

1978

Some Observations on Boswell's Early Satiric Ambitions

Michael Rewa

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rewa, Michael (1978) "Some Observations on Boswell's Early Satiric Ambitions," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 13: Iss. 1.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol13/iss1/18>

This Article is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in Scottish Literature* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

Michael Rewa

Some Observations on Boswell's Early Satiric Ambitions



Up to and including its description of his first meeting with Johnson, Boswell's *London Journal* is a record of failures: of friendship, professional hope, amatory expectation, and literary ambition. He wanted to be numbered among the friends of lords and literary figures, Eglintons and Sheridans, and was, until these friendships palled. He aspired to be a Guardsman, though there was never any real hope of his becoming one. He wished to be a lover of "fine women" (*LJ*, p. 156),¹ yet he never followed up his invitation from "Lady Mirabel" to become such, satisfied until he "got into genteel life" (*LJ*, p. 149) with an actress who had played such ladies on the stage--satisfaction irritatingly terminated. Above all, he wanted to make a literary reputation as a satirist or "Genius"² and become "one of the brightest wits of the court of George the Third" (*LJ*, p. 181). But he failed again.

Boswell's account of a long day's journey into satire he undertook with George Dempster and Andrew Erskine to attack the opening of David Mallet's new play *Elvira* suggests why.³ In light of his later achievement as the biographer of two great men, Paoli and Johnson, it is instructive to consider why, for I think his early failure and later success are connected. In 1763 there was still much of the 1760 "heedless, dissipated, rattling fellow who might say or do every ridiculous thing" (*LJ*, p. 62) about Boswell. Self-conscious rather

than self-knowledgeable, this fellow was incapable of seeing himself as his own real object of satire for even trying with such a character to make a reputation as a satiric "Genius." Accordingly, the satiric actions he so literally undertakes and describes take on mock epic significance. Indeed, if ever there were satirists unconsciously satirized in and by their behavior, we find them in the three Scots and Boswell their non-ironic spokesman. The terms they choose to judge by judge them. Although Boswell continued to gesture in the direction of satire later in his career and although he retained most of the exuberant energy that underlay his "rattling," he understood that his satire was trivial: he strove to be known as genial rather than as a genius. He did not invest satire with the same significance his earlier attempts had for him, for by then he had perceived that the way to literary success and personal satisfaction depended more upon his ability to celebrate virtue in a manly fashion than to criticize occasional lapses from literary taste. The terms he later judges by validate his own desires for genuine personal and literary achievement.

Irrked by their scapegrace countryman Mallet's⁴ efforts to make a name for himself in the world of London letters, Boswell and his friends undertook to prevent *Elvira's* success and deny Mallet his third night's revenues. Acting on Boswell's planned "whim,"⁵ the three set out on the morning of the day the play was to open, 19 January 1763, to "walk from one end of London to the other, dine at Dolly's, and be in the theatre at night; and as the play would probably be bad, and as Mr. David Malloch, who has changed his name to David Mallet, Esq., was an arrant puppy, [they] determined to exert [themselves] in damning it" (*LJ*, p. 152). They conceive of the whole day's activities as a unified action, climaxing quite possibly with physical combat. They arm themselves with cudgels as well as catcalls. Dempster specifically refers to their day's plan as an "Epic Poem" when he remarks, of a departure from their predetermined route, that their "Epic Poem would be somewhat dull if it were not enlivened by such episodes" (*LJ*, p. 153). They propose to reveal themselves as champions of taste--a Westminster virtue--right in the camp of their enemy. Their "notion of the adventure" (*LJ*, p. 153) is satiric attack: "just as the doors opened at four o'clock, we sallied into the house, planted ourselves in the middle of the pit, and with oaken cudgels in our hands and shrill sounding catcalls in our pockets, sat ready prepared, with a generous resentment in our breasts against dullness and impudence, to be swift ministers of vengeance" (*LJ*, p. 154).⁶

The notion of a whole day's adventure spread over an extended geographical area and culminating in a combat with the

play or playwright and his supporters generates epic reverberations in their minds. Given their making over-much of the whole business, however, and considering their actions at the playhouse, the reader familiar with Augustan satire may sense a more apt than "epic" analogue for their behavior. Their actions resonate with unconscious mock epic significance. It is not an *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, or *Aeneid* that gives allusive substance to their day's actions but *The Dunciad* or *Mac Flecknoe*. Epic diction aside ("swift ministers of vengeance" is the kind of heroic phrase that sends one to his Shakespeare concordance; suggestions of the pit as battleground reinforce the heroic overtones), their actions stamp them not as champions of wit and taste but Dunces themselves. The satiric combat they perform in the heroically imaginative context they have entertained themselves with is, trivially, catcalling.

