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SAMUEL JOHNSON'S *RAMBLER*
AND THE INVENTION OF SELF-HELP LITERATURE

Committee:

Elizabeth Hedrick, Supervisor

Samuel E. Baker

Jeffrey Barnouw

James D. Garrison

Neil Kamil

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by

John Steven Kinkade, B.A., M.A.

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John Steven Kinkade, Ph.D.
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Supervisor: Elizabeth Hedrick

This dissertation argues that Samuel Johnson's *Rambler*, a series of essays written between 1750 and 1752, helped established a new genre of advice writing, the self-help book. This genre depends on a method of caring for the self that privileges an autonomous identity that defines itself, through labor, against upper class values. Though Johnson employs many of the tropes and tactics of courtesy and civility literature, his work offers a new focus on the discipline of one's mind and the assertion of an independent self in an urban culture.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the history of conduct literature, following its changes from Renaissance courtesy literature, which focused on the court, to civility literature, which emphasized the importance of participation in a broader public sphere. Johnson was conscious of the civility tradition, especially as a context in which periodical essays were written, and of the didactic possibilities of literature. The second

chapter examines how Johnson's *Rambler* adopts the topics of earlier conduct literature but shifts the focus of his advice from sociability to the cultivation of the self. He teaches his readers the importance of an interior discipline, as opposed to the discipline of the body that marked courtesy and civility literature, and of the centrality of labor in developing a self.

The third chapter argues that Johnson writes a self-help text geared specifically towards writers and scholars. Johnson frequently invokes this audience, advising them on what constitutes professional behavior for writers, and producing in *The Rambler* a manual of professionalization for a previously ill-defined profession. Chapter 4 argues that Johnson tries to extend his ethic of self-help to a female audience, arguing for the importance of learning and an autonomous self. However, because Johnson cannot imagine contexts in which women's labor truly becomes meaningful, self-help fails to make sense as a tactic for women, a limitation imposed by a culture that does not value women as equals.

Reading *The Rambler* as a self-help book offers us a better understanding of the importance of Johnson's work and an appreciation of an under-studied genre.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Samuel Johnson, Self-Help Literature, and the Conduct Book Tradition.	7
Chapter 2: <i>The Rambler</i> and Mastery of Common Life: The Discourse of Self-Help. . .	56
Chapter 3: Establishing the Profession: Self-Help for “Men of Study and Imagination”	103
Chapter 4: <i>The Rambler</i> and Women.	156
Conclusion.	201
Works Cited	204
Vita.	215

Introduction

James Boswell, whose journals suggest a profound immunity to *The Rambler's* moral exhortations, nonetheless praised the essays for providing “*bark and steel for the mind.*”¹ He seems to have held *The Rambler*, among all of Johnson's works, in especially high regard, turning to the text throughout his life (Sisman 21). Boswell took Johnson seriously as a guide to the conduct of life, as his response to the text when he grew depressed in Utrecht in 1763 indicates: “I have received most valuable instruction from his *Rambler*. Several papers seem to have been just written for me. I shall make out a *cento* (if I may use the expression) of philosophy for the happy conduct of life from his works. He is the ablest mental physician that I have ever applied to” (*Boswell in Holland* 28).² However much he may have swerved from the lessons of Johnson's precepts, Boswell read the papers intensively, seeking concrete instructions on how to live his life and benefiting, or at least claiming to benefit, from Johnson's help with ordering his psychology (hence “mental physician”). In the *Life*, Boswell praises Johnson for helping to keep the reader's soul out of “despondency and indifference” by “every where inculcat[ing] study, labour, and exertion” (1:213).

Boswell's responses to *The Rambler* rarely merit much attention, and his use of *The Rambler* as therapy and guide-book may strike us as strange. Many of Boswell's contemporaries might have found his response odd as well, for *The Rambler's* fame was sometimes closer to infamy because of its abstruse diction and complex syntax or its

¹ “Bark and steel for the mind” is a proverbial phrase referring to quinine and iron; the italics are Boswell's.

² See also page 18, where Boswell describes the lessons he learned from specific *Rambler* papers.

failure to equal or improve upon *The Spectator*. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu attacked *The Rambler* for its lack of originality, complaining, “The Rambler is certainly a strong misnomer. He allways plods in the beaten road of his Predecessors, following the Spectator (with the same pace a Pack horse would a Hunter)” (3:65-6; *sic*). The eighteenth-century rhetorician John Witherspoon was one of many who deplored Johnson’s style. He wrote in his *Lectures on Eloquence* (1768) that Johnson, whom Witherspoon identifies as “the author of the Rambler” with no mention of the *Dictionary*, “is so stiff and abstracted in his manner and such a lover of hard words that he is the worst pattern for young persons that can be named” (238). The voices against Johnson’s style were strong enough that even Boswell had to acknowledge the difficult style, though he loyally defends Johnson’s stylistic choices (*Life* 1:213-4). This chorus continued into the twentieth century, with James Clifford’s famous, delicate sentence serving as the best summary of how Johnson fails to live up to *The Spectator*: “If Johnson cannot ever quite catch the light touch of Addison and Steele, he does at times come close” (84). Defensiveness about Johnson’s style, however, soon gave way to arguments that maintained Johnson’s timelessness.

Walter Jackson Bate’s influence still hangs heavily over criticism of *The Rambler*. Bate worked hard to ensure that readers appreciated Johnson’s greatness—hence the title of his work proclaiming Johnson not only as a major figure but as a major *writer*, *The Achievement of Samuel Johnson* (1955). Bate’s book helped shape a decades-long critical project that emphasized Johnson’s greatness and set out to reclaim the writer Johnson from Boswell’s biography of a grand eccentric. Of course, Bate’s

work (including his biography of Johnson) most of all replaces Boswell's quirky genius with a dark, tormented genius better aligned with twentieth-century expectations about artistic alienation. Harold Bloom, who claims Johnson as his "hero since boyhood," similarly works to establish Johnson's fundamental greatness, pronouncing that everything Johnson wrote "is essentially wisdom literature" (201-2; 184). Johnson's prose can be difficult, and Johnson's essays frequently have an impressive weight. But we have grown so used to reading Johnson as *Johnsonian* that we may be assigning a reading that the text does not always support.

Boswell's response to *The Rambler*—serious but practical—makes perfect sense if we consider that he might have been a member of the ideal audience: a young man with literary pretensions hoping to make his way in London and looking for practical instruction on how to live his life. Indeed, in this dissertation I suggest that Boswell's response highlights essential elements of *The Rambler* that have long been overlooked. This dissertation offers a two-part argument. First, contrary to the critical tradition that assigns Johnson's work the ponderous role of wisdom literature, I locate *The Rambler* within the tradition of conduct literature, the books that offer readers advice on making their way in the world. Johnson's fealty to his title and the series epigraph ("Sworn to no master's arbitrary sway, / I range where-e'er occasion points the way") means that the essays present an odd mish-mash of topics. No description can adequately define the whole series, but to identify *The Rambler* as conduct literature does account for many of the essays that have long been overlooked (in large part because they never made it into anthologies) in addition to the more famous *Rambler* essays. Second, I argue that

Johnson breaks with past traditions of conduct literature to help create a new discourse of self-help.

