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Robert G. Walker

BOSWELL'S *THE CUB* AND THE SHADOW OF AUGUSTAN SATIRE

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Until very recently the evaluation of one of James Boswell's first publications that was offered by an anonymous mid-nineteenth-century editor was entirely typical:

> Boswell published, in 1762, a little poem, "The Club [sic] at Newmarket." It does not seem to have had any great success, though probably all it merited; and indeed, having chronicled the fact of the publication of the poem, it should be added, perhaps, that its perusal will not repay any one, unless he may desire to satisfy a special curiosity as to what some persons *could* write and others *could* read, under that name of poetry, in the middle of the last century.[1]

The bibliographical entry in Frederick A. Pottle's *Literary Career of James Boswell, Esq.* (1929) influenced subsequent treatment mainly by mentioning a very recent literary forerunner: "The *Cub* is . . . an attempt in the Shandean style. Boswell was probably already intimate with Sterne; at any rate, was infatuated with his book and his personality."[2] Pottle, the dean of Boswell studies in the twentieth century, was unimpressed with the poem's artistic merits, choosing elsewhere to "spare the reader a quotation" from the poem; in the words of Celia Barnes, who has just published a particularly cogent essay on *The Cub*: "Pottle clearly wasn't a fan."[3] A few

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[1] *Letters of James Boswell, Addressed to the Rev. W. J. Temple* (London: R. Bentley, 1857), 15-16. An early twentieth-century attribution would make the editor Sir Philip Francis (1825-1876). I wish to thank Todd A. Chavez, Dean, University of South Florida Libraries, for providing access to research materials that were otherwise difficult to obtain; and Melvyn New, for comments on an earlier version of this essay.

[2] Frederick Albert Pottle, *The Literary Career of James Boswell, Esq. Being the Bibliographical Materials for a Life of Boswell* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929), 16-18.

[3] Frederick A. Pottle, *James Boswell: The Earlier Years, 1740-1769* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 61. Celia Barnes, "'Making the Press my Amanuensis:' Male

years ago, James Caudle strongly suggested that a meeting between Boswell and Sterne may not have happened at all—putting the lie to the legend that Boswell read his poem to Sterne.[4] (Incidentally, Boswell seems to have been reading it to anyone who would listen.) Caudle's argument may have removed the only reason for scholars to attend to the poem at all, were it not for the strong inducement to examine it again supplied by Barnes's work. My re-examination, following the trail partially blazed by her and not being overly influenced by possible associations with Sterne, reveals a rather complicated satiric work of more sophistication than might otherwise be expected of the young Boswell.

Barnes's critical contribution is a close reading in context. Working not only from the poem itself but also from its paratextual elements, its dedication and preface, and from its biographical backstory, she demonstrates that "Boswell's poem is a literary production about literary production, a poem that poeticizes its own composition and reflects on its own publication, distribution, and reception" (97). Boswell's "house of mirrors" (99) is often difficult to sort, so her tracing the various threads of the poem is much needed. My understanding of *The Cub* agrees largely with hers, and the disagreements that I express below are not intended to diminish her work but rather to supplement it. Elsewhere I have characterized the style of Boswell's ephemeral writing as "that of the imprecise pastiche," suggesting the difficulty of narrowing to a specific meaning his multifold (and highly topical) allusiveness, a point enforced by the poem's very title. [5] I would suggest that Barnes's "house of mirrors" and my "imprecise pastiche" are parallel attempts to describe Boswell's elusive literary style, from the beginning to the end of his writing career.

Alexander Montgomerie, tenth Earl of Eglinton, introduced his young friend Boswell to London in general and to the racing society at the Jockey Club Coffee House in New-Market in particular in the spring of 1760:

> LORD E*******N, who has, you know,
> A little dash of whim, or so;
> Who thro' a thousand scenes will range
> To pick up any thing that's strange,

Friendship and Publicity in *The Cub, At New-Market*," in *Boswell and the Press: Essays on the Ephemeral Writing of James Boswell*, ed. Donald J. Newman (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2021), 94-107; at 106n11. Hereafter I cite Barnes parenthetically by page number in the text.

