himself, admits as much when he says: "in criticism as in every other art, we fail sometimes by our weakness, but more frequently by our fault. We are sometimes bewildered by ignorance, and sometimes by prejudices."¹⁵⁶ There are, however, at least three other factors, in my estimation, influential in the Doctor's misjudgments. They are Dr. Johnson's Standards of Criticism, the nearness to himself of these men in point of time, and the serious consideration of everything Dr. Johnson has said, irrespective of place, circumstance or purpose.

Dr. Johnson opposed blind reverence for antiquity, and blind observance of ancient rules, but he did believe in rules, his rules, and in the application of these he was as arbitrary as any classicist could ever have been. Truth was to him the dominant characteristic of all literature, but that there were many avenues to the road to truth, Dr. Johnson did not admit. To him there was one correct way, as to him there was one correct form of religion, one correct form of government, and one correct form and only one of organization of society; and all who did not conform to his views

¹⁵⁶ Works of Samuel Johnson, Ed. Murphy, Vol. 6, p. 181

on literature as in other matters were, therefore wrong in his opinion. His overestimation of Pope as a poet was no doubt due to his reverence for the classical couplet in the use of which Pope excelled. If, as in the case of Shakespeare or Milton, as I have pointed out, some of his standards were violated, there were others not violated which redeemed the author in Johnson's estimation. Had Milton written nothing but Lycidas he would have been as seriously condemned by Dr. Johnson as were Swift, Fielding, and Gray. Each of these three men violated some of Dr. Johnson's literary standards and did not in the employment of others redress himself in the Dictator's eyes. Swift was a satirist, Fielding shocked the Doctor's conventional moral standards, and Gray used figurative and mythological language; hence according to Johnson none of them display any qualities in his productions to justify high literary merit.

In analyzing the preceding paragraphs it will be observed that in his own contemporary period he apparently erred in his judgment of two out of the three representative men chosen for this study; in the period next preceding this, he erred in the case of one out of the three, and least partially in the case of the second, and in the furthest remote period he erred in none. We might therefore take into careful consideration Dr. Johnson's words: "What has been longest known has been most considered, and what is most considered is best understood,"¹⁵⁷ and that "while the author

157 Works of Samuel Johnson, Ed. Murphy, Vol. 2, pp. 117-118

is yet living, we estimate his powers by his worst performance and when he is dead we rate him by his best."¹⁵⁸

Finally whether he spoke in seriousness or jest; whether he was arguing on the wrong side or the right; whether he was talking for social intercourse or to display his wit and superiority, critics both contemporary and subsequent have made Dr. Johnson accountable for everything he ever said.

In all justice to Dr. Johnson, we must then conclude:

1. That his criticisms show some sound standards.
2. That those standards are fundamentally classical standards, formulated to meet demands of the eighteenth century.
3. That most of his standards are now grown obsolete.
4. That his criticisms of his contemporaries are so imbedded in personal prejudices and remarks which owing to their setting were never intended seriously, that they become practically valueless.
5. That he is not a reliable critic with reference to his contemporaries, and that his reliability increases as we recede from his own age.
6. That despite the fact that his standards are obsolete Dr. Johnson is entitled to an important place among critics of English literature because his criticisms have formed a most important step, the first, step, in the stairway of criticism, one upon which the succeeding critics have built, who in their turn too may become obsolete as times change, but therefore not any less important in the history and evolution of literary criticism.

¹⁵⁸ Works of Samuel Johnson, Ed. Murphy, Vol. 2, p. 116

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Boswell's Johnson, Ed. Hill, New York: Bigelow, Brown & Company, 1799
- Brown, J. E. The Critical Opinions of Samuel Johnson, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1926.
- Cambridge History of English Literature, New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1907. Vol. 7, pp. 108-160. Vol. 8, pp. 1-64. Vol. 9, pp. 29-144. Vol. 10, pp. 1-50, 177-219, 220-244.
- Cox, J. E. The Independent Boswell and the Capricious Dr. Johnson. Journal of the University of North Dakota, Fall, 1931.
- Johnson's Dictionary of the English Language. Eleventh Ed. London, England, 1816.
- Johnson's Lives of English Poets, Ed. Hill, Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1905. Vol. 1, pp. 84-200, 331-481. Vol. 2, pp. 79-158. Vol. 3, pp. 1-74, 82-267, 421-442.
- Johnsonian Miscellanies, Ed. Hill, Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1897. Vol. 1 and Vol. 2.
- Johnsonian. Ed. Napier. London, England: George Bell and Sons, 1884.
- Letters of Samuel Johnson. Ed. Hill, Oxford, England; Clarendon Press, 1892. Vol. 1, pp. 209-210, 315-318. Vol. 2, pp. 184-185, 224n, 233-234, 351-390m.
- Lounsbury, T. R. Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist. New York: Scribner's, 1902. p. 130.
- Moulton, The Library of Literary Criticism. Buffalo, New York: The Moulton Publishing Company, 1901. Vol. 1, pp. 639-669, 447-577. Vol. 2, pp. 242-298, 733-745. Vol. 3, pp. 144-238, 613-639, 338-365, 553-573.
- Rasselas, Ed. Hill. Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1887.
- Roscoe, E. S. Aspects of Doctor Johnson. Cambridge, England: University Press, 1928.
- Spittal, J. K. Contemporary Criticism of Dr. Samuel Johnson. London, England: John Murray, Albemarle St. W. 1923.
- Tinker, C. B. Dr. Johnson and Fanny Burney. New York: Moffat, Yard and Company, 1911.
- Tinker, C. B. Young Boswell, Boston, Mass. The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1922.

Tour of the Hebrides. Ed. Chapman, Oxford, England: University Press, 1924, pp. 1-149.

Warner, C. D. Library of the World's Best Literature, New York: Peal and Hill, 1996. Vol. 10, pp. 5693-5731. Vol 11, pp. 6501-6532, 6628-6636. Vol. 14, pp. 8283-8316. Vol. 21, pp. 1689-1761.

Works of Samuel Johnson, Ed. Murphy, London, England: Hodson, 1806. Vol. 1, pp. 156-168. Vol. 2. pp. 28-59, 116-117. Vol. 3, pp. 85-90, 111-117, 186-192, 200-206, 237-242, 236-274, 274-280, 389-426. Vol. 4, pp. 13-37, 18-24, 91-97, 133-138, 167-172, 208-213, 214-219, 343-345. Vol. 5, pp. 33-39, 84-90, 96-101, 107-113, 133-140, 203-209, 294-300, 316-322, 349-354, 393-399, 399-406. Vol. 6, pp. 11-18, 48-53, 69-74, 80-84, 90-95, 138-143, 178-182.