Archibald Campbell on Smollett's Style

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Archibald Campbell on Smollett's Style

Archibald Campbell¹ (1726-1780), a Scotch purser in the Navy, is chiefly remembered for the pugnacious impudence of his Lexiphanes² (London, 1767), which launched a vigorous, if at times heavy-handed, attack against Samuel Johnson's stylistic fondness for sesquipedalian terms, especially in the Rambler.³ Campbell shows time and time again that he is hurt by Johnson's obvious and sarcastic dislike of the Scots⁴. This may have been the general psychological motive, not untinged with regional chauvinism, that impelled Campbell to take upon himself, single-handed, the self-appointed task of "a literary scavenger, a sort of gentry very necessary to the cleanliness of others, but by no means the cleanliest folks in the world themselves"⁵. Although Campbell sticks a few barbed satirical shafts into the stylistic reputations of Dr. Akenside, Kames, Edward Young and Joseph Warthon, the bulk of his critical archery is trained against the Great Cham, who is made to speak thus: "Without dubiety you misapprehend this dazzling scintillation of conceit in totality and had you had that constant recurrence to my oraculous dictionary, which was incumbent upon you from the vehemence of my monitory injunctions, it could not have escaped you that the word

1. In addition to the article in the DNB, see Robert C. Whitford "A Little Lyttelton," Philological Quarterly, III (Oct. 1924), 302-308.

2. Lexiphanes, A Dialogue. Imitated from Lucian, and suited to the present times. Being an attempt to restore the English tongue to its ancient purity, and to correct as well as expose, the affected style, hard words, and absurd phraseology of many late writers, and particularly of our English Lexiphanes, the Rambler (London Printed for and Sold by J. Knox in the Strand, 1767 pp. XXXIX + 185). A second corrected edition (pp. XXXIX + 185) appeared in 1767 in London, a fourth edition in Dublin (1774) and a third in London (1783).


5. Lexiphanes, p. XXX.

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novel exhibits to all men dignified by literary honors and scientifical
accomplishments, two discrepant significations. Inkhorn words, and
with a vengeance! Campbell with questionable Celtic impetuosity,
declares war on "those Lexiphanes, those Shiners, those Dealers in
hard words, and absurd phrases, those Fabricators of Triads and Qua-
ternions." Lest his learned title should be misunderstood, with touching
paternal care for the unscholarly, he explains that "it literally signifies
Word-Sinner, or one who always uses, and is mighty fond of, what my
Lord Lytrelton would call, a shining affected diction." Pantagruel had
also fought a memorable verbal skirmish with the pedantic Limousin
scholar who proudly claimed that he came "De l'alme, inclyde et célèbre
académie que l'on vocite Lutèce." But whereas Pantagruel merely shakes
and scares the Latinized jargon out of the breech-beshitting student,
Johnson is forced to disgorge it painfully in a most emetic way.

Who then were Campbell's stylistic models? Robert C. Whitford sums up his views most adequately when he states that "Campbell was
so thoroughly indoctrinated with the decorous classic principles of the
Age of Anne, that he was thoroughly dissatisfied with the Age of
Johnson". Addison, Steele and first and foremost, Swift appear in
Lexiphanes as bright luminaries shedding their pure and elegant light
over English prose. If Johnson wishes "to translate into good plain
English, some of those few Ramblers whose matter may render it worth
the trouble", he must "in the first place, make [himself] master by
repeated readings of the style and manner of the Tatlers, Spectators and
Guardians, the only perfect models of such way of writing, perhaps, in
the world." Campbell quotes - most respectfully and approvingly -
Swift's famous definition of style in the Letter to a Young Gentleman
lately Entered into Holy Orders: "proper words in their proper places",
which he calls" the concisest, and, at the same time, the fullest that ever
was given of so complex a theme." Campbell's hatred of "hard words"
was probably inherited from Swift who in the above quoted letter
condemned "the frequent use of obscure terms, which by the women
are called hard Words, and by the better Sort of Vulgar, fine Language,

7. On this lexicographical topic, see "Inkhorn Words before Dr. Johnson"
by E. L. Mc Adam jr., in Eighteenth Century Studies, edited by W. H. Bond
8. Lexiphanes, p. XVII.
11. Lexiphanes, p. 146.
12. Lexiphanes, p. 145.
than which I do not know a more universal, inexcusable, and unnecessary mistake among the Clergy of all Distinctions, but especially the younger Practitioners". Johnson's spirited and skilful defence of "hard words" in his *Idler* n°70, Saturday 18 August 1759, must have infuriated Campbell who was probably ready to dub Johnson "a mighty affecter of hard words", to borrow Fielding's ironical description of Mrs. Slipslop. Dryden, Pope, Atterbury, Bolingbroke, Sprat, Tillotson, Clarendon, Temple and Burnet are also proposed as stylistic models.