The first chapter offers a narrative history of conduct literature from the Renaissance into the nineteenth century. Conduct literature, the most popular name for books of advice that discussed codes of behavior for various audiences in society, saw a distinct shift in emphasis from courtesy to civility. Renaissance conduct literature focused on a courtly audience, defining a code of courtesy. But as literacy spread and societies become less centered around a monarch and court, the arts of being a participant in a society—a civilized society—became the focus of conduct writing, giving rise to the ethic of civility. Recent work, particularly that of the sociologist Jorge Ardití, has shown how etiquette arises as a discourse in eighteenth-century England. I think that these narratives obscure the rise of a discourse (and later genre) directed towards the middle class reader in a young capitalist economy, and I propose another strand of discourse that arises out of conduct and advice literature: self-help. When it has been acknowledged as part of British culture, self-help has traditionally been seen as a nineteenth-century idea; more frequently, self-help is treated as a uniquely American idea. Self-help, though, has a strong presence in British culture and a history, and I suggest some of the essential elements of self-help discourse that represent differences from the discourse of civility.

Chapter 2 situates *The Rambler* between a rhetoric of civility and a rhetoric of self-help. Addison and Steele's *The Spectator* participates in the civility discourse of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, I argue, while *The Rambler* helps to construct the discourse of self-help. Addison and Steele emphasize the importance of sociability and

on determining one's place in society. Johnson's *Rambler* offers advice for an inner life, what he famously terms "the moral discipline of the mind." But Johnson's self-help is not only internal. He also offers advice on social behavior that emphasizes self-control rather than, as in Addison, social disciplining. I also examine *The Rambler*'s contents in comparison with conduct literature of the period to reveal how Johnson changes the tropes and tactics of civility to create the discourse of self-help.

Johnson's labor-centered ethic of self-help would function particularly well as encouragement for a man compiling a dictionary of the English language. And Johnson is most interested in offering self-help advice for other laboring scholars and writers—"men of study and imagination," as he calls them. Chapter 3 identifies *The Rambler* as self-help document designed especially for writers and scholars to whom Johnson wants to offer guidance. Johnson repeatedly insists on the overarching importance of persistent effort and the great labor that intellectual work requires, though he balances these arguments with advice on the importance of social behavior—usually as a means of refreshing oneself for more scholarly endeavor or to ensure that the rest of the world can properly appreciate the writer's great achievement. Johnson's advice on the writing life, particularly the focus on work, helps to establish writing as professional behavior, as do Johnson's critical writings. In his critical essays in *The Rambler* Johnson seems to argue more for what literary criticism should do than he does for interpretations of particular works of literature. In other words, *The Rambler*'s literary criticism works mostly to establish literary criticism—and the literature that it criticizes—as important, professional work.

Like any other description of human activity or attempt at a code of behavior, self-help cannot capture the experience of every person. The “men of study and imagination” from Chapter 3 represent an ideal audience for Johnson’s ideas, and the emphasis in that phrase should perhaps fall on the first word, *men*. Perhaps the most notable omission for Johnson, and thus the moment that best illustrates to us the limits of self-help, is his difficulty in constructing a workable code for women. We see, I argue in Chapter 4, Johnson trying to create the conditions for an ethic of self-help for women. He argues for the establishment of an autonomous self and offers claims about what constitutes virtue for women that resemble arguments about what constitutes virtue for men. However, contrary to the recent critical trend that mines *The Rambler* to prove Johnson’s feminist sensibilities, I argue that Johnson cannot imagine roles for women in which the values of persistence and endeavor can truly apply. As a result, reading *The Rambler* as a guide for women is a frustrating experience. Johnson simply cannot stretch his ethic to apply to women as well as men, whose roles in society cannot benefit from the values that self-help presents.

Chapter 1, Samuel Johnson, Self-Help Literature, and the Conduct Book Tradition

Self-help continues a long tradition of conduct literature, re-articulating modes of advice and conceptions of the self for a culture that differed dramatically from what had come before. In this chapter, I first define self-help as a category, describing the unique concerns that separate self-help literature from earlier conduct literature. To emphasize the importance of this difference, I also offer a selective overview of the history of conduct literature beginning in the Renaissance, the period in which Johnson begins his own such history. Next, because conduct literature of Johnson's time is based on many religious assumptions, I discuss how conduct literature separates itself from texts such as sermons and how Johnson squares the mostly secular discourse of self-help with his religious beliefs. Finally, to establish Johnson's familiarity with the conduct literature tradition, I examine Johnson's discussion of conduct literature in the *Life of Addison* and discuss his familiarity with conduct literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The Invention of Self-Help

When Samuel Johnson writes himself into the tradition of conduct literature he rewrites it as self-help literature. His biographers ever since have also been writing him into this discourse, celebrating the narrative of his rise from poor provincial to iconic Englishman. The narrative works beautifully for Johnson's life: his labor allowed him to eschew the support of the patron and eventually be asked by the crown to accept a

pension. The state, in other words, found itself indebted to this individual whose work had helped create the greatness of English, and thus the greatness of England.³

Johnson works at the beginning of the discourse, helping to shape attitudes about work and success, and ultimately helping to frame how middle class Britain will think about itself. Johnson is not creating a system or a philosophy; rather, he lays out ideas that add up to a discourse that advises readers on how to behave. Still, self-help discourse, in Johnson's loose formulation, contains several essential elements. First, self-help literature recognizes the importance and dignity of labor and effort (or endeavor), with a special privileging of intellectual labor and an insistence on the value of perseverance. Second, through that labor, self-help literature encourages the construction of an autonomous self that exists comfortably in society but that is unafraid to express or enact individuality. Third, self-help literature identifies the importance of literacy and learning, with some emphasis, usually uncertain, on traditional classical education. Fourth, self-help literature highlights the importance of a trustworthy character marked by "punctuality," a catch-all term for an assortment of virtues commonly associated with trade: not only timeliness but also general responsibility and trustworthiness. Finally, self-help literature asserts the dignity of these values that separate the self-helpers from the gentry; basically, self-help contributes to the making of a bourgeois class or middle class, where the self-identification works not as separation from those below, but from those above.

³ Roy Porter writes, "At first glance the life of Samuel Johnson reads as a classic moral tale of Smilesian self-help, exertion triumphant over adversity" in *Flesh in the Age of Reason* (167). The insertion of "at first glance" implies that this is a simplistic approach to Johnson's life, presumably because Smiles's *Self-Help* is also simplistic. It is simple, surely, which must be one of the keys to the book's longevity, but it is not at all simplistic.

Self-help is ultimately a technique of caring for the self that pushes it to do more, to stake out an identity apart from another group (who are usually, in some way, idle) and to do this without external supports.⁴ It must be noted that the ethic of self-help has a built-in male bias. Women of the eighteenth century, denied full agency in the creation of their subjectivity, cannot access these strategies of self-creation as effectively as men. In particular, in a society that still dictates the control of women's bodies as closely as eighteenth-century Britain did, the discipline of the mind cannot take on the same importance. If control of the male body in social situations could largely be taken for granted, the discipline of women's bodies was a still heavily contested.

That care for the self presents a notable difference from most of the earlier ideas in conduct writing that emphasized bringing the self into line with a larger group. To establish the context out of which self-help arises, in the next section of this chapter I consider definitions of conduct literature and trace the history of the genre.

Conduct Literature: Definitions and History

The broad category of "conduct literature," an omnibus term that encompasses courtesy literature, civility literature, etiquette literature, and self-help literature, divisions that I discuss later in this chapter. Though the definition of "conduct literature" remains unsettled, we can still sketch a definition that will help us understand what conduct books set out to accomplish. Nicholas Hudson has suggested the term

⁴ For Samuel Smiles, this will become a doubt about what the government can accomplish; he famously argues a libertarian ethic on the first page of *Self-Help*.