[4] James J. Caudle, "'Fact' or 'Invention'? James Boswell and the Legend of a Boswell-Sterne Meeting," *The Shandean*, 22 (2011), 30-55.

[5] Robert G. Walker, "Addenda to the Documentation of *Facts and Inventions: Selections from the Journalism of James Boswell*," *Notes & Queries*, 67 (Dec. 2020), 506-510.

By chance a curious CUB had got,
On SCOTIA's Mountains newly caught;
And, after driving him about
Thro' *London*, many a diff'rent rout, . . .
New-market Meeting being near,
He thought 'twas best to have him there;
And, that your Time I mayn't consume,
View him in the *New Coffee-Room*.[6]

The Cub is not only Boswell, seventeen years Eglinton's junior and the poem's author and hero, but also the poem, as the second sentence of the dedication to Edward, Duke of York makes clear—or at least teasingly suggests. (One is reluctant to use the phrase "makes clear" when discussing the poem.) "[P]ermit me to let the World know that this same Cub has been laughed at by the Duke of YORK;----has been read to your Royal Highness by the Genius himself" (v). Barnes observes, "Boswell's diction is delightfully ambiguous at the opening of this passage: that he is referring to the poem *Cub* and not the poem's hero isn't clear until after the series of dashes" (98). Even though Boswell had indeed read his poem to the Duke of York and perhaps even gained applause on some level, he had not secured approval for the dedication he fashioned for the poem when he published it two years later: "[the Duke of York] was very angry," Eglinton told Boswell (Barnes, 95, quoting from *Boswell's London Journal*). Certainly, Eglinton was concerned because he had introduced Boswell, his Cub, into the Duke's society. In Boswell's defense, perhaps he felt that donning the persona of a cub, that is, an awkward and inexperienced naif, would excuse his presumption—in the event, it did not—or perhaps he was hoping his social stretch would be seen as a humorous imitation of Laurence Sterne's dedicating the second edition of *Tristram Shandy* to William Pitt in April 1760. Sterne, however, was more careful than Boswell: a week before publication he sent Pitt this brief letter—"Though I have no suspicion that the inclosed Dedication can offend you, yet I thought it my duty to take some method of letting you see it, before I presumed to beg the honour of presenting it to you next week, with the Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy."[7] It seems doubtful, given Eglinton's dismay, that Boswell exercised similar caution but if anything rather out-Shandied Shandy.

The figurative use of "cub" as a protégé was quite common. "Cobham's Cubs" of the 1730s and 40s constituted an important faction of

[6] *The Cub, at New-Market: A Tale* (London: Dodsley, 1762), 13-14; hereafter referred to by page number in the text.
[7] *Sterne: The Letters: Part I*, ed. Melvyn New and Peter de Voogd (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009), 137.

young MPs within the Whig party (it included Pitt; and Alexander Pope was associated with it as well), but the usage need not have been political. "Cub" was often used in jest, as was done by Andrew Erskine in a poem to Boswell included in his letter of 11 September 1761: "You [i.e., Boswell] kindly took me up, an aukward cub, / And Introduc'd me to the Soaping-Club."[8] Erskine and Boswell in fact were nearly the same age. Barnes has called attention to Erskine's "mocking of 'the reluctance with which you always repeat your *Cub,* and the gravity of countenance which you always assume upon that occasion,'" (105n3), but is silent about the Erskine's mockery of the dominant metaphor Boswell chose to frame his poem. The Edinburgh Soaping Club here obviously stands in for the Jockey Club of New-Market, and Erskine makes fun of Boswell's choice to describe his introduction by Eglinton into the Jockey Club with this animal metaphor. The correspondence between Boswell and Erskine during this period contains at least two other pertinent references to *The Cub*, which I treat below, but first I will focus on Boswell's extensive use of animal references in his poem.

