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Samuel Johnson, William Shakespeare, and the Vanity of Human Wishes

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By some measures, Johnson's work on his edition of Shakespeare's plays was the most extended effort of his lifetime of extensive work. He began the job in 1745, when he wrote *Miscellaneous Observations on the Tragedy of Macbeth: with Remarks on Sir T. H.'s Edition of Shakespear. To which is Affix'd, Proposals for a New Edition of Shakeshear* [sic], *with a Specimen*. The completed work in eight volumes octavo finally came out twenty years later, in 1765. Although Johnson was horribly late in delivering his edition of Shakespeare, the two decades that elapsed from the beginning of the project to the end were the most productive of his life of writing. In 1746, he signed the contract to write *A Dictionary of the English Language*, and he was at work on the project by 1747, when he started marking up his copy of Warburton's edition of Shakespeare, published in that year. Seven of the eight volumes of Johnson's copy are now in the library of University College, Aberystwyth.

Johnson's copy of Warburton's Shakespeare is the most heavily marked of the extant fourteen titles that Johnson read and underlined for use in the *Dictionary*. One volume, alas, has gone missing. Johnson also makes occasional references to Hanmer's Shakespeare in the *Dictionary*, especially to its glossary and at least one reference to Pope's notes on Shakespeare[1]. Although Johnson principally used Warburton's Shakespeare in compiling his *Dictionary*, he occasionally looked at other editions, and it is fair to say that he was aware of Shakespeare throughout his work. E. J. Thomas closely inspected Johnson's copy of Warburton's Shakespeare and found about 17,000 quotations from it excerpted for use in the *Dictionary*. Some of these are used multiple times; Shakespeare is by far the most heavily quoted author in the *Dictionary*. One would be hard-pressed to find a single page in the *Dictionary* on which his name does not appear.

Consideration of Johnson's sojourn in the sea of the English language, important as it was, does not in itself get us to 1756, when he evidently resumed work on his edition of Shakespeare, publishing at that time his revised proposals for his edition. Before then, Johnson interrupted his work on the *Dictionary* to write two issues of the *Rambler*, every Tuesday and Saturday, from 1750-52 before diving into volume II on or about 3 April 1753, when he consecrated the resumption of that work with a prayer[2]. Shakespeare was not entirely forgotten by Mr Rambler, even if his most pressing unfinished task was the *Dictionary*. *Rambler* 156, on tragicomedy, for example, foreshadows parts of Johnson's 1765 preface to Shakespeare, as does number 121, on the impropriety of imitating Spenser and of anachronism in general. Number 168 comes straight from the *Observations on Macbeth*, focusing on the "Come thick night" speech and criticizing the low diction of "dun" and "knife".

After the revised proposals of 1756, Johnson was still unable to focus on his edition of Shakespeare full time, though it was always

1 For information on authors and works cited in the *Dictionary*, see the admirable webpage created and curated by Brian Grimes: https://www.sjdictionarysources.org/

2 See Samuel Johnson, *Diaries, Prayers, and Annals*, eds E. L. McAdam, Jr. *et al*., in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, New Haven-London, Yale University Press, 1958-2019, 23 vols, vol. I [1958], p. 50.

on his back burner. In that year, having spent everything he earned on the *Dictionary*, Johnson launched *The Literary Magazine*, for which he wrote thirty-six book reviews in a thirteen-month period. In 1757, meanwhile, Johnson wrote to Charles Burney about his progress on the edition of Shakespeare, predicting completion in 1758[3]; by the end of that year, in fact, two volumes were printed. Around the time that Johnson wrote for the *Literary Magazine* (1755-56), he also edited Thomas Browne's *Christian Morals,* and a little later, in 1761, by which time six volumes of Shakespeare were printed, he published an edition of the English works of Roger Ascham. In both of these other editions, as in his forthcoming edition of Shakespeare, Johnson wrote glosses that go beyond his work in the *Dictionary*, while drawing on it, of course, and resembling it in method. In 1759, in the midst of editing Shakespeare and all his other work, Johnson wrote *Rasselas*. In this oriental tale, the wise man Imlac's description of the poet's task (not to "number the streaks of the tulip") foreshadows parts of Johnson's preface to Shakespeare and even constitutes an exaggerated sketch of it[4]. Finally, after he received his pension from the king in 1762, Johnson was able to stop writing for immediate exigencies and work full time on Shakespeare. After a vacation with his friend Joshua Reynolds in Devonshire, Johnson got down to work and finished the job rather quickly. All eight volumes were in print by 1765[5].