“prudential literature” to describe the kinds of didactic texts that I am describing, and his term usefully emphasizes the importance of practical virtue. J. Paul Hunter’s *Before Novels* makes a fascinating argument for the importance of the “guide” tradition in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literature, pointing out that instructional books on an extraordinary variety of topics were a literary staple of the period. Each of these terms captures essential aspects of conduct texts: prudence is surely the virtue most widely celebrated in these texts, while “Guide” nicely captures the aggressive role that these texts wanted to assert for themselves in relation to their audiences, even as it highlights the directional metaphor that marks the didactic function of these texts (a metaphor that Johnson ironically challenges by choosing the title *The Rambler*). But “conduct literature” can comfortably include a larger variety of texts over a longer period of time, including texts that are less forceful about asserting their “guide” qualities as well as those that offer advice on etiquette that operate with an emphasis on self-interested prudence. More important, scholarly consensus seems to have settled on the use of “conduct literature” or “conduct book” in talking about the advice and guidance literature that I describe here.⁵ By “conduct literature” I mean texts that offer guidance to the reader about matters of practical concern by offering instruction on controlling one’s behavior as a way of controlling one’s relationship to society or forming one’s private character. The inclusiveness of the term is appropriate, for the eighteenth century in particular saw a great number of texts designed to offer instruction to the reader on many aspects of life, from professional behavior to care for the home.

⁵ One small but significant piece of evidence for this consensus is Pickering and Chatto’s recent reprinting of long-neglected texts under the title *Conduct Literature for Women*.

The small number of modern critical histories of the genre of conduct literature tend to look back to classical sources. John Mason, whose 1935 book *Gentlefolk in the Making* is still a standard history for most scholars, traces the genre of conduct literature from ancient authors and Biblical sources. *The Book of Proverbs*, for example, offers us numerous examples of perhaps the most traditional form of conduct literature, the gnomic saying, and classical literature provides plenty of examples of literature that offers advice. Mason argues that these wisdom texts are forerunners of courtesy books and conduct literature since they are frequently concerned with everyday behavior, but differences between them exist. Most importantly, conduct literature is generally less philosophical than wisdom literature, which might be more concerned with sketching a state of existence rather than offering advice on how to manage one's mind, body, and social behavior.

Mason's connection to the classical past might call to mind Walter Jackson Bate referring to the work of the Greek aphorists as one of Johnson's influences. Bate defines these works as wisdom literature, a traditional term for the Books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job. This definition offers Bate a way to advance his thesis that we need to be more mindful of Johnson's achievement (a more important thesis in the 1960s, when Johnson was too often considered only as Boswell's subject).⁶ Historians of conduct literature have seized this tactic, aligning what has commonly been considered a marginal literature with ancient texts that can help establish its importance. This strategy for establishing conduct literature as a topic for serious study makes sense given a

⁶ Bate makes this argument in his Introduction to *The Rambler* in the Yale edition of Johnson's works, *The Achievement of Samuel Johnson*, and in his biography of Johnson.

recurrent modern view of advice literature as psycho-babble or platitudinous nonsense. In his 1989 book on the culture of self-help books in modern America, for example, Steven Starker opts for a title—*Oracle at the Supermarket: The American Preoccupation with Self-Help Books*—that contains an implied criticism of the genre and its readers, emphasizing the cheap ubiquity of the genre.

This kind of dismissive attitude toward conduct literature is distinctly modern. Several conduct books from the Renaissance have become canonical works. I focus on Renaissance texts in this history because a transformation was taking place in conduct literature in the Renaissance, a transformation that we can best understand as a shift from courtesy, or a court-centered code of conduct, to civility, a broader code of social interaction that was as important to the middle classes as it was to the aristocracy. These changes are especially important for two reasons. First, as we will see later, Johnson locates the origins of conduct literature in the Renaissance, and examining the centuries before and just after him places *The Rambler* in historical context in a way that too much scholarship on the essays has failed to do. Second, this period gives rise to major shifts in conduct literature that help us understand the social history of manners as well as the literary approaches to teaching manners that occur from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. The first shift that I describe is that from courtesy to civility; the second is that from civility to etiquette; Jorge Ardití sketches this basic progression in his book *A Genealogy of Manners*, and my narrative of conduct literature is indebted to that work. I diverge from Ardití's work in focusing more on the history of a genre (rather than the history of social practice) and by arguing that the history of this genre should also

include self-help literature, perhaps the most enduring legacy of conduct literature in the present day. As with any shift in ideas or manners, the changes from courtesy to civility to etiquette and self-help do not happen all at once, but the differences in these concepts can form a useful framework for thinking about the changes in conduct literature over several centuries. Further, as Norbert Elias teaches us in his pioneering study of the history of manners, the “civilizing process,” by which Elias means the development of the codes of self-control that mark the changes in manners in Western culture, has no origination point from which we can begin measuring some kind of “progress” in manners and personal behavior. In tracing a history of conduct literature and, by implication, the manners conduct literature helps to shape, I do not mean to suggest a Whig history of the improvement of manners (though I might note that Johnson likely saw exactly this kind of progress, from barbarity to refined civilization) but instead to suggest a way of understanding how manners have been conceived across different times and how these differences have led to changes in the texts that propose to instruct readers in deportment, manners, and daily life.

A history of European conduct literature from the Renaissance to the eighteenth century can be seen as a democratization, though a mild one, of a genre. Renaissance conduct literature is best represented by the work that Johnson isolates as the essential text, Castiglione’s *The Courtier*. The title of this book reminds us that books such as *The Courtier* were courtesy literature, aimed narrowly at a royal or court audience. Such is the case with another work that Johnson cites in the *Life of Addison*, Casa’s *Il Galateo*, published in 1558. Early English conduct books were also courtesy literature, aimed at

training the sovereign or the court. Some of the first courtesy books in English were such works as Thomas Elyot's *The Boke Named the Governour* and James I's *Basilikon Doron*. Early courtesy books first emphasized the importance of the monarch behaving as a good Christian; as the audience grew, they were also directed to the courtiers and not just the sovereign. Then the audiences expanded again: as the importance of the court declined and the importance of the middle class grew, that group, too, needed guidance on how to live as good Christians or how to succeed gracefully in a political world. I emphasize the importance of the Christian conduct books because one of the causes of the widening audience for conduct literature is a strand of latent egalitarianism in Protestant understandings of Christianity.

Ultimately, it was the widening of the author's conception of the audience that marked the decline of the courtesy book as the primary form of conduct literature. Particularly in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as literacy, economic opportunity, and the middle class expanded, readers grew hungry for instruction in a new and comparatively more democratic social structure. Courtesy books taught young princes and sometimes princesses how to be sovereigns and nobles to be gentlemen; as the definition of gentleman expanded to include those who were not born noble, and as opportunities for social mobility grew, middle class folk learned to be genteel. The audience for written instruction for negotiating social and professional situations expanded. Thus the shift from courtesy to civility. Embedded in the words we can see the change in audience; courtesy literature aimed to help readers negotiate a court;

civility literature aimed to help readers negotiate an urban, civic space in which tradesmen were becoming particularly important.

One of the ways that conduct literature teaches its readers is by offering readers possibilities for creating coherent narratives of their lives, and the change from courtesy to civility sees a distinct change in narrative possibilities. As Frank Whigham has shown, courtesy literature depends heavily on tropes of competition and rivalry; the relationships discussed in courtesy literature showcase battles for preference in the limited world of the court. The narrative offered the reader is one of constant competition; *sprezzatura*, the famous grace that Castiglione championed, was a way of covering up the hard work involved in battling for preferment. Not that conduct in courtesy literature is social warfare or devoid of ethical considerations of others; indeed, courtesy literature advocates behavior that at least on the surface shows great respect for others. But the goal of personal advancement, even at the expense of those one is kind to, is the motivating force.