But among contemporary authors, Campbell reveres a rather unlikely trinity, between whose members no love was ever lost: Lyttelton, Charles Churchill and Smollett. *Lexiphanes* is dedicated to Lyttelton, "the best and happiest imitator of Lucian our nation has yet produced" and also "the purest and choicest of any I know now living, and the remotest from that affectation and Lexiphanicism which are at once the disgrace and characteristick of the age". Charles Churchill, although a cordial hater of the Scots, as he had shown in his cruel and slashing *Prophecy of Famine* (1763), probably earns Campbell's respect for his nicknaming Johnson "Pomposo" in *The Ghost*. After acknowledging the rake-hell Churchill's faults, Campbell passes a rather flattering, and no doubt exaggerated judgment on his literary abilities: "Had he not been snatched away by an untimely fate, and had he been more difficult and correct, and learned to polish and blot, methinks, he was able to give perfection to rhyme it has hitherto been thought unsusceptible of, and which Dryden himself has not attained to; I mean that of running the lines into one another with ease and gracefulness, and giving it all the variety and swelling periods of prose". Campbell's most laudatory homage is reserved to Smollett. After admitting grudgingly that he does not "absolutely condemn all authors" since Queen Anne's time, he grants some contemporaries" undoubted merit, and had they not prostituted their admirable talents to write for booksellers, might have been models of perfection". This sentence is completed by a long explanatory note which takes up more than half the page:

I must own that the writer of a late history is alluded to in this passage. And when we consider it, rather as the project of another, than the favourite choice or theme of it's [sic] author, that he was writing not for reputation only, but also from another motive, and moreover that he was limited in the time of it's [sic] execution; we cannot but stand amazed at those abilities which

13. *Lexiphanes*, p. IV.
14. *Lexiphanes*, p. 143. In the same note Campbell admits that he had once thought of publishing his dialogue under the title of "Pomposo".
in so short a time, eleven months it is said, and under so many disadvantages, could produce a work, of that weight and importance, with so many beauties and so few imperfections, not only an honour to its [sic] author, but to the people whose transactions it records. What a reproach is it to the times it was writ in, that so noble a genius should either lie under the necessity, or even find it convenient to write with any other view than reputation alone. It cannot, however, be denied, that there is something too shining now and then, both in his words and diction; but with this essential difference; which is the fruit of art, labour and design in the pedantick old schoolboy, proceeds from inadvertence and want of leisure to correct in so lively and spirited a writer as Dr. Smollet [sic].

Without doubt Campbell refers here to Smollett's *Complete History of England* (1757-1758), which, according to John Moore's biographical introduction to his *Works* (London, 1797), Smollett is said to have completed in fourteen (not eleven, as Campbell generously states) months.\(^\text{16}\) That Smollett followed "the project of another," viz. Hume, whose *History* had begun to appear in 1754, is no more than a likely hypothesis, still unbuttressed by any biographical data. Smollett's pressing need for money at the time and the gruelling discipline he imposed upon himself are, on the contrary, well-documented from his letters. Thus, in April 1757, he begins a hurried and jaded note to William Huggins with: "I have just finished the third volume of my *History*, and am as sick of writing as ever an Alderman was of Turtle"\(^\text{17}\). Such surfeit of rich historical calipash, or calipee, did not prevent Smollett from exerting his stylistic skill to the best of his over-taxed abilities. Apart from the strictures due to heated but all too current political partisanship, Smollett was usually commended for his style in the *Complete History of England*. The *Critical Review* of May 1757, reproduced Smollett's "Plan" of his *Complete History*, in which the author set forth how he would endeavour "to write in a clear, succinct, nervous style"\(^\text{18}\). In the second installment of this review (June 1757), the critic was more explicit about the stylistic qualities of the *Complete History*: "The stile is neither laboured, nor negligent; neither inflated, nor humble, but strong, easy and perspicuous, suited to the situation, and the narration is animated with such spirit as supports the attention of the reader. Nor but that we sometimes meet with marks