We do not know for certain what type of animal Boswell envisions, but I assume it is a brown bear cub, an animal quite rare if not extinct in Scotland by the mid-eighteenth century. This also is Andrew Erskine's view, as he mentions to Boswell "a very severe Epigram that someone in London had written" attacking the poem: "You know it is natural to take a lick at a Cub." Boswell's modern editors annotate this as "a punning reference to the prevalent belief that mother bears 'licked' their cubs into shape after birth."[9]

Whatever type of cub it is, it certainly is a find, worthy of display and attention, like many out-of-the-ordinary animals on exhibition in England at the time. The speaker describes Sir Charles Sedley, "a truly worthy Knight," as one

> Whose humour of peculiar cast
> Surprizes you from first to last;
> Who, tho' few really are more wise,
> To look a little foolish tries;

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[8] *The General Correspondence of James Boswell: 1757-1763*, ed. David Haskins and James J. Caudle (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 91. Hereafter cited as *General Correspondence*. This volume includes all letters published by Boswell as *Letters Between the Honourable Andrew Erskine and James Boswell, Esq.*(1763). In view of the argument of this essay, it is perhaps not gratuitous to cite Eglinton's harsh criticism of Boswell's first book, this letter collection: "By the Lord, it's a thing Dean Swift would not do—to publish a collection of letters upon nothing," cited from *Boswell's London Journal 1763-1765*, ed. Frederick A. Pottle (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1950), 241n1.

[9] *General Correspondence*, 222 and 224n15.

And likes *Exotics* to discover,
As a fine Lady a new Lover. (17-18)

Sedley's interest in the scribbling Cub is thus linked to the rage for viewing exotic animals, then a part of London's social life. That the Cub is found in a public social setting is not unusual: "Curiosities were an important part of the culture of coffee houses and taverns, and it became more frequent for live exotic animals to be displayed at inns" throughout the first half of the century.[10] Animal references abound in Boswell's poetic menagerie: in fourteen pages we find, in addition to Cub and *Exotics*, "sheepish," "Bat," "country mouse," "Dog," "Hounds," and, most important, a deliberately ambiguous "CALIBAN grotesque." At first the references seem to run a Dorothy Parker-like gamut from trivial to trite, and it is off-putting to have the poet explain the source of his country mouse allusion by mentioning Horace in the very next line. But Boswell seems to believe that anything worth doing is worth over-doing, and here he is certainly emphasizing the animal trope. Boswell himself must have realized that he was courting absurdity with his diction, as the Cub's bashfulness at being observed "[Brings] tears into his sheepish eye" (15).

The opposite of trivial or trite is the Caliban reference, which functions as a synecdoche for all the poem's main themes, as Barnes has outlined them. Sir Charles Sedley, having noticed the Cub's writing ("Why, you've already wrote a Quire"), immediately assumes that he is composing "Our History," that is, the history of the Jockey Club, and suggests publication at breakneck speed: "Out with *Proposals*----for my share, / I'll instantly subscribe, I swear" (18). Then a "sprightly PEER . . . Popt in his nose" (19)—this is perhaps Eglinton, although he is not definitely identified—and suggests a dedicatee (interestingly, not the Duke of York), and textual notes, which he will "whistle." The pun on notes and whistling works here because it reflects the multiple modes of presentation of the poem, both the publication to come and Boswell's frequent oral recitations. The sprightly peer also volunteers to provide a frontispiece, a portrait that he will draw after a fellow member. A footnote, one of only two in the poem, is quite telling: "*The Caliban*—An Appellation sometimes merrily bestowed on a very sensible worthy Member, who loves a jest himself; and who admires the equitable Practice of *Give and Take*" (19). Here is Barnes's "house of mirrors," as the image at the front of the published poem is to be a Jockey

[10] Christopher Plumb, "Exotic Animals in Eighteenth-Century Britain" (PhD diss., University of Manchester, 2010), 52. Exotic displays often included freaks, both real and bogus. See the Double Mistress episode, and the editor's notes, in *Memoirs of the Extraordinary Life, Works, and Discoveries of Martinus Scriblerus*, ed. Charles Kerby-Smith (1950; rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, 1966), 143ff.

Club member, famed for his (mis)shape and for his good humor, which Boswell hopes will be true of the poem as well.