Civility literature, on the other hand, emphasizes smoothing social relations and envisions social life as an exchange. By the eighteenth century, civility will value social life as a system of exchange based and imagine social life based on the metaphor of commerce. The book usually considered the first text of civility, Erasmus's *De civilitate morum puerilium* (1530), though directed to the son of a nobleman, became a textbook to teach both manners and Latin to boys across Europe and went through hundreds of editions in the centuries after its publication. For Norbert Elias, who identifies the book as central to the "civilizing process" of Western Europe, the book is about "the behaviour

of people in society—above all, but not solely, ‘outward bodily propriety’” (48). Control of the body might be the beginning of civility, but as Elias shows, over time the control of the body becomes more and more accepted, so that advice that Erasmus gives in his book might be the sort of thing that “civilized” people would no longer talk about publicly.

What really matters about civility is the emphasis on agreeable behavior and on conduct that takes into account the needs and desires of others without the promise of *obvious* return. A strange example from Erasmus can illustrate both the concern for others that marks civility and the sort of issue that disappears from conduct texts as “civility” progresses. In discussing manners at table, one of the classic subjects of conduct literature, Erasmus warns against farting during dining. But he also warns against shifting in the seat because that might give the impression of farting—and that would make others uncomfortable. Instead, good manners (in the context of civility) are a marker of being well bred, and manners become, more and more, a way of marking class but still with consideration for the feelings of others. I do not mean to suggest naively that civility involves merely the practice of pure and innocent intentions; the texts of civility still highlight the possibilities for social advancement that good manners offer. Ultimately, the key narrative that civility texts offer readers is one of belonging to a group of like-minded people: cultivated, considerate, trusting.⁷

Anna Bryson sketches a history of the term “civility” and notes that it became particularly important in England in the seventeenth century, about a century later than it

⁷ For a discussion of trust as the cornerstone of civility and good manners, see the first chapter of Steven Shapin’s *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England*.

was adopted as the central term for good manners on the continent. Bryson's history highlights the slipperiness of the term: many writers paired it with courtesy, others treated it as something new and separate. But any student of Johnson must be aware of subtle differences in meaning in discussing one word, much less two, and civility does express something different from courtesy. In particular, courtesy codified the practices of service to nobility, while civility refers to what Bryson calls "the representation of personal virtue within a broader 'civil' community" (277). Johnson's *Dictionary* includes "civility" instead of "civilization" because for Johnson "civility" captured the meaning that we might ascribe to "civilization"⁸—particularly the separation barbarity that was important in the rise of the concept. Indeed, Johnson's first definition of the word reads "Freedom from barbarity; the state of being civilised." Only in the second definition ("Politeness; complaisance; elegance of behavior") do we meet with the meanings that bring civility closer to the understanding we are more likely to have now, though Johnson probably most frequently uses the word "civilities" to refer to good social practices in *The Rambler*. I use the word as the historians of manners Bryson and Ardit do, as a way of identifying a set of social practices that revolves around establishing a sense of a community based largely on the self-control of its members, for self-control marked one as having the ability to live as a civilized man. But what is most important to me is the flux that civility is in around the time of *The Rambler*, hence my

⁸ Boswell objects to this choice, writing in the *Life*, "On Monday, March 23, I found him busy, preparing a fourth edition of his folio Dictionary. Mr. Peyton, one of his original amanuenses, was writing for him. . . . He would not admit *civilization*, but only *civility*. With great deference to him, I thought *civilization*, from *to civilize* better in the sense opposed to *barbarity*, than *civility*; as it is better to have a distinct word for each sense, than one word with two senses, which *civility* is, in his way of using it." (1772)

emphasis on the changes in manners and conduct literature from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century.

The shift from civility to etiquette is best located in Chesterfield's *Letters*, published in 1774, which might be said to remove, at least to a degree, concerns of ethical implications from the performance of manners. Jorge Ardití has presented a compelling argument that Chesterfield coined the word "etiquette" as a reference to manners, using it to refer to "a little ethics" (209). Chesterfield famously recommends that his son show good manners as a way of establishing social class without necessarily regarding the feelings of others beyond their social approval; this recommendation has led many to hold him responsible for "a little ethics" so small that they are not even ethics. Michael Curtin actually locates the end of courtesy literature (which he uses to refer to texts that I would call "civility literature") in the writings of Chesterfield, whom Curtin writes "appeared to represent manners in their most cynical, expedient, and immoral light" (403). The key word in that phrase is "appeared," for the content of Chesterfield's *Letters* has come to matter far less than the reception of the text by its readers. Chesterfield's especially utilitarian view of manners gave opponents of courtesy strong arguments against the morality of manners. And, ultimately, the etiquette manual, a genre that truly comes of age in the nineteenth century, emphasizes etiquette as a means of marking class distinction. In etiquette guides, the performance of manners is a performance of class.

Etiquette literature, then, represents a narrowing of the concerns of courtesy and civility literature, with an emphasis on the actions that define manners. Crucial to

courtesy, civility, and etiquette is the idea of an external order to which the reader aspires. What has been overlooked in the narrative of conduct literature is what happened to the interiority of conduct literature and how conduct literature became even more important to non-aristocratic classes. Another discourse, an enduring one, springs from courtesy and civility literature: self-help. Self-help privileges the interiority of the middle classes.

Self-help literature is particularly invested in the construction of an interiority that etiquette literature neglects. As discussed above, civility literature, according to Norbert Elias, begins primarily as a literature devoted to control of the body. But as “the civilizing process” continues, civility literature becomes more and more concerned with the psychology of conduct. In part this results from the adoption of some of the recommendations that come from civility; control of the body can, increasingly through the centuries, be taken for granted by the conduct book writers. As a result, advice turns more to the construction of an interior self-control, a discipline of one’s thoughts. To some degree self-help literature revives the competition present in courtesy literature, for self-help literature emphasizes the harnessing of one’s discipline and ambition for economic, spiritual, and/or social advancement, which can come at the cost (or, perhaps, with the benefit) of assuming superiority over others. However, competition is not an especially important trope of self-help discourse; the ideal, instead, is to harness ambition as a means of constructing an autonomous self. The measure of success relies less on social advancement than it does on a sense of personal valorization; for Johnson, that sense of personal advancement could result from avoiding idleness and having the

courage and presence of mind to endeavor. We might now think of self-help as a discourse meant to justify acquisitiveness, a version of Weber's Protestant ethic. But self-help is a discourse with a history, a discourse that emerges out of the tradition of advice-giving and helps to shape social practices beginning in the mid-eighteenth century.

“Self-help” is a term more closely associated with the nineteenth century than the eighteenth because of Samuel Smiles's 1859 book of that title.⁹ Smiles's book, still available in the Oxford World Classics series (the closest we have to a scholarly edition) as well as in paperback versions without a scholarly apparatus, is primarily a collection of biographical portraits of successful men, and it provides the best capsule of the tenets of self-help as a form of advice book distinct from, say, the courtesy manual or etiquette book. The book represents a convenient stopping point, and thus a point that represents the fullest articulation of the principles involved, for the discourse that Johnson helps to create in *The Rambler*.