There are many smaller works that I could have mentioned as preparing Johnson to write his edition of Shakespeare, but only one more demands serious consideration. Johnson's greatest poem, first published in 1749 and revised in 1755, is *The Vanity of Human Wishes.* This work obviously does not have the generic pedigree to be relevant to the edition of Shakespeare, but it plays into the edition nevertheless. The poem is an imitation – that is, a loose translation, with modern characters substituted for those in the

[3] See Johnson, *The Letters of Samuel Johnson*, ed. Bruce Redford, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1992-94, 5 vols, vol. I, p. 158.

[4] See Johnson, *Rasselas and Other Tales*, ed. Gwin J. Kolb, in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, vol. XVI [1990], p. 43.

[5] For information on the printing history of Johnson's Shakespeare, see J. D. Fleeman, *A Bibliography of the Works of Samuel Johnson: Treating His Published Works from the Beginnings to 1984*, Oxford, Clarendon, 2000, 2 vols, especially vol. II, p. 1089.

original – of Juvenal's tenth satire. This poem is notable not for any mention of Shakespeare, but rather because it articulates one of the central themes in all of Johnson's work, a theme that Johnson found ways of inserting into both his fictional and his scholarly work. The *Vanity* comprises a series of vignettes in which the various vanities of life – wealth, power, learning, beauty, and long life – are shown to be short-lived and illusory. This is a key work in Johnson's oeuvre because it distills the theme that Johnson finds everywhere in literature and life. In his approximately seventy biographies, for example, the theme arises again and again as authors hope for comfort and relaxation just before death snatches them from their grasp. Otway chokes on a piece of bread that he has just begged and was trying to enjoy[6]; Pope dies after eating his favorite dish, potted lamprey[7]; and Ambrose Philips, "[h]aving purchased an annuity of four hundred pounds, […] now certainly hoped to pass some years of life in plenty and tranquility; but his hope deceived him: he was struck with a palsy, and died"[8]. Almost as strong a distillation of his quintessential theme is Johnson's *Sermon 12*. It takes its epigraph from Ecclesiastes 1.14 and begins thus:

> That all human actions terminate in vanity, and all human hopes will end in vexation, is a position, from which nature with-holds our credulity, and which our fondness for the present life, and worldly enjoyments, disposes us to doubt; however forcibly it may be urged upon us, by reason or experience.[9]

Hagstrum and Gray, the editors of the Yale edition of the sermons, call this one "a quintessentially Johnsonian sermon – a prose *Vanity of Human Wishes*, a *Rasselas* without narrative". It "exposes", they go on to say, "as does no other work of SJ, the orthodox Christian

6 See Johnson, *The Lives of the Poets*, ed. John H. Middendorf, in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, vol. XXI [2010], p. 259.

7 See Johnson, *The Lives of the Poets*, ed. John H. Middendorf, in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, vol. XXIII [2010], p. 1167. Johnson knows the story may be apocryphal, but his interest in the theme it exemplifies drives him to retail it anyway.

8 Johnson, *The Lives of the Poets*, vol. XXIII, p. 1317.

9 Johnson, *Sermons*, eds Jean Hagstrum and James Gray, in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, vol. XIV [1978], p. 127.

foundation that underlies his philosophy of human life and effort and that supports the entire structure of his morality"[10].

The two points I have been trying to make here are that 1) Johnson spent a good part of his professional life thinking about Shakespeare, even when he was distracted from the project of editing his plays, and 2) that the vanity of human wishes is a key theme in his writing throughout this period of mulling over the works of Shakespeare and, indeed, throughout Johnson's life. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that Johnson would want to find his key theme in his key author. This does not mean that he will. In fact, it may be only another vain wish. That this wish is not always gratified, however, is one of the reasons why Johnson found that

> Shakespeare with all his excellencies has likewise faults, and faults sufficient to obscure and overwhelm any other merit […]. His first defect is that to which may be imputed most of the evil in books or in men. He sacrifices virtue to convenience, and is so much more careful to please than to instruct, that he seems to write without any moral purpose.[11]

Not content with Shakespeare's failures in this regard – and this is the main point I want to make – Johnson sometimes steps in to make the moral explicit and to give us "Shakespeare improved", much as he may have been against that concept as an editor.