The identity of the member called Caliban is still unknown, and I am content to accept Barnes's general assessment: "I've yet to see any of these figures—the Justice, the Spectre, or the Monster—identified for certain, and in a poem that so easily traffics in inside jokes, we may never know" (106n13). Yet it is important to stress that whoever Caliban is, he and the Monster are one in the same. Here is what follows the sprightly peer's offer to sketch the Caliban grotesque as a frontispiece:

> This last Design was scarcely broach'd,
> When, lo! The MONSTER fell approach'd!
> The Justice in one arm he lugs,
> And the thin Spectre onward tugs. (20)

Taking his nickname from the half man, half animal creature in *The Tempest*, where he is repeatedly called the monster, this club member is a threat, or seems to be, to the cowering Cub. He is, from the Cub's point of view, lugging and tugging two fellow members through the room.[11] The "affrighted *Animal*," that is, the Cub, skulks and tries to hide from the monster, described as having a "horrid grin," and shaking "his triple chin," (20), Cerberus-like. The infectious laughter that is set off among the members as they notice the abject terror the monster has aroused in the timid Cub is certainly part of the point of the poem, and, indeed, the social binding that occurs from sharing a laugh, even a laugh brought on by humiliation of another, is, to Boswell's credit, an important take-away. But I believe there is yet another satiric reversal in the offing.

Lest my use of "satiric" in the previous sentence seem a critical over-reach, I will explain. I am not trying to make Boswell into a satirist, at least not one of any standing. But I think it likely that he wrote *The Cub* with an eye on a particular literary tradition. Surely, he craved being associated with the Lion of London in 1760, as the new celebrity Laurence Sterne was called. He (probably) created a fictional event, his reading the poem to Sterne, and Pottle encouraged the Sterne connection. Even so careful a reader as Barnes refers to the poem as "Shandean" four times in her essay—and she uses "Rabelaisian" once. But this attention on Sterne, especially in the corrective light provided by Caudle, may have caused readers to overlook an influence even more important on Boswell at this

[11] Barnes seems to get this backward: the narrator "affords [the monster] real heft, as his carriers heave and 'tug' his 'ENOROMOUS BULK' to the center of the action" (104). Boswell inverts word order for the sake of rime. This may be bad poetry but it is not bad grammar: the subject of "lugs" is he, i.e., the monster.

time, the Augustan satirists Alexander Pope and, especially, Jonathan Swift.[12]

Although we have no record of Boswell's reading in 1760, when *The Cub* was conceived, Melvyn New has pointed out recently what he was reading as he journeyed from Auchinleck to Edinburgh en route to London in the fall, 1762: "That Boswell in 1762, at the age of twenty-two, found the [Pope-Swift *Miscellanies* (1727)] worth taking on his journey suffices in my judgment to indicate the reality—indeed the vitality—of the Scriblerians into mid-century."[13] The verse form of *The Cub* is rimed couplets of iambic tetrameter, Swift's favorite. Swift's forebear in this sense was Samuel Butler, whose *Hudibras* Boswell recalls as he begins a physical description of "this Wild Man," that is, the Cub, that is, Boswell himself:

> AND now, my Story, pause awhile;
> Till I, in *Hudibrastic* stile,
> Attempt to give you as I can,
> The Portraiture of this Wild Man. (16)

Turning to the Erskine-Boswell correspondence from the period between when *The Cub* was written and when it was published, we find evidence that the verse form was both self-consciously selected and quite meaningful. Here is Erskine's feigned encomium:

> HAIL! mighty Boswell! at thy awful name
> The fainting muse relumes her sinking flame. . . .
> Swells the full song? it swells alone from thee;
> Some spark of thy bright genius kindles me!
> "But softly, Sir," I hear you cry,
> "This wild bombast is rather dry:

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[12] To my knowledge no one has followed the lead of Michael Rewa, "Some Observations on Boswell's Early Satiric Ambitions," *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 13 (1978), 211-220. Available at https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol13/iss1/1. Rewa does not mention *The Cub* and is primarily interested in what he sees as Boswell's early failure as a satirist, in advance of his success as a biographer.

[13] Melvyn New, "Boswell and Sterne in 1768," in *Laurence Sterne's A Sentimental Journey: A Legacy to the World*, ed. W. B. Gerard and M-C. Newbould (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2021), 171-193, at 172-173. New gives the details of Boswell's reading: "For this entertainment on the road, Boswell armed himself with several volumes of the Pope-Swift *Miscellanies* (1727), along with Orrery's biography of Swift (1751). On September 17, he refers to 'Memoirs of P. P. Clerk of the Parish' (probably by Pope) . . . and five days later to Swift's 'Letter to a Young Lady Newly Married'. . . . Then on September 30, he entertains Lord Kames by reading *Art of Sinking in Poetry*, 'a performance which cannot be too often read, as its inimitable humour must always please' . . . . All are in *Miscellanies*."