Self-Help, Smiles's *magnum opus*, has been called an example of the “character-ethic” genre of conduct literature; the key virtues for the individual to cultivate include perseverance, frugality, diligence, and industry (Kinmonth 537). Where courtesy books and most other forms of conduct literature encourage working to adapt to the demands of society, self-help—though stopping far short of encouraging revolution—frequently implores the reader to believe in himself (the masculine pronoun is intentional) despite the obstacles that government or society or the powerful might present. Crucially, self-

⁹ The *OED* records the first use of the phrase by Carlyle in 1828.

help inverts the courtier's idea of *sprezzatura* by celebrating work and labor. Indeed, no principle is more central in the discourse of self-help than work, which becomes a badge of honor. Courtesy values masking the difficulties that one faces, and civility and etiquette value manners and politeness as ways of smoothing one's path through life. Self-help seems to fetishize obstacles and difficulties that might have prevented a hard-worker from achievement in his chosen endeavor. And self-help does not seek to determine endeavors; though Smiles tends to celebrate engineering above all other occupations or practices, he works to apply the rhetoric of self-help to any kind of endeavor.

Though self-help defines the individual as centrally important and assumes a certain detachment from society as natural and desirable, Smiles cites more social and nationalist reasons for encouraging self-help: "The spirit of self-help is the root of all genuine growth in the individual; and, exhibited in the lives of many, it constitutes the true source of national vigour and strength" (17). The discourse of self-help values individuals for contributing to national wealth or cultural advancement, not for the accumulation of capital or the achievement of rank. Smiles is not Horatio Alger, and he worked consciously to avoid being labeled as one who encouraged simple acquisitiveness; his efforts can be seen, for example, in a Preface to the second edition of the book in 1866 that argues that "the duty of helping one's self in the highest sense involves the helping of one's neighbours" (3). That claim does not quite capture the argument for self-advancement that Smiles actually puts forth in his text, as most of the biographies he recounts end with the acquisition of wealth and renown. Indeed, his first

edition focused so heavily on heroes of capitalism that the changes to the second edition mostly entail adding biographical anecdotes about artists, writers, philanthropists, and other, more cultural figures—though even for these figures, such as Josiah Wedgewood, the measure of their success resides in pounds earned.

Self-help assumes a new relationship between individual subjectivity and one's social and public lives. "Courtesy" creates a set of behaviors for the court; "civility" creates and describes a pattern of behavior for a wider audience, one organized around a "civil" society, the nation. "Self-help" as a discourse puts the individual, the self, at the center. In courtesy and civility the individual attempts to enter into the circle of the court or the power of the state; in self-help, the discourse assumes that the state draws power from individuals. Self-help presumes a multi-centered plane of social interaction; no monarch serves as the middle, organizing society around itself. Courtesy used metaphors of the king as the sun; civility used the metaphor of stars of equal magnitude. Self-help will find its metaphorical expression in the stars as well, but not until Emerson encourages Americans to hitch their wagons to one—with the central idea that there is *one* star.

Notably absent from this discourse is the role of religion. Because the conduct books that I discussed earlier in this chapter drew heavily on religious teachings, in the next section, I discuss the religious backgrounds of conduct literature, highlighting the importance of the English Latitudinarians, whose treatment of ethics as virtue reinforced the importance of behavior above doctrine.

Religious and Ethical Dimensions

One of the trickiest aspects of defining conduct literature is separating it from religious didactic literature. Conduct literature tends to focus on how one ought to live in the secular world, but religion is too much a part of the life of seventeenth and eighteenth century readers for it not to permeate contemporary texts with a clear secular bent.

Therefore, it can be difficult to differentiate between a conduct book and a religious tract. Generally, even religious conduct literature emphasizes secular activity; for instance, religious conduct literature advises readers on how to apply religious principles to one's behavior outside of religious practice, not on how to worship. Devotionals or liturgical manuals such as *The Book of Common Prayer* would not be conduct literature, but a text that used scriptural citations to recommend a way of living might.

Sermons might immediately come to mind as a form of conduct literature—they are, after all, religious in nature and concerned with daily life. Yet scholars have not always confronted this question seriously enough. Sylvia Kasey Marks, for example, glosses over this troubling distinction with the assurance that “conduct books definitely aren't sermons,” and provides no more explanation. Ultimately sermons are a borderline case: any collection of sermons can be read as a conduct book; the generic distinction sometimes is simply not distinct enough, perhaps particularly with Samuel Johnson, whose sermons frequently offer advice on applying religious principles to behavior. But perhaps the purpose for which the text is written makes the distinction. Specifically, sermons are oral texts; Johnson's sermons, for instance, contain much more obvious

signposts for the argument, making it easier to follow when read aloud.¹⁰ Sermons are also more likely to focus on issues other than personal conduct such as theodicy, theology, and issues of doctrine. Even Latitudinarian sermons do not focus on conduct exclusively. But a reader who chooses to see sermons as conduct literature will be able to find the sorts of guidance he or she is looking for, particularly because conduct literature that derives authority or motivation from Christian principles is common in the Western tradition. Particularly in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as the Latitudinarian emphasis on ethics over doctrine influences the church, the distinction between sermon and conduct book blurs.

The similarities and differences can be seen if we compare Johnson's Sermon 2 and *Rambler* 110. Part of the argument for Johnson's authorship of Sermon 2 derives from its affinities with this essay, and the two pieces do rely on the same basic argument to reinforce the importance of repentance—God has both power and mercy, repentance requires more than external acts of penance, and true repentance is an act of changing one's life.¹¹ The similarities between the two works are greater than that summary of the argument suggests, but the differences are more telling and more important here. Most important, perhaps, is that in *Rambler* 110 Johnson refrains from making repentance a specifically Christian act. The sermon includes an epigraph from Isaiah; *The Rambler*, from Prudentius. Johnson ends *Rambler* 110 with a passage from *Paradise Lost* that

¹⁰ What separates Johnson's essays from his sermons is, most of all, the difference between written and oral texts. See *Samuel Johnson and Moral Discipline* for a fuller discussion of this difference.

¹¹ Hagstrum and Gray offer a slightly different comparison of the argument in the two texts in footnote 1 to Sermon 2, p. 17; my argument here is unaffected by the scope of the similarities, as I wish to emphasize the differences in content that separate sermons and conduct books. See also Gray's *Johnson's Sermons*, pp. 96-8 for a discussion of Sermon 2's strategies.

could be read as ecumenical, but Sermon 2 contains six direct quotations from the Bible. Johnson goes to great pains to establish the universality of the need for repentance, writing in *Rambler* 110, “The expiation of crimes, and renovation of the forfeited hopes of divine favour, therefore constitutes a large part of every religion” (4:221). On the other hand, in the sermon Johnson highlights the differences in repentance practices between the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Church, reminding the audience of the official Anglican position that the Catholic practice of confession does not have Scriptural authority (14:20). These differences are only a small sampling, but they highlight Johnson’s preference for basing his advice about conduct on principles of general human nature or, more accurately, general human psychology (e.g., it is human nature to believe in God, his power and mercy, and the importance of repentance). Even though we see that Johnson projects Christian doctrine onto all religions and all human experience, he seems to be distinguishing between Christian practice and ethical practice. In other words, in *The Rambler*, Johnson offers conduct advice motivated by religious ends, but without making religious connections apparent. I believe that this tactic is a result of the demands of genre; instead of writing true sermons in the moral essays, he borrows the traditions of the conduct book, a practice that gives religious actions a “natural” basis.

