
From the Editor



The recent arrival of two new biographies of Johnson has sent me in search of the many passages throughout his works in which Johnson expresses his strict sense of historical truth. Boswell mentions this aspect of Johnson's thinking often and at one point in his *Life* cites Johnson's review of Warton's *Essay on the Writings and Genius of Pope*: "Nothing but experience could evince the frequency of false information. . . . Some men relate what they think, as what they know; some men of confused memories and habitual inaccuracy, ascribe to one man what belongs to another; and some talk on, without thought or care." Boswell continues, "Had he lived to read what Sir John Hawkins and Mrs. Piozzi have related concerning himself, how much would he have found his observation illustrated" (*Life*, 3: 229). Of course, Piozzi was more intimate with Johnson in many ways than Boswell, and Hawkins knew him longer. All three biographers had immediate experience with Johnson that it would be perilous to ignore. But, if even these contemporaries are prone to falsehood, what shall we say of present-day biographers?

Adam Gopnik's biographical essay on Johnson in *The New Yorker* (8 December 2008), which draws on the new books by Peter Martin and Jeffrey Meyer (as well as *Hester*, the new biography of Mrs. Thrale), is a case in point of the sort of thing that Johnson was always remarking. Meyer twice tells the famous story of Johnson and Osborne. The prolific biographer says, "Johnson once knocked down the bookseller Thomas Osborne with a folio volume (a duodecimo would not do), then put his foot on his neck and told him not to rise, threatening to compound the well-earned punishment by kicking him down the stairs" (p. 82). He tells the story again later, adding, "Osborne was eventually permitted to get up, and Johnson, always pressed for money, somehow made peace with his employer" (pp. 146-7). Readers of the *News Letter* know, thanks to O M Brack's article in the last number, that the story of the event, which took place in 1738, circulated in London for nearly forty years before it was first written down in *The London Packet*, as a parallel to a similar story about Goldsmith. The story was embellished by Tyers and Cooke, two of Johnson's earliest biographers. Both Thrale and Boswell asked Johnson for his account of the event, and both got the simple answer that Osborne was "imperti-

nent" or "insolent," and Johnson beat him. No folio; no speech; no threats of further violence; no foot on the neck. To Cooke's, Tyers's, and Meyer's accounts Gopnik adds his own embellishment of this story of Johnson: "A monster of a man, with a huge and powerful frame, and a blunt bulldog head set above it, he could pick up warring street dogs and toss them aside like kittens [he gets this stuff from Meyer], and once beat an insolent publisher senseless with a folio volume." No one before registered a knock out for Johnson. If only Gopnik subscribed to the *News Letter*! He would then have known that Johnson told Thrale, "I beat the fellow, & that was all; but the world so hated poor Osborne; that they have never done multiplying the blows, and increasing the weight of them" (*Thraliana*, 1: 195).

I'm assuming, of course, that if Meyer and Gopnik had known better, they would have forborne the propagation of these falsehoods, but perhaps that's an open question. Meyer, at least, has read *Thraliana* and presumably knew the passage in which Johnson deflates the myth of his battle with Osborne. He might also have suspected that the story sounds mythic and had a life of its own, divorced from any historical reality. A similar story was later told of Goldsmith, and earlier of Poggio, a combative humanist of the early fifteenth century. Therefore, it seems to me, these writers were led to accept a fiction because they could not resist its temptation, and because of this—and in this—both writers are very unlike Johnson. Boswell says, "I never knew any person who upon hearing an extraordinary circumstance told, discovered more of the *incredulous odi* [whatever I disbelieve I hate]. He would say with a significant look and decisive tone, 'It is not so. Do not tell this again.' He inculcated upon all his friends the importance of perpetual vigilance against the slightest degrees of falsehood; the effect of which, as Sir Joshua observed to me, has been, that all who were of his *school* are distinguished for a love of truth and accuracy, which they would not have possessed in the same degree, if they had not been acquainted with Johnson" (*Life*, 3: 229-30). Readers of this *News Letter*, I hope, are proud to be of the school of Johnson, and reject falsehood wherever they discover it.

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