> "I hate your d---n'd insipid song,
> "That sullen stalks in lines so long;
> "Come, give us short ones, like to Butler,
> "Or like our friend Auchinleck, the cutler."

Erskine's shift from heroic couplets to tetrameter when he "quotes" Boswell is obvious, as is the mention of Butler, but typical of Boswell's style—here slyly imitated by Erskine—is the slightly off-center allusion to "Auchinleck," not a poet or even a family member, as we might have expected, but probably Gilbert Auchinleck (d.1780), an Edinburgh cutler or knife-manufacturer, a deliberate satiric confusion of the physical with the artistic. That Boswell's family name was typically pronounced with only two syllables, Affleck, multiplies the short joke. Erskine's answer to the imaginary defense by Boswell of the shorter verse form reverts to heroic couplets and concludes with an Alexandrian:

> A Poet, Sir, whose fame is to support,
> Must ne'er write verses tripping pert and short:
> Who ever saw a judge himself disgrace,
> By trotting to the bench with hasty pace?
> I swear, dear Sir, you're really in the wrong;
> To make a line that's good, I say James, make it long.[14]

Both Erskine and Boswell were obviously quite familiar with Pope's view of the Alexandrine:

> Then, at the *last* and *only* Couplet fraught
> With some unmeaning Thing they call a Thought,
> A *needless Alexandrine* ends the Song,
> That like a wounded Snake, drags its slow length along.[15]

In the mock heroic that follows in Boswell's *Cub*, he describes himself not as the well-known "wild man" or woodwose of legend (the Scottish version of Big Foot), but as a plump creature with a belly that declares his fondness for beef and pudding, "a large and pond'rous head, / That seem'd to be compos'd of lead," and with "such stiff, lank hair, / As might the crows in Autumn scare" (17). Terrifying to crows perhaps but to no one else, the Cub himself is terrified by Caliban, setting off peals of laughter among the other members, who circle round to get a better view of the show. Ironies abound as the Cub has now become the center of attention—contrast how earlier, deserted by Eglinton, he had slunk into a corner:

> WHAT could the luckless fellow do?
> For not a single soul he knew.

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[14] *General Correspondence*, 90-91.
[15] "Essay on Criticism," in *Pope: Pastoral Poetry and An Essay on Criticism*, ed. E. Audra and Aubrey Williams (London: Methuen, 1961), 279-280 (ll. 354-357).

> At last a corner pure and snug
> He chanc'd to spy, which made him hug
> Himself with joy. (16)

In the corner with a barely audible voice—"[L]ike a man at point of death, / Scarcely squeez'd forth above his breath" (16)—he timidly asks for pen and paper and composes the poem we are reading.

The satiric reversal occurs now amid the riotous laughter ridiculing the Cub. Sedley re-enters:

> MEANTIME, Sir CHARLES, who *seem'd* to pry
> Into the Jest, with aspect sly;
> His visage veiling with a gloom,
> Slip'd to the middle of the room,
> Pull'd half a dozen by the sleeve,
> And whisper'd each; "You may believe,
> "I'm forc'd to tell you what is true,
> "Why, damn it, Sir! They laugh at *You*." (22)

Barnes ignores this difficult and ambiguous passage, perhaps assuming it merely echoes the meaning of the passage preceding it: "*The Cub* may have begun with a dedicatory letter of almost obnoxious overreach, but it ends with the painful humiliation of its hero. . . . In this Shandean topsy-turvy world, public shaming restores 'the equity of heaven,' and the Cub's humiliation curiously becomes his apotheosis" (105). But more than laughter is spreading among the club members. This is suggested a bit earlier, with this description of the crowd's activity:

> Each as he came th' infection seiz'd,
> And by his friend behind was teaz'd
> With "What's the matter?"----All at once,
> The friend behind turns equal Dunce. (21)