The only recent book-length study of *The Rambler*, Steven Lynn’s *Samuel Johnson after Deconstruction: Rhetoric and The Rambler*, emphasizes the religious

nature of Johnson's work.¹² Lynn argues that *The Rambler* is "a single-minded evangelical document" where Johnson is "a lay preacher out to win our souls for God" (157). For Lynn the wandering, fragmented nature of the essay series indicates Johnson's rhetorical strategy: *The Rambler* mimics our own wandering, fragmented lives and points us to the salvation that is possible through Christianity. This interpretation is elegant, but it has shortcomings, as Lynn concedes. Most of all, Lynn's argument risks obscuring the secular qualities of *The Rambler*—qualities that are important to Johnson's rhetorical strategies—and fails to explain why *The Rambler* has so few direct references to Christianity. Lynn offers the unsatisfying conclusion that Johnson fears "scaring off a mostly secular audience" (26). Given the enormous popularity of books like *Pilgrim's Progress* (to offer just one powerfully Christian example) in the eighteenth century, this is an unpersuasive explanation. It may be that Johnson does not need to make as many explicit references to Christianity because advice about conduct is, at base, specifically Christian. Johnson's ethics and religion are intertwined, but not interchangeable.

To borrow some of Johnson's language from *Rasselas*, religion concerns the choice of life; ethics, the *choices* of life. Ethics concerns the practical choices of everyday life. As Johnson consistently reminds us, ethical choices eventually become religious choices—small choices ultimately define our behavior, which in turn ultimately defines our salvation. We see this same type of reasoning in James Burgh's conduct book for young men, *The Dignity of Human Nature* (1767):

¹² I here exclude Philip Davis's 1989 book *In Mind of Johnson: A Study of Johnson the Rambler* because Davis's book is a fairly personal exploration of his own reactions to reading *The Rambler* and a speculative attempt at establishing Johnson's state of mind while writing the series. Though enjoyable, the book does not have a scholarly focus or approach.

Of all parts of knowledge, which may be properly termed scientific, there is none, that can be so ill dispensed with by a gentleman, who would cultivate his mind to the utmost perfection, as that of Ethics, or the grounds of morality. The knowledge of right and wrong, the obligations and consequences of virtue, and the ruinous nature and tendency of vice, ought to be perceived by every well-cultivated mind in the most clear and perfect manner possible. But of this most important branch of science, and what is very closely connected with it, viz. revealed religion, I shall treat in the two following books. (257-8)

Johnson seems to hold similar opinions, and much of *The Rambler* emphasizes the conduct of everyday life because how we live every day determines how we live the whole of our lives. That statement sounds like a modern self-help book, and I mean for it to do so, because that reflects Johnson's rhetorical practice: *The Rambler* offers self-help advice. And so does the Bible. Indeed, Johnson makes the argument in *Rambler* 81 that Christianity emphasizes proper conduct and daily practice above, for example, textual exegesis. He writes,

Of the divine author of our religion it is impossible to peruse the evangelical histories, without observing how little he favoured the vanity of inquisitiveness; how much more rarely he condescended to satisfy curiosity, than to relieve distress; and how much he desired that his followers should rather excel in goodness than in knowledge. His precepts tend immediately to the rectification of the moral principles, and the direction of daily conduct, without ostentation, without art, at once irrefragable and plain, such as well-meaning simplicity may

readily conceive, and of which we cannot mistake the meaning, but when we are afraid to find it. (4:61)

Johnson only rarely makes direct references to Christianity in *The Rambler*, as many commentators have remarked with surprise. Thus, Lynn is right to call our attention to the religious content of *The Rambler*, but he does not quite go far enough to explain that the religious content takes on the trappings of a different genre, the self-help book. So while there may be few Biblical quotations in *The Rambler*, Johnson assumes a Christian audience and makes frequent reference to a shared religious understanding.¹³ And, much more importantly, all behavior ultimately has religious implications for him, and in this series he is drawn more to questions of how religion manifests itself in daily practice than he is to theological speculation. That is, in *The Rambler*, to be a good person is the same as being a good Christian, and vice versa. Therefore, the practical advice of *The Rambler* (which is, it is important to add, mixed in with essays that are more explicitly Christian, such as *Rambler 5*) in the end serves a religious function. Johnson himself makes this clear when he writes in *Rambler 208* that all of the “essays professedly serious”—I would add the rest of the series as well—“will be found exactly conformable to the precepts of Christianity” (5:320). That phrasing suggests that Johnson knew that the audience would not necessarily see the Christianity of every essay.

¹³ Consider, for instance, No. 127, an essay that explores how we may be inclined to shortchange our own industry by too much confidence or too little. The essay opens with an epigraph from Ovid, and the first eleven paragraphs have no Christian references. But the last sentence of the last paragraph clearly shows that the whole essay has been building to a religious point: “But the consideration that life is only deposited in his hands to be employed in obedience to a Master who will regard his endeavours, not his success, would have preserved him from trivial elations and discouragements, and enabled him to proceed with constancy and cheerfulness, neither enervated by commendation, nor intimidated by censure” (4:127).

As with James Burgh, the conduct book author quoted above, the ethics of daily life are bound up with revealed religion, to the point that the Christian background may even be obscured for some readers. However, the “evangelical” purpose of essays that focus so heavily on ethics becomes clearer when consider that Johnson’s religion here reflects the Latitudinarian tradition.

Johnson, like many writers of conduct literature from his time, displayed a Latitudinarian influence. The conduct of everyday life became part of establishing one’s Christianity, but, more to the point, Christianity was seen as providing guidance for daily behavior in way that it had not before. Forgiveness, charity, hope—certainly Christian virtues were encouraged long before the Latitudinarians put pen to paper, but the particular contribution to Christian ethics of the Latitudinarians seems to lie in their essentially ethical understanding of Christianity. As historian Michael Curtin points out, “The sociable virtues of self-control, reasonableness, tact, and moderation were believed to cooperate with revelation, not to compete with it” (401). This cooperation helped establish the utility and respectability of conduct literature at a time when manners as social practices were still often dismissed as superficial. Certainly daily devotion had long been a feature of Christian practice and had been advised. But conduct literature, particularly that of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, urged readers to think of ethical behavior as a practice motivated by Christianity. The conduct literature of the period, even as it is imitated in Richardson’s novels, for instance, frequently argues for the incorporation of Christian motivation into daily behavior, not just devotional practices. The influence of the Latitudinarians helped spur this support for an explicitly

Christian ethics for people of every class. These ideas border on the Pelagian heresy: a conduct book might tie good behavior and good works too closely to salvation and thereby upset Christian orthodoxy, especially Puritan orthodoxy. Puritans and high churchmen had charged the Latitudinarian divines of the seventeenth century with reducing Christianity to a code of ethics, but as the next chapter shows, doing so is a position that Johnson explicitly endorses in *The Rambler*.

This Latitudinarian influence might help explain Johnson's defense of *The Rambler* in No. 208, the last essay in the series. In this essay he famously argues, "The essays professedly serious, if I have been able to execute my own intentions, will be found exactly conformable to the precepts of Christianity, without any accommodation to the licentiousness and levity of the present age" (5:320). Is Johnson mildly defensive here? Does he think that he might be attacked for ideas that do not conform to Christianity? Would those attacks be like the ones on the Latitudinarians, whose ideas were regarded as reducing a great religion to mere ethics?