They fail to win, to close the play. According to Boswell, the audience (among whom were Mallet and a supporting claque of some thirty others) lost the "original fire and spirit" (*LJ*, p. 155) it showed in hissing the prologue and was unmoved any efforts of the three Scots. "As we knew it would be heedless to oppose that furious many-headed monster, the multitude, as it has been well painted," Boswell recounts, "we were obliged to lay aside our laudable undertaking in the cause of genius and the cause of modesty" (*LJ*, p. 155). After supper, however, they throw out "so many excellent sallies of humour and wit and satire on Malloch and his play" (*LJ*, p. 155) that they decide to produce a satirical review, *Critical Strictures on the New Tragedy of Elvira, Written by Mr. David Malloch*, and repeat their efforts as necessary to remind authors when they are "dull" (*LJ*, p. 182).

The three begin their day at Hyde Park Corner in Westminster. They walk through the City, out into the suburbs, and then back to the edge of Westminster and the City to Drury Lane Playhouse. With the exception of their stopping at a small public house one-half mile beyond the Turnpike at Whitechapel, their "epic" prelude to satiric combat is an unconscious inversion and modification of the progress of Dunces in *The Dunciad* from the City to Westminster and back again.⁷ It is a telling coincidence that near where the three Scots anticlimactically noise their displeasure the great event of mock epic noise-making occurs: the braying contest in *The Dunciad*, won by Blackmore, at the junction of Drury Lane and the Strand. The three Scots are no more aware of their presumptuous foolishness than any of the Grubstreeters in Pope's poem. One wonders what Pope would have done with three such, who like young men on the Grand Tour are endured by Dulness with "Want of Shame" ("Argument," Bk. IV); who in their ambitions and character appear very much like "three wicked Imps, of her own Grubstreet choir [whom Dulness]

decked like Congreve, Addison, and Prior" (*The Dunciad*, II. 123-124).⁸ I think this turn-about criticism fair enough play, since the three themselves have chosen the "epic" terms of their judgment; and above all since Boswell quotes from Pope's *Satires* when he calls the audience at *Elvira* a "furious, many-headed monster" (V. 305). My point, however, is not that there are any conscious correspondences between the Scots' *Elvira* activities and *The Dunciad* or *Mac Flecknoe* but that Augustan satiric achievement and convention, which Boswell believed he was promoting but was in fact undermining by him imperceptible actions, provide a *locus* for understanding and judging Boswell's failure as a satirist--in deed and word--in this episode.

Critical Strictures on Elvira is a farrago of Augustan critical terms and satirical imagery. Its lack of success constitutes a second anticlimax to the Scots' initial satiric activities. Mallet, whom they disliked for having changed his Scots' name Malloch, is "everywhere to be traced in the Puddle of the Moderns" (*CS*, p. 11). They parody a line from the play into, "O Mr. David Malloch! 'midst all your Dullness I must admire your Genius" (*CS*, p. 15). The authors claim that at one point the audience was in danger of "falling fast asleep" (*CS*, p. 16). However, "amidst all the harshness inspired by a real feeling of the Dulness of the Composition itself," the authors remark, "it would be unjust not to bestow the highest applause on the principal performers [especially Garrick, to whom Boswell had just recently shifted his affections from Sheridan], by the Energy of whose Action even Dulness was sometimes rendered respectable" (*CS*, p. 23). Garrick repaid Boswell in kind, saying "there were half a dozen as clever things in the *Strictures on Elvira* as he had ever read" (*LJ*, p. 226). One would like to ask, "where?" The *Strictures* is shot through with condescending malice directed at Mallet's lack of ability and the audience's lack of taste. It warrants itself as little other than an expression of piqued determination, a Parthian shot. Though "Erskine made a draft" (*JB:EE*, p. 102) and seems to have been prime mover and scribe for the jotting down of their "sallies of humour and wit and satire," Boswell's was the imagination and force initially to prompt the premeditated satirical activities on January 19 which culminated in the *Strictures*. Its failure is his.