As a textual editor, Johnson was careful to keep his emendations in the margins (in footnotes), and, as a commentator, he was aware that "[n]otes are often necessary, but they are necessary evils"[12]. Even if he feared his notes would "refrigerate the mind"[13], however, Johnson could not resist adding them, especially when they enabled Shakespeare to become a book of moral teaching. In several of these instances, the moral that Johnson helps Shakespeare to articulate is the vanity of human wishes. Johnson does something similar in the *Dictionary* when he gratuitously positions quotations or adds comments to make a point. For

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10 Johnson, *Sermons*, note 1, p. 127.

11 Johnson, *Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. Arthur Sherbo, in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, vol. VII [1968], p. 71.

12 Johnson, *Johnson on Shakespeare*, vol. VII, p. 111.

13 Johnson, *Johnson on Shakespeare*, vol. VII, p. 111.

example, when he illustrates *brevier*, the typeface, with some lines in that style, Johnson chooses the pithy, religious advice of Michael to Adam in *Paradise Lost*: "Nor love thy life, nor hate, but what thou liv'st, / Live well, how long or short, permit to heav'n" (XI.553-54). He could have chosen any passage, so he chose one with a strong moral lesson.

Johnson often took the same approach in scholarly notes. His method is illustrated very handily in two that he could not resist adding to his friend Giuseppe Baretti's *Introduction to the Italian Language* (1755). As part of the *Lettere Familiari from Francesco Redi al Signor Egidio Menagio, a Parigi*, Baretti included the following:

> Non deve adunque questa Donna, per volersi far estimar buona ed onesta, esser tanto ritrosa; e mostrar tanto d'abborrir e le compagnie e i ragionamenti ancor un poco lascivi, che ritrovandovisi se ne levi, perchè facilimente si potrìa pensare, ch'ella fingesse d'esser tanto austera per nascondere di se quello, ch'ella dubitasse, ch'altri potesse risapere: costumi così selvatichi son sempre odiosi. Non deve tampoco per mostrar d'esser libera e piacevole, dir parole disoneste, nè usar una certa domestichezza intemperata e senza freno, e modi di far creder di se quello che forse non è. Ma ritrovandosi a tai ragionamenti, deve ascoltarli con un poco di rossore, e vergogna.

Johnson, who was only proofreading for Baretti (the book contains a facing-page translation and notes in English), cannot help but add a note on moral grounds:

> Though the design of these notes is rather to teach grammar than morality, yet, as I think nothing a deviation that can serve the cause of virtue, I will not forbear to observe, that this despicable argument has been from age to age the snare of women. They have been taught to fear reserve more than levity, and have in time become loose, because they durst not venture to be charged with hypocrisy. The true rule to be given to every human being, is to fly the appearance of evil, and so start back from the brink of guilt; for they who venture on the first step, will still more readily pass over the second.[14]

[14] Giuseppe Baretti, *Introduction to the Italian Language*, London, 1755, pp. 48-49. James Crossley first identified Johnson as the author of this note and a longer one on pp. 198-99 (*Notes and Queries*, first series, V, 1852, p. 101). He also attributed the preface to Johnson, but that has been disputed; for the details, see Fleeman, vol. I, p. 485.

Johnson epitomized this message in *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, where he reveals the hidden dangers of the wish for beauty. The belle, afflicted with pride, gradually lets her guard down and in the end:

> In croud at once, where none the pass defend,
> The harmless Freedom, and the private Friend,
> The guardians yield, by force superior ply'd;
> By Int'rest, Prudence; and by Flatt'ry, Pride.
> Now beauty falls betray'd, despis'd, distress'd,
> And hissing Infamy proclaims the rest. (ll. 337-42)[15]