We have reason to suspect that Johnson did think of himself as aligned with the Latitudinarians in at least some ways. In particular Johnson seems to follow Latitudinarian thinking in emphasizing the ethical dimension of Christianity; as he states explicitly in *The Rambler*, Johnson thinks of his religion as one that emphasizes everyday actions instead of strict adherence to doctrine. And in the sermons we can find Johnson arguing for religious importance of courtesy. In Sermon 11 he examines five precepts of Paul that create a "system of domestick virtue" (14:118). The fifth precept is simple: "to be courteous" (14:125). Johnson argues that courtesy's importance derives from its role

in evangelical recruitment: early Christians had to ensure that the religion “might not be accused of making men less chearful as companions, less sociable as neighbours, or less useful as friends” (14:126). But the importance of courtesy still stands for Johnson, and he ends the sermon by imploring the audience to “endear ourselves by general gentleness and affability” because “It will from hence soon appear how much goodness is to be loved, and how much human nature is meliorated by religion” (14:126). The relationship between faith and behavior (or manners) that Johnson describes here has not always been so persuasive. A text such as Castiglione’s *Courtier* came under frequent attack from readers who distrusted the notion that manners and morality could be bundled together. For these critics, many of them Puritans, manners were disingenuous, superficial, and misleading. Regarding manners as important placed too much importance on external actions that were not necessarily sincere; indeed, for some critics manners implied a social behavior that was rooted in insincerity. For Castiglione, true courtesy was the product of merging good behavior with good ethics to the point that they combined to form a seamless whole that was the essence of grace. The Latitudinarians suggested a similar definition of ethics *as* virtue, an equation that, as we have seen, Johnson endorses to some degree. However, Johnson seems to offer self-help as a response to the equation of outside behavior with virtue, shifting the emphasis from behavior to motivations for behavior.

Before I examine Johnson’s invention of self-help writing, I want to examine how Johnson himself presents the history of conduct literature as a way of understanding how he writes himself into the conduct literature tradition.

Johnson's Brief History of Conduct Literature

Most readers of *Lives of the Poets* remember Johnson's famous praise for Addison's style that concludes the *Life of Addison*. But earlier in this work, in his analysis of *The Spectator*, Johnson emphasizes the essays' role in teaching manners and conduct. Johnson's brief history of advice books in the *Life of Addison*, which begins in the Renaissance and ends with Addison and Steele, focuses on the sorts of texts that scholars now refer to as conduct literature. Significantly, Johnson's history never praises the timeless or universal qualities of these books; these texts are important in Johnson's mind for how they have helped shape specific cultures. After having considered Renaissance texts, Johnson writes,

To teach the minuter decencies and inferior duties, to regulate the practice of daily conversation, to correct those depravities which are rather ridiculous than criminal, and remove those grievances which, if they produce no lasting calamities, impress hourly vexation, was first attempted by Casa in his book of *Manners*, and Castiglione in his *Courtier*; two books yet celebrated in Italy for purity and elegance, and which, if they are now less read, are neglected only because they have effected that reformation which their authors intended, and their precepts now are no longer wanted. Their usefulness to the age in which

they were written is sufficiently attested by the translations which almost all the nations of Europe were in haste to obtain. (334)¹⁴

We know, from this passage and others like it, that Johnson knew and admired Castiglione's work; we also know that he owned a copy of *The Courtier* at the time of his death.¹⁵ More importantly for my purposes, Johnson cites Castiglione in the final number of *The Rambler* as the writer who authorizes Johnson's choice to remain behind the mask of Mr. Rambler (5:317). This passage from the *Life of Addison* offers Johnson's reason for valuing the work of Castiglione so highly: for his didactic value, particularly regarding daily conduct. Johnson's later conversational praise for Castiglione's book as the best "ever written on good breeding" has raised the ire of some Castiglione champions who feel that Johnson undermines the intellectual achievement that *The Courtier* represents. Virginia Cox, editor of the Everyman edition of *The Courtier*, dismisses Johnson's reading as "faint praise" that results from the "superficiality" that attends many readings of Castiglione (xvii). Accusing Johnson of reading superficially always entails some risk. Though Cox may not be reading Johnson superficially, she is reading him unfairly by suggesting that "good breeding" is a superficial concept. Consider Johnson's definition of "unbred" in the *Dictionary*: "Not instructed in civility; ill educated." The second half of that definition brings out the depth of meaning that Johnson sees in "breeding": it is largely synonymous with

¹⁴ Richmond Bond refers to this passage as being "as well known as it is well stated" (95). I have not come across much discussion of this passage, not even a quotation of it in a secondary work aside from Bond, and so I am not confident that the passage is well known today even to Johnson readers.

¹⁵ See Greene, Donald, *Samuel Johnson's Library: An Annotated Guide*. Greene speculates that Johnson's copy of *The Courtier* was probably Sir Thomas Hoby's English translation (46).

education, and with the deeper formation of one's character. Johnson does not view "breeding" as a superficial concept.

To return to the passage from the *Life of Addison*, we see even in this short extract that Johnson does not view Castiglione's achievement as being superficial. Affecting a culture as profoundly as Castiglione did—writing a book that renders itself irrelevant—is an extraordinary accomplishment. To write on breeding is to tackle a weighty subject, one that Addison and Steele, whom Johnson will repeatedly seek to identify as his predecessors, also took on. Johnson laments that England had no authors offering advice on conduct in the manner of Castiglione, Casa, and La Bruyere: "Before the *Tatler* and *Spectator*, if the writers for the theatre are excepted, England had no masters of common life" (334).

"*Masters of common life*"—the phrase surprises because critics have focused in particular on how Johnson looked at *The Spectator* for style; when they have noted that he took ideas for content from *The Spectator*, they tend to emphasize his clearly imitative series of papers on Milton. But here Johnson focuses on the content of the essays. He discusses how Addison and Steele's essays "adjusted, like Casa, the unsettled practice of daily intercourse by propriety and politeness; and, like La Bruyere, exhibited the 'Characters and Manners of the Age'" (2:95). And just before the concluding paragraphs on style Johnson writes of Addison, "As a describer of life and manners he must be allowed to stand perhaps the first of the first rank" and "As a teacher of wisdom he may be confidently followed" (2:148). Knowledge of life and manners, therefore, becomes identified with wisdom. Johnson's descriptive praise of the content of Addison's writing

frequently goes overlooked, but it might be less equivocating than the more famous praise of Addison's style (which is, after all, limited to "the middle style").

Johnson's *Life of Addison* offers us a way of understanding *The Rambler* as well as it does *The Spectator*. When emphasizing *The Spectator*'s function as a practical guide to life, Johnson also emphasizes this aspect of *The Rambler*, for he carefully tries to follow the first series with his essays, as many critics have pointed out. Steven Lynn has been especially persuasive in showing how Johnson exhibits a thorough indebtedness to *The Spectator* in *The Rambler*.¹⁶ Lynn relies on Harold Bloom's theory of the anxiety of influence to argue that Johnson does not want readers to think of *The Spectator*, that he wants to overwrite the famously successful series that preceded him. I disagree somewhat: *The Rambler* has too many similarities to *The Spectator* and Johnson too much respect for literary history for me to believe that he does not intend, at least in part, to honor Addison and Steele with his imitation. Powerfully conscious of Addison and Steele's achievement, he repeatedly refers in *The Rambler* to a singular "predecessor."¹⁷ Some of these references come from Johnson's friends, such as Hester Mulso in No. 10, but in these cases Johnson let the references stand, suggesting that he wanted to downplay *The Rambler*'s similarity to the many periodical essays other than *The Spectator* and keep his ties to the original series foremost in the minds of his readers. If we take Johnson's suggestions that *The Spectator* is the primary literary ancestor of *The Rambler* and then also consider the lineage that Johnson puts *The Spectator* in, we

¹⁶ See *Samuel Johnson after Deconstruction: Rhetoric and The Rambler*, Chapter 1 "(Mis)Reading the Spectator."

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

can hypothesize that Johnson was attempting to write himself into a history of what we would now call conduct literature, perhaps a particularly English conduct literature. We should note that the core of *The Spectator's* importance for Johnson seems to derive from its filling a gap in English life—there were no masters of common life in *England*.