Once in the *London Journal*, however, Boswell carries off his satirist's pose with some dignity and effect, the result of aptness of allusion and control. Challenged for some model for investing his disappointment over the Duke of Queensberry's failure to procure him a commission in the Guards, he makes a Swiftian gesture in writing to Lady Northumberland. So what if he has been unsuccessful in a suit and put upon by

the great? "*Vive la bagatelle*," Boswell satirically asserts in his letter to the Lady on 27 December 1762. Look how I carry off my disappointment, detach myself from vain worldliness, and assert my "freedom of spirit." Swiftian liberty is all his cry in the letter: "I think a Welsh rabbit and porter with freedom of spirit better than ortolans and burgundy with servility" (*LJ*, p. 108). Calling the phrase his "rule," Swift often speaks of *la bagatelle* in his letters, the imaginative reduction of worldly affairs to trivia or the sane substitution of trivia for them.⁹

Boswell had used the saying two years earlier, in August 1761, in a letter to Erskine to account for his "volatility:" "*Vive la bagatelle*, is the maxim. A light heart may bid defiance to fortune."¹⁰ Boswell's ignoring Erskine's initial objections and publishing the "impudent" and "strenuously facetious" (*LJ*, p. 239, n. 5) *Letters between the Honourable Andrew Erskine and James Boswell, Esq.* in April 1763 was another effort to test the reception he might gain as a promising wit and satirist. Lord Eglinton, sensitive to the bagatelle allusion, would say of the publication of these *Letters*, "By the Lord, it's a thing Dean Swift would not do" (*LJ* p. 241, n. 1). Yet in the "Review" of the *Letters* Boswell wrote for *The London Chronicle* he touted himself as a "true Genius" (*JB:EY*, p. 106).

What I have been describing thus far as an ignored part of the character of Boswell's early literary ambitions is essentially a pose on Boswell's part, as much a pose as his posturing as Mr. Spectator, or Macheath, as a "true born Old Englishman" or a blackguard (since he couldn't be a Blue). His gesturing in this manner stems from his desire to make a reputation in both an acceptable and unlaborious way, a way that embodies his sense of himself as a "Genius" and is expressive of his personal vitality--that outgoingness that is quintessentially Boswell. His early works, from his Soaping Club verse, to his *Shandeyan Observations, Good or Bad, Stupid or Clever, Serious or Jocular, on Squire Foote's Dramatic Entertainment, intitled The Minor* (itself a satire on the Methodists, which Boswell had, in fact, not even seen), to the poems he contributed to the collection of *Original Poems by Scotch Gentlemen* (1762), to *Critical Strictures*, are all *sallies*, a word Boswell delights in, Johnson might have called them "loose sallies of the mind," had he not already used the phrase to define *essay* in his *Dictionary*. Or, better yet in Boswell's case, *sallies of a loose mind*. They are attempts to establish himself as a literary personality quite apart from the subjects he treats. Quite literally, they have no subject. They are projections of powerful desire. The perceptive confidence and honest frustration expressed in Boswell's remarks to Lord Kames in 1762 describing himself in search of a subject should prompt our charity for the failure of his

early efforts at the same time as they point to the reason for that failure: "I told him. . .that I was sure I had genius, and was not deficient in easiness of expression, but was at a loss for something to say, and, when I set myself seriously to think of writing, that I wanted a subject" (*JB:EY*, p. 94: from Boswell's Journal, 14 October 1762). For the young Boswell who was generally ambitious of literary fame but specifically uncertain about how to obtain it satire seemed to be an attractive means of creating a literary reputation.

Yet satire as a genre insists upon judging any who attempt it in a way no other genre does. It imposes costs for both success and failure, costs Boswell was never prepared to pay. His reluctance, as indicated by the non-ironic literalness of his style in the "Epic Poem" episode coupled with Boswell's lack of the courageously aggressive wit essential to satire, accounts for his failure to perceive that it is himself he is satirizing in all his early works--as the "Genius," for example who doesn't even know what he's doing in *Observations, Good or Bad*, or the champion of taste and aesthetic values who acts like a Dunce in the *Elvira* activities and *Critical Strictures*. The lucidity or "easiness of expression" of even the young Boswell's style, a quality without which satiric irony or perspective may indeed fail, is in the "Epic Poem" episode a means not of complex effect but of denial. Its goal is a dismissal of consequences rather than genuine engagement of personality and values.