\(^\text{18}\) III, May 1757, article X, p. 450.
of carlessness [sic] and precipitation, which we ought to forgive, in consideration of that exactness with which the author has recorded every event that could tend to the reader's amusement or information.\textsuperscript{19} It is likewise regretted that "certain expressions are repeated too often, and there are some lapses of the pen, quos incuria sudit.\textsuperscript{20} The final installment of the review of the Complete History appeared in the Critical Review in January 1758, after the fourth volume had been given gratis to the buyers of the first three volumes, an excellent publicity gambit, as it turned out, which netted Smollett some £2000. The fourth volume was received as warmly as the other three: "the stile is, in general, equal and in many places superior to that of the preceding volumes: nevertheless, we cannot help owning, that we perceive in it marks of hurry and oversight, which we hope will vanish in the next edition, as well as many errors of the press, owing to the haste in which the sheets have been cast off.\textsuperscript{21} In case the opinion of the Critical Review should be judged too heavily biased in favor of Smollett, a quick look at its bitter rival, the Monthly Review will confirm the reader in his favourable view of Smollett's style. Goldsmith wrote the first review of the Complete History for the June 1757 issue of the Monthly Review and after pointing out some weaknesses tactfully pronounced Smollett's style "in general clear, nervous and flowing; and we think it impossible for a reader of taste not to be pleased with the perspicuity and elegance of his manner". Owen Ruffhead, the author of the second review in the Monthly Review (April 1758) proved far less gentle than Goldsmith on the whole, but finally praised Smollett for his style: "The great excellence of this work, is the elegance and spirit of the style which is, in general, nervous, clear, fluent, bold and florid.\textsuperscript{22} In few words, this writer's merit is rather that of an ingenious novelist than of an accurate historian.\textsuperscript{23} Like Campbell, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu in 1758 also regretted to see Smollett employed in historical hack-writing, thus disgracing "his talents by writeing [sic] those stupid romances commonly called History."\textsuperscript{24} But if Smollett had been forced to prostitute his talents, at least the publication of the Complete History marked for him the beginning of "comparative freedom from any acute financial difficulties."\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{19} III, June 1757, article I, p. 481.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., p. 483.
\textsuperscript{21} V, January 1758, article I, pp. 2-3.
\textsuperscript{22} Monthly Review, XVIII, April 1758, p. 305.
\textsuperscript{24} L. M. Knapp, op. cit, p. 192.
The "pedantick old school-boy" spitefully referred to by Campbell at the end of his note, is no other than Johnson, as is made clear in another polemical production of the irate Scot, *The Sale of Authors* (London, 1767): 'I may have called him, in some of the Notes, a *pedantick old Schoolboy*, but I can only wish for the honour of our country, where he has some how or other acquired so great a name, that there were less truth and justice in the appellation.'

In the preface of *The Sale of Authors*, Campbell makes an elaborate show of pseudo-impartiality, pretending that he had attacked neither Johnson nor Dr. Akenside as persons in his previous work, "but their Manner of Writing, and expressing themselves on all subjects, and the pompous affected style used by them, and many other Doctors and Writers." In the literary auction sponsored by Mercury and Apollo, two gods in the sudden throes of dire poverty, nothing will be made of the few good authors, who are finally dismissed with apologies. Gray, Macpherson, Garrick, Dr. John Hill, and, of course, Dr. Johnson, who is still labouring under the cathartic effects of the emetic administered in *Lexiphanes*, come in for some savage burlesque. But Dr. Lowth, Hurd, Burke, Hume and Home, Kames too — "who tho' an Hypercritik and extravagantly subtile [sic], is yet a man of sense and genius" — Smollett, Robertson, George Campbell, Mrs. Macaulay and Warburton thus escape unscathed and unsullied.

Such was not the fate of Campbell himself whose *Lexiphanes* was roughly handled by the *Critical Review*, and even more so by the *Monthly Review*. The reviewer of the *Critical Review* staunchly defends Dr. Johnson and his *Rambler*, stating clearly that Campbell is "inexcusable for his unfair representations, and his illiberal treatment of Dr. Johnson, and some other respectable authors", yet adding immediately, and not without a smug touch of voluntary ambiguity: "we cannot but commend him for endeavouring to explode the use of hard words and pedantic expressions." The general evaluation of *Lexiphanes* is balanced and possesses the obvious advantage, over Campbell's spontaneous but untrained pronouncements, of a detached and professional outlook: "The stile of some of our late writers, we confess, is very justly censured by the author of this Dialogue. But we cannot allow, that 'Lexiphanick is the characteristick of the age'. We have innumerable writers whose language is easy, natural, and unaffected. Hard words and turgid expressions are generally exploded. No writer in this age attempts to use

26. *The Sale of Authors*, p. IV.
the stile of Sir Thomas Browne. The English language has received great improvement since the beginning of this century. Yet this work is not unseasonable. It is written with acuteness and spirit; and may be attended with a good effect."

The *Monthly Review* of May 1767 devotes nine wrathful lines — while the homologous article in the *Critical Review* numbers nine pages — to Lexiphanes. The opening sentence falls like a death-verdict: "the author of the Rambler is here censured for writing ill, by a person who cannot write at all."\(^{29}\) *The Sale of Authors* was also reviewed both in the *Critical Review* (July 1767) and in the *Monthly Review* (Oct. 1767), but, although the *Critical Review* is again definitely more lenient, Campbell’s second dialogue is given short shrift.

Whitford summed up the matter, "In general, there is much that is amusing, and little of permanent value, in Campbell’s two dialogues."\(^{30}\) But, at least, the obscure Scotch purser of a man-of-war has managed to carve himself a tiny literary niche — as an irate Caledonian Zollus — in the majestic shadow of the ungainly colossus bestriding the English eighteenth century. His estimate of Smollett’s style in the *Complete History*, although undoubtedly biased by pro-Scottish prejudice, testifies to the enduring popularity of Smollett’s historical works and to their much - appreciated readability, as opposed to the jejune ponderousness of such historians as Oldmixon, Carre or Rapin. Finally, although Campbell’s two critical dialogues remain but of secondary importance, they point to a deep and recurrent trend all through the eighteenth century: a constant, widespread, preoccupation with the protean evolution of the language, and a sharp awareness of its stylistic potentialities.

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28. Ibid., p. 265.  