Sedley's remark, then, delivered with a grave face, may be directed not toward the Cub but toward each one of the members as he pulls him aside. It is they who are the dunces; it is they who are ridiculous, a point emphasized by the italic "*You*" that ends the line. One need not level all differences between Pope's dunces and Boswell's to recognize the allusion. Yes, the laughter will be therapeutic to all, to the extent that the other members recognize that they too are potentially subject to humiliation. The poem widens its target abruptly. Boswell did not know Swift's "The Day of Judgement," first published posthumously in 1773, but the remarkably similar ironic reversal at the end of both poems is noteworthy, and, for me, a significant indicator of the Scriblerian mode of self-reflective satire:

> You who in different sects have shammed,
> And come to see each other damned; . . .

> I to such blockheads set my wit!
> I damn such fools!—Go, go, you're bit.[16]

If the connection with Sterne that Boswell himself encouraged and that Pottle abetted is more red herring than help in interpreting *The Cub*, the necessary correction comes from an even closer concentration on Boswell's text. For example, that Rabelais was one of Sterne's favorite authors, and a great influence on him, was obvious to even the earliest readers of the first two volumes of *Tristram Shandy*, and remains a commonplace today: thus, in February 1760 an anonymous notice in the *London Magazine* read, "Oh rare Tristram Shandy! . . . what shall we call thee?—Rabelais, Cervantes, What?"[17] So if one is following the scent of a Boswell-Sterne connection and comes across what might be an example of Rabelaisian bawdry, it is tempting to follow the trail. But the scent, like that of the red herring, may mislead.

The prologue with which the poem begins features an otherwise unidentified "Lord Rich," attempting to persuade the Cub to ignore that poets are rarely rewarded monetarily for their works and to proceed with a recitation. The Cub agrees to do so, but continues to express trepidation in these six lines, only three words of which are spoken by Lord Rich:

> I will, my Lord! But hope you'll make
> Allowance for a Youngster's sake.
> "O never fear."----Don't look so grim,
> You seem dispos'd my back to trim;
> That Cudgel looks so wondrous strong,
> 'Twould sweep a dozen Tars along. (12-13)

Barnes finds here "Boswell requesting a comically Rabelaisian form of quid pro quo. . . . Boswell seems to take his point to its furthest ends, and tit for tat becomes a mutually satisfying, albeit slightly revolting, grooming ritual between men" (101).

Subsequent characterizations of the episode leave no doubt how Barnes reads it: "one pleasurable but humiliating ritual follows another" and "I'm reminded once again of that friendly little back-trimming episode with

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[16] *Jonathan Swift: The Complete Poems*, ed. Pat Rogers (London: Penguin, 1983), 507. Rogers has modernized. The textual details of the poem have generated much controversy, which may be settled when the CUP edition of Swift's poetry is published.

[17] *London Magazine* (February 1760), quoted from "Introduction," *Sterne: The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman, Volume III: The Notes*, ed. Melvyn New, with Richard A. Davies and W. G. Day (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1984), 13. The modern editors continue, "There is no author that Sterne plundered more than Rabelais, and perhaps none with whom he identified more fully" (19).

which the poem opens—and it is this strange, almost prurient pleasure that *The Cub* seeks at once to explore and exploit" (102, 103). Now, I have no knowledge of the degree of sadomasochism practiced at the all-male Jockey Club in Boswell's day, but I suspect it was not much. "Trim" is surely used in its most common figurative sense of to beat, trounce, or defeat, as in Sterne's "Political Romance" (1758), where the character Trim is defeated in mock warfare, so that "in three several pitch'd Battles, *Trim* has been so *trimm'd*, as never disastrous Hero was trimm'd before him."[18] The passage in the poem seems to carry not a whiff of prurience about it, let alone a reference to a "revolting, grooming ritual between men."