While it is true that a satirist may himself create the object of his attack, our knowledge of the fact need not diminish our response if his performance engages and expands our imagination. This does not happen with Boswell's Mallet/Malloch, whom Boswell does not so much satirize as smudge with paints from an old pot at a time when even those colors are going out of fashion. While we may know what the satirist is doing, informed of the biographical, historical, or literary occasion of the act, effective satire demands that we keep the activity and the object balanced in our mind, assenting to both as significant, as in *Mac Flecknoe*, or *The Dunciad*, or Johnson's "London," for example. Boswell's epic poematizing, his catcalling, hissing, cudgel carrying, his share in *Critical Strictures* so call attention to themselves as to cast Boswell himself and his friends as the real object of mock epic derision. We lose balance with a gesturer like Boswell, more conscious of his *doing* satire than the worth of its means and its being done. Satire seems too obviously the easy way for Boswell, although easy, however exuberantly playful the satirist's imagination, I doubt it ever is. The lack of any irony in Boswell's wish to become "one of the brightest wits of the court of George the Third" also bespeaks his failure.

Particularly, as long as Boswell's experience, as it was up to and including his first meeting with Johnson, was essentially a series of disappointments and frustrations, he was likely to think of satire as an appropriate means of displacing his frustration and achieving a literary identity. In the economics of emotion, he was receiving no return on the investment of himself--which was all Boswell ever had to offer. Lacking a subject and seeking to make up for that lack by posturing, he could sense, furthermore, that his literary future was dim. His experiences with Johnson are a turning point for him because, although he does not yet know he has discovered his "subject," he at least comes to sense possibilities for grounding his efforts to shape a personality and become a writer not in satire and wit--which oblige one to stand at some distance from one's subject--but in a different mode of responding and imagining. After his meetings with Johnson his investment of himself begins paying real dividends. Love returned for self revealed--a truly significant Johnson says what no one else in the *Journal* can or does: "My dear Boswell! I do love you very much" (p. 103)--prompts Boswell to perceive that the mode which actually accords with his character and offers him a way to fame is that in which the irrepressibly genial, not genius, qualities of his character and imagination, those of an essentially "open and loving heart" (*JB: EY*, p. 89), steadily root themselves in the heroically positive qualities of his subject matter. The Celebrative mode. Boswell comes to discover that the commitment to authorship involves not only finding a subject, but also making a genuine moral choice, a choice he never made in any of his occasional satiric efforts. His response to the "London Geniuses" Thornton, Lloyd, Churchill, and others when he meets them on 23 May 1763 suggests the beginning of Boswell's new perception. He finds them "high-spirited and boisterous"--qualities which would always appeal to him--but rather "too outrageous and profane" (*LJ*, pp. 266-67). He finds them, in fact, to be too much like the "heedless, dissipated, rattling fellow who might say or do every ridiculous thing" he saw himself on his first trip to London some three years before. As Pottle puts it, "if Boswell had not previously met Johnson [a week before], this meeting with the 'Geniuses' might well have seemed the climax of his months in London" (*LJ*, p. 266, n. 4). It turned out to be, rather, the third and last in a series of anticlimaxes associated with Boswell's early satiric ambitions and efforts.

Although his anonymously published satiric efforts brought him no real attention or fame, his first signed work, *An Account of Corsica* (1768) with its heroically celebrative *Memoirs* of Pascal Paoli, did. He capped his literary reputation

with two more works in the celebrative mode, his *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* and *Life of Johnson*. Each of the three commends the virtue Boswell learned to pray for by the end of the *London Journal*: not "Genius" or wit but manliness. "Let me be manly," he asks and urges himself (*LJ*, p. 333). Foote praised Boswell's *Account of Corsica* for just this virtue in conception and execution: "It is manly" (*JB:EY*, p. 430). By the end of the sequence of events the *London Journal* records Boswell has actually become more knowledgeable about himself, a goal he set at the beginning of his record (*LJ*, p. 39). Part of that knowledge comes from his emotional and intellectual experience with Johnson in 1763, from the essential strength, wisdom, and love of Johnson's character, qualities which help Boswell stabilize himself.¹¹ Part of that knowledge demonstrates itself in Boswell's perception that the Celebrative, as it accorded with his own geniality, rather than the Satiric, which always stands at some distance from cordial intimacy, was to be the best mode in which to create a literary identity. In this mode he could satisfy his irrepressible need to write, project his personality in terms of subjects with real value, and express the manliness of character he actually hoped to be remembered as possessing. So prompted, Boswell was no perfect fool in any of his substantial later works, as Macaulay suggests. Early in his career, however, he came perilously close to showing himself a perfect Dunce.