For Johnson, there is always an appeal open from grammar to morality, and he exhibits this frequently in his edition of Shakespeare, as in his *Dictionary* and, indeed, in all of his scholarly works. A pillar of Johnson's morality is the vanity of human wishes, and Johnson often finds it needs pointing out in Shakespeare. At *Cymbeline*, IV.ii.269ff, for example, there is a song: "Both the scepter, learning, physic, must / All follow this, and come to dust". Johnson finds the message indistinct but important, so he adds in a note: "The poet's sentiment seems to have been this. All human excellence is equally subject to the stroke of death: neither the power of kings, nor the science of scholars, nor the art of those whose immediate study is the prolongation of life, can protect them from the final destiny of man"[16]. Did Shakespeare mean to say, as the sermonizer in Ecclesiastes 1.14 says, "I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit"? Is what Johnson says the same as what is said in Ecclesiastes? The answer to both questions must be "not quite", but it does seem clear that Johnson has translated (or imitated) Shakespeare and made him speak a Johnsonian version of Ecclesiastes. Johnson's more poetic version can be found in several

[15] Johnson, *Poems*, ed. E. L. McAdam, Jr., in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, vol. VI [1964]. All references to *The Vanity of Human Wishes* refer to this edition.

[16] Johnson, *Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. Arthur Sherbo, in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, vol. VIII [1968], p. 898. Johnson added this note in his revision of the edition in 1773, but it illustrates the principle on which he acted all the same.

of the pithiest couplets of *The Vanity of Human Wishes*. Perhaps the most pithy of all are these:

> Fate wings with ev'ry wish th' afflictive dart,
> Each gift of nature, and each grace of art,
> With fatal heat impetuous courage glows,
> With fatal sweetness elocution flows,
> Impeachment stops the speaker's pow'rful breath,
> And restless fire precipitates on death. (ll. 15-20)

For another example of Johnson annotating Shakespeare to bring out the central theme of human vanity, consider *1 Henry IV*, V.iv.77-82, in Johnson's edition:

> HOTSPUR
> […]
> I better brook the loss of brittle life,
> Than those proud titles thou hast won of me,
> They wound my thoughts, worse than thy sword my flesh;
> But thought's the slave of life, and life time's fool,
> And time, that takes survey of all the world,
> Must have a stop.

Johnson's comment is:

> Hotspur in his last moments endeavours to console himself. The glory of the Prince "wounds his thoughts", but "thought", being "dependent on life", must cease with it, and will soon be at an end. "Life", on which "thought" depends, is itself of no great value, being the "fool" and sport of "time"; of "time" which, with all its dominion over sublunary things, "must" itself at last "be stopped".[17]

There is an element of consolation here, but it is based on an acknowledgment of the vanity or evanescence of human wishes and, in fact, all human things. Wishes cease with life, and all things, including life and time, must end. Johnson's great imitation of Juvenal is much better at bringing out the vanity of wishes than offering any consolation concerning their term, so it is hard to find an exact parallel there. The lines that come closest are near the end

[17] Johnson, *Johnson on Shakespeare*, vol. VII, p. 488.

of the poem, when readers are exhorted to "pour forth" prayers for things that really matter: "For faith, that panting for a happier seat, / Counts death kind Nature's signal of retreat" (ll. 363-64).

But Johnson's gloss on Hotspur's lines is more reminiscent of the last *Idler* than anything in the *Vanity*. There he writes:

> The secret horrour of the last is inseparable from a thinking being whose life is limited, and to whom death is dreadful. We always make a secret comparison between a part and the whole; the termination of any period of life reminds us that life itself has likewise its termination. […] an end must in time be put to every thing great as to every thing little; that to life must come its last hour, and to this system of being its last day, the hour at which probation ceases, and repentance will be vain; the day in which every work of the hand, and imagination of the heart shall be brought to judgment, and an everlasting futurity shall be determined by the past.[18]

There is something consolatory too in the expression of vanity that Johnson finds in *Measure for Measure*, III.i.32-34, where the disguised Duke is consoling the imprisoned Claudio. As Johnson has it:

> DUKE
> Thou hast nor youth, nor age;
> But as it were an after-dinner's sleep,
> Dreaming on both.

His comment makes explicit what perhaps were better left metaphorical, but he finds the meaning too important to be left to the reader's interpretation:

> This is exquisitely imagined. When we are young we busy ourselves in forming schemes for succeeding time, and miss the gratifications that are before us; when we are old we amuse the languor of age with the recollection of youthful pleasures or performances; so that our life, of which no part is filled with the business of the present time, resembles

[18] Johnson, *The Idler and The Adventurer*, eds W. J. Bate, John M. Bullitt and L. F. Powell, in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, vol. II [1963], pp. 315-16.