The rest of the prologue supports this view. After the Cub's mention of the wondrous strong cudgel of Lord Rich, Lord Rich replies,

> "POH! Poh! This idle trifling! nay,
> "Come, Sir, you dine with me to-day."
> BRAVO! my Lord! Oh, now I'm fee'd,
> Wise as a Lawyer I'll proceed. (13)

Barnes neglects to quote the first couplet, in which Lord Rich offers the Cub a free meal if he will produce his poem, and writes, "The economic language with which the poem opens comes back here in parodic form...: 'I'm fee'd,' the speaker confesses, but his payment is the pleasure he hopes to receive from the stout cudgel Rich will employ to trim his back.... The gesture is at once intimate and grotesque, a little intimidating but undeniably pleasurable ('Bravo! my Lord!')" (101). Indeed the future attorney (if his father has his way) is joking about his fee, permitting it to be merely a dinner; however, the jest seems entirely gustatory, given what we later are told about the poet's heaviness and good eating. The idea of some sexual romp seems highly unlikely. Indeed, a similar appetitive inducement was previewed in the poem's preface, where in exchange for "a few obliging encomiums" he offers critics "a SCOTCH-PINT-BOTTLE of mine excellent Host WILDMAN's best Claret; which, by the by, has been facetiously reckoned no ineffectual Bribe to one formidable *Bashaw* amongst you" (ix).

If we set aside what I believe is an unwarranted expansion of the idea of "ritual humiliation" in the poem, we nevertheless can agree with what Barnes properly identifies as its dominant theme: "This poem exists not for Boswell, but for 'us,' the gentlemen friends who form a circle around it, and him, and laugh at what we see" (105). The final couplet—"THUS is

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[18] "A Political Romance," in *Sterne: The Miscellaneous Writings and Sterne's Subscribers, an Identification List*, ed. Melvyn New and W. B. Gerard (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014), 108.

the Ballance render'd even; / Here view the equity of Heaven" (24)—shows a huge difference in tone between the twenty-year old Scot, full of optimistic aims, and the aging and ill Jonathan Swift of "The Day of Judgement." But a close look at the poem's beginning and ending shows us Swift's possible presence once again.

The "economic language" that Barnes notes at the poem's opening is, more precisely, Boswell's version of the age-old comparison of the gifts of fortune and the gifts of nature; the first six couplets are replete with such references:

> POETS, for most part, have been poor;
> Experience tells us;----Proof too sure.
> "Ay, may be so," Lord RICH exclaims,
> Who Fortune's Will incessant blames,
> "It may be so; but yet, confound 'em,
> "They still have Jollity around 'em."
> PRAY, my good Lord!----'tis no Offence
> To ask by rules of common sense,----
> Is not this distribution right?----
> At least I view it in that light;
> For 'tis but just that ev'ry Creature
> Should have *some* favour from Dame Nature. (11-12)

Lord Rich has benefited from the gifts of fortune, that is, worldly wealth, though he still blames Fortune because he is not happy, at least not as happy as "poor" poets, whose "Jollity" he envies. The poet argues that all has been fairly allocated by "Dame Nature," a "distribution right" of good humor to those who have less "fortune." At the poem's end, after the frightened Cub has drawn derisive laughter and after, as I have argued, that laughter both infects and reflects upon all the members, the speaker offers to "my Lord," probably Eglinton, the "Moral," that is, "To what does all this Story tend?" (22).

Boswell defends nonsense, harmless folly that "set[s] a table on a roar, / And drive[s] dull Sadness out of door." Surely his Lordship will confess "that in life it may be well, / Sometimes to hunt the *Bagatelle*" (23). The word remained in Boswell's mind when he used "*Vive la bagatelle!*" in a letter to Erskine dated 25 August 1761.[19] In both places Boswell *could* be echoing Sterne's use of bagatelle in the recently published initial volumes of *Tristram Shandy*, where *vive la Bagatelle* appears in Tristram's

[19] *General Correspondence*, 88. It is important to note, however, that the three-word French phrase is *not* in the manuscript version of the letter of 25 August 1761. Boswell added it at some undetermined time between then and when the letter was published on 12 April 1763 in *Letters Between the Honourable Andrew Erskine and James Boswell, Esq.*

discussion of his father's hobbyhorse.[20] Sterne would repeat this phrase eight years later in *Sentimental Journey*. Still, in using it in *The Cub*, Boswell seems to me more likely to have had in mind Swift, who had used the phrase to define his "rule" of life. And, indeed, Alexander Pope's reference to his friend's motto at the end of *The Sixth Epistle of the First Book of Horace* (1738) resonates quite well with the sentiment expressed at the end of *The Cub*:

> If, after all, we must with Wilmot own,
> The Cordial Drop of Life is Love alone,
> And Swift cry wisely, "Vive la Bagatelle!"
> The Man that loves and laughs, must sure do well.[21]

The final twelve lines of *The Cub* revisit its opening, with the distribution of nature's gifts now represented by a balancing of the scales, while presenting a soft, yet appropriate argument for the use of satire to invoke the health-giving laughter the poem has illustrated previously:

> LIKEWISE we see that Fate ne'er fails
> To weigh things in impartial scales:
> For, tho' some People are more blest,
> With Understanding than the rest,
> She some external Oddity
> Bestows, which they themselves can't see,
> Or some particular defect,
> Which, while they indolent neglect,
> To Mortals of inferior sort,
> In harmless Satire serves for sport.
> THUS is the Ballance render'd even;
> Here view the equity of Heaven. (23-24)

This essay has been an attempt to restore another type of "Ballance." It seems to me that the weight of Sterne's influence on Boswell's early poem has been disproportionally advocated, at the expense of an equally likely influence from the earlier Augustan satirists, especially Swift. But balance would indeed suggest equity, and in Boswell's return to *bagatelle* in his

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[20] Vol. I, chapter 19: see *Sterne: The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, ed. Melvyn New and Joan New (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1978), 1:60; hereafter cited in the text as *TS*.1.19.60, that is, Sterne's volume and chapter number and the page number in this edition. I am indebted to New's annotations throughout this part of my discussion. See specifically *Tristram Shandy: The Notes*, 19; 100. And *Sterne: A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy and Continuation of the Bramine's Journal*, ed. Melvyn New and W. G. Day (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002), 297.

[21] *Pope: Imitations of Horace*, ed. John Butt, 2nd ed. (London: Methuen, 1953), 245-246.

letter to Erskine, whenever the phrase was inserted into the letter, we have an elaboration that points in both directions:

> The Boswells . . . came over from Normandy, with William the Conqueror, and some of us possess the spirit of our ancestors the French. I do for one. A pleasant spirit it is. *Vive la Bagatelle*, is the maxim. A light heart may bid defiance to fortune.[22]

Is Boswell echoing Tristram's description of Walter's "thousand little sceptical notions of the comick kind," which began as "mere whims, and of a *vive la Bagatelle*," (*TS*.1.19.60) or is he recalling the wise cry, the maxim even, of Swift praised by Pope in his Horatian imitation? When Boswell defends harmless folly that "set[s] a table on a roar" (23), was he specifically recalling Sterne's Yorick, whose flashing eyes as he lay dying remind his friend Eugenius "of those flashes of his spirit... [as] were wont to set the table in a roar!" (*TS*.1.12.34), or, rather, recalling more generally Shakespeare's jester, as Sterne's text itself does at this point?

We know that *The Cub* was written in the spring of 1760, but did Boswell write the preface after volume three of *Tristram Shandy* appeared in January 1761, making his contradiction of the Critics—"Do not apply your confounded Squares and Compasses to a Performance, whose Beauty... consists in a careless ease" (viii)—an echo of Sterne's request that "Great *Apollo!*... send *Mercury*, with the *rules and compasses*, if he can be spared, with my compliments to----no matter" (*TS*.3.12.214)? Were we to discover exactly when Boswell wrote his preface, the last cited possible link with Sterne would certainly gain credibility, and return the myth of a Boswell-Sterne connection to the reality of at least several strong textual links. Boswell's technique of imprecise pastiche, or a house of mirrors, however, precludes anything more than a balanced assertion, perhaps, that like Sterne, Boswell was strongly influenced by the Scriblerian satirists—and thus, also by Sterne. Time muddies many literary influences, as do authors themselves. A century and a half after Boswell's poem appeared, James Joyce wrote of four Irish literary precursors—"your wildes haweshowe moves swiftly sterneward"—creating arguments among scholars as to the relative degree of influence on his writing of Sterne versus Swift. With Boswell, the equipoise I have suggested by the advancement of Swift as influential may bring us closer to the truth. At any rate, *The Cub* repays closer perusal than its early critics believed.

Washington & Jefferson College

[22] *General Correspondence*, 88.