University of Delaware

NOTES

1. To avoid a Nessus' shirt of footnotes, I incorporate references to the following frequently cited works in abbreviated form in the text of this essay: Boswell, *London Journal: 1762-1763*, ed. Frederick Pottle (New York, 1950)--*LJ*; Frederick Pottle, *James Boswell: The Earlier Years: 1740-1769* (New York, [1967])--*JB:EY*; [James Boswell, Andrew Erskine, and George Dempster], *Critical Strictures on the New Tragedy of Elvira, Written by Mr. David Malloch* (London, 1763), ed. Frederick Pottle for the Augustan Reprint Society, No. 35 (Los Angeles, 1952)--*CS*.

2. In 1760 Boswell signed himself "Genius" on the title page of his *Observations, Good or Bad, Stupid or Clever, Serious or Jocular, on Squire Foote's Dramatic Entertainment intitled, The Minor*. The make-of-it-what-you-will quality of the

title is less ironically ambiguous than characteristic of the essentially uncommitted, opportunistic nature of all Boswell's early satiric efforts.

3. There is a prior critical/satirical texture to Boswell's experience this January, a set of mind perhaps owing, in addition to his literary ambitions, to his anger at himself for getting gonorrhoea from Louisa, symptoms of which he begins to notice on January 18, the day before his "epic" adventure; to his general disappointment with the failure of his Guard's scheme; or to his disenchantment following Sheridan's cold-watering his literary ambitions, again on January 18, a bad day for Boswell. Embittered by Sheridan's strong criticism of his Prologue for Mrs. Sheridan's comedy *The Discovery*, Boswell decides that Mrs. Sheridan's substitute lines are "much duller" than his at their worst (*LJ*, p. 151). On the same day he records taking an aversion to Sheridan: "I resolved to take an opportunity of breaking off acquaintance and then lashing him for a presumptuous dunce, like as my friend Erskine and other people do in great abundance" (*LJ*, p. 152). In reply to Sheridan's later sneering at *Critical Strictures* as "laughable," Boswell asserts his determination to continue to remind authors when they are "dull" (*LJ*, p. 182).

4. See Pottle on Mallet in *LJ*, pp. 152-53, n. 6. From all indications Mallet deserved some criticism of his behavior, if not his skill, as a writer. In *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (Boston, 1932), Helen Child Sargent and George Lyman Kittredge point out, for example, that Mallet printed as his own "Margaret's Ghost" in 1724 "William and Margaret, an Old Ballad" which had been anonymously printed in 1711. In an earlier aborted piece of satire, *The Turnspitiad* (an imitation of Churchill's *Rosciad*), Boswell singled out Mallet for satiric attack. See Pottle's introduction to *CS*, p. iii.

5. Boswell's acting like a "true born Old Englishman" on 15 December 1762 is just such another "whim" with a point (*LJ*, pp. 86-7).

6. What Boswell elsewhere calls the "silver Thames" in the *Journal* (pp. 234, 328)--a phrase borrowed from Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, II. 4--when he is in a self-consciously romantic mood, is on this day of satire "the river" of "rude and terrible appearance," "partly froze up, partly covered with enormous shoals of floating ice which often crashed against each other" (*LJ*, p. 153). Boswell sees clearly and accurately, no doubt, on what was an unusually cold winter day, yet the chaotic buffeting and rough noise he notices echo his own satiric

disposition.

7 My reading of this episode obviously owes to the explications of mock epic action in Aubrey Williams's *The Dunciad* (London, 1955) and Alvin Kernan's *The Plot of Satire* (New Haven, 1965).

8. See Paul Fussell, "The Force of Literary Memory in Boswell's *London Journal*," *SEL*, II (Summer 1962), 351-57, for identification and discussion of many of the literary models (Steele, Addison, Macheath, and Hamlet, for example) whose attitudes and behavior Boswell sought to incorporate into his own public personality.

9. See, e.g., Swift to Bolingbroke on 21 March 1729, or to Gay and the Duchess of Queensberry on 10 July 1729, in vols. III and IV of his *Correspondence*, ed. Harold Williams (Oxford, 1963 and 1965). In the letter to Gay and the Duchess, Swift chides them, Pope, and Bolingbroke for "inattention" owing to "Court hopes and Court fears. . . . All for want of [his] rule vive la bagatelle." See also the chapter by this title on Swift and Johnson in W. B. C. Watkins' *Perilous Balance* (Princeton, 1939).

10. *Boswell's Correspondence With the Honourable Andrew Erskine And His Journal of a Tour to Corsica*. (Ptd from original edns), ed. George Birkbeck Hill (London, 1879), Letter I, p. 3.

11. Frederick Kiley persuasively demonstrates Johnson's early stabilizing influence on Boswell in "Boswell's Literary Art in the *London Journal*," *CE*, XIII (May 1962), 629-632.