> our dreams after dinner, when the events of the morning are mingled with the designs of the evening.[19]

This is close to what Johnson says in *Sermon 12*, the one with the epigraph from Ecclesiastes 1.14:

> So great is our interest, or so great we think it, to believe ourselves able to procure our own happiness, that experience never convinces us of our impotence; and indeed our miscarriages might be reasonably enough imputed by us, to our own unskilfulness, or ignorance; if we were able to derive intelligence, from no experience but our own. But surely we may be content to credit the general voice of mankind, complaining incessantly of general infelicity; and when we see the restlessness of the young, and the peevishness of the old; when we find the daring and the active combating misery, and the calm and humble lamenting it; when the vigorous are exhausting themselves, in struggles with their own condition, and the old and the wise retiring from the contest, in weariness and despondency; we may be content at last to conclude, that if happiness had been to be found, some would have found it, and that it is vain to search longer for what all have missed.
>
> But though our obstinacy should hold out, against common experience and common authority, it might at least give way to the declaration of Solomon [the once putative author of Ecclesiastes], who has left this testimony to succeeding ages; that all human pursuits and labours, are vanity.[20]

One more example is pertinent. Here Johnson has to wrench the meaning of the text a bit to reveal that it is really about vanity. At *Romeo and Juliet*, V.i.3-5, Romeo says, as Johnson has it:

> My bosom's lord sits lightly on his throne,
> And, all this day, an unaccustom'd spirit
> Lifts me above the ground with chearful thoughts.

Johnson responds:

> These three lines are very gay and pleasing. But why does Shakespeare give Romeo this involuntary cheerfulness just before the extremity of

[19] Johnson, *Johnson on Shakespeare*, vol. VII, p. 193.

[20] Johnson, *Sermons*, pp. 127-28.

> unhappiness? Perhaps to shew the vanity of trusting to those uncertain and casual exaltations or depressions, which many consider as certain foretokens of good and evil.[21]

For faithful readers of Johnson, this interpretation recalls the powerful vignette of the suitors surrounding the man of the moment in *The Vanity of Human Wishes*:

> Unnumber'd suppliants croud Preferment's gate,
> Athirst for wealth, and burning to be great;
> Delusive Fortune hears th' incessant call,
> They mount, they shine, evaporate, and fall. (ll. 73-76)

Romeo's wishes are of course romantic rather than political, but the intellectual mechanism that causes delusion and the critic's need to point it out to vulnerable readers are the same in Johnson's edition and in his poem.

In concluding, it is important to point out that, as an editor or, indeed, as a lexicographer, Johnson is not always roused to comment on the vanity of all sublunary things, even when his text gives him an opportunity to do so. The *Dictionary* has many hidden gems in which Johnson speaks out in propria persona, and some of these gems concern the vanity of human wishes, but gems are rare, and most of the *Dictionary* is a work of lexicography without moral commentary. Likewise, Johnson's edition of Shakespeare is mainly a work of scholarly editing. When, for example, Johnson reads Ulysses' remark in *Troilus and Cressida* ("How some men creep in skittish Fortune's hall, / While others play the ideots in her eyes!", III.iii.134-35), he does not leap in to quote Juvenal's conclusion to his own *Vanity of Human Wishes* ("It is we who make Fortune a goddess"). He instead rejects Warburton's emendation of "sleep" for "creep" and shows how the meaning of "creep" suits the passage[22]. In other words, he is the philologer, and he feels no pressure here to relieve his reader from what he called in the *Dictionary* "the dusty desarts of barren philology"[23]. In sum,

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21 Johnson, *Johnson on Shakespeare*, vol. VIII, p. 954.

22 See Johnson, *Johnson on Shakespeare*, vol. VIII, pp. 924-25.

23 Johnson, *Johnson on the English Language*, eds Gwin J. Kolb and Robert DeMaria, Jr., in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, vol. XVIII [2005], p. 94.

Johnson is a professional scholar, but he is a scholar with a powerful conscience who believes that the final ends of literature are morality and religion. On some occasions, he departs from his professional agenda to make this clear, and, when he does feel the need to moralize Shakespeare or any other writer, his text is often Ecclesiastes 1.14.