Maintaining a connection to *The Spectator* may be the result of the anxiety of influence, as Steven Lynn argues, but we can also read it as consciously derivative; Johnson may be imitating *The Spectator* because the same country in a later time needs a new master of common life. In the first essay, after all, Johnson explains that he wants the freedom to range over different topics because “he that is confined to no single topick, may follow the national taste through all its variations” (3:8). Johnson’s inclusion of the word “national” and his earlier reference in the same essay explaining that his essays “endeavour the entertainment of my countrymen” recall Johnson’s lament that England in particular lacked a literature to provide guidance for common life.

Johnson may here reflect an anxiety that Anna Bryson argues existed particularly in seventeenth-century England but persisted into the eighteenth century: the worry that Italy and France were more sophisticated and refined and that the English had much to learn from these more civilized countries. Bryson points to the publication of translated Italian and French conduct books (particularly Della Casa’s) in the late seventeenth century as a symptom of this anxiety (75). Perhaps one tactic for addressing fear of English inferiority was to follow the practice of *The Spectator* and write to become a master of common life. More evidence than this paragraph from the *Life of Addison* suggests that this may have been Johnson’s goal: the contents of *The Rambler* show

similarities to the sorts of texts that we now categorize as conduct literature. Johnson's views on what literature can and should do authorize my approach to Johnson's work as conduct literature.

Nicholas Hudson has put forward the relationship between *The Rambler* and conduct literature, asking us to consider a new way of interpreting the text. In his 1988 article "Johnson and the Literature of Common Life" Hudson suggests that scholars need to consider that Johnson read much more than the classics and religious literature. Since Johnson counted it a point of pride that he did not live in an ivory tower, Hudson argues, we should consider unexpected sources. Hudson directs us to what he calls "prudential literature," a term that I find insufficient for capturing the great variety of conduct literature. Hudson's essay, though, is heavily speculative. He focuses more on Johnson's biography than on his writing, and his argument centers on resolving the apparent contradiction between Johnson's social manners and the manners recommended by conduct books. Yet even though Hudson does not explore the relationship between *The Rambler* and conduct literature with much depth, he does remind us that "[I]terature of a very minor sort [. . .] has played a deceptively crucial role in the history of ideas" (48).

While no other critics besides Hudson have pursued *The Rambler's* similarity to conduct books, several scholars have been pushing toward a new understanding of Johnson that de-emphasizes conventional intellectual history in favor of examining other influences on Johnson's work. In "Samuel Johnson and Domestic Metaphor" (1999), Howard Weinbrot argues that Johnson's prose is more accessible than his critics

normally allow because of its vivid metaphors, and specifically those metaphors that derive from domestic life. Weinbrot also looks to another source for Johnson's language: the influence of Hebrew through the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer. He provides persuasive examples of parallelism and antithesis from religious literature that could have influenced Johnson's prose. These examples suggest, Weinbrot argues, that Johnson's use of domestic metaphors reflects his concern with "basic human wants and human responses" (130). Perhaps Weinbrot's article is most effective in reminding us of the breadth of Johnson's reading: to isolate influences seems unrewarding. We ought instead to cast a wider net, one that better takes into account Johnson's life of reading, including works such as conduct literature that have traditionally been excepted from serious scholarly consideration.

One other critic has paid close attention to Johnson's didacticism regarding the everyday. Paul Tankard's 1999 article "A Petty Writer: Johnson and the *Rambler* Pamphlets" offers an analysis of how the majority of Johnson's writing—prefaces, dedications, essays, political tracts, letters, and sermons—are works that fall outside the canon of traditional literature. Tankard argues that Johnson prefers these small pieces to a full book because "[a] dense volume of prose unleashed upon the world implies a sense of finality and self-containedness" that would not reflect "Johnson's personal habits and the nature of his talents" (84). He argues that these short writings do more to encourage readers to "engage in [. . .] the dailiness of moral inquiry and moral endeavor" than a long work could (84). While I agree with (and intend to build on) Tankard's idea that Johnson embraces "the dailiness of moral inquiry and moral endeavor," I feel that it is

important to note that Johnson did not view such literature as petty. Instead, I think that *The Rambler* implicitly argues for the utility and nobility of conduct literature. When Johnson employs the didactic strategies of the advice book in a work that consciously imitates one of the most significant prose works of the eighteenth century, *The Spectator*, he elevates the mission and the practice of the conduct book. Further, we might consider the final paragraph of *Rambler* 204 to be a statement of Johnson's hopes for the fate of his essays. After an essay that considers the greatest tribute to the vanity of human wishes to be the public library, where books showcase how many people have thought that they had something to add to the sum of human knowledge, Johnson considers the fate of authors' desire for fame:

There are, indeed, few kinds of composition from which an author, however learned or ingenious, can hope a long continuance of fame. He who has carefully studied human nature, and can well describe it, may with most reason flatter his ambition. Bacon, among all his pretensions to the regard of posterity, seems to have pleased himself chiefly with his essays, "which come home to mens [*sic*] business and bosoms," and of which, therefore, he declares his expectation, that they "will live as long as books last." It may, however, satisfy an honest and benevolent mind to have been useful, though less conspicuous; nor will he that extends his hope to higher rewards, be so much anxious to obtain praise, as to discharge the duty which Providence assigns him. (4:204)

By introducing Bacon here, Johnson invites us to see the similarities between *The Rambler* and one of the greatest essay collections essays in English, and in doing so

again elevates his own literary status. But he then retreats to imply a more modest goal for his essays, that they prove “useful.” Johnson suggests that utility is a more humble goal for literature, but one he clearly considered still worthy, and he valued the conduct books that were meant to be useful to their readers.

Eighteenth-Century Conduct Literature and Johnson’s Reading

Didacticism was a necessary part of the reading experience for many eighteenth-century readers, including—perhaps especially—Samuel Johnson. In this section I discuss some of the contemporary conduct literature that Johnson knew, his opinions on literary didacticism, and some of the conduct books that appropriated Johnson’s work.

Robert Darnton’s study of a French provincial reader, Jean Ranson, in *The Great Cat Massacre*, suggests that readers responded to Rousseau with a new kind of enthusiastic reading that is “a kind of spiritual exercise” that “trains one not for literature but for life” (226). Darnton argues that Rousseau ushers in an age of Romantic reading, where the novel is read intensively and for the rewards of instruction “as if it were the Bible” (232). Johnson does not ask of his readers the kind of emotional response that Rousseau does, nor does he ask his readers to read *The Rambler* intensively; in fact, he makes much of the fact that the essay can be read quickly and that the length will not wear out a reader.¹⁸ As Johnson notes in the *Life of Addison*, moral essays work best as quick doses of wisdom: “For this purpose [education in “common life”] nothing is so proper as the frequent publication of short papers, which we read not as study but

¹⁸ See particularly the last two paragraphs of *Rambler* 1, where Johnson offers a defense of his choice of the periodical essay format.

amusement. If the subject be slight, the treatise likewise is short. The busy may find time, and the idle may find patience” (2:93). Still, in Johnson, and particularly in *The Rambler*, we can find the same call to treat reading as a guide to life, the kind of reading that Darnton wants to highlight as being particularly important to the eighteenth century. As Lawrence Lipking has argued, Johnson takes “life”¹⁹ as his subject and attempts to help readers navigate their choice, particularly in *Rasselas* and the moral essays. In short, Johnson valued didactic possibilities of reading, that instruction on conduct was, in fact, an essential reason for reading in the first place.

In his history of conduct literature in Addison’s *Life*, Johnson sees plays and essays as giving readers cues on how to conduct themselves. He famously worries in *Rambler* 4 that the “the young, the ignorant, and the idle” will be seduced by novels (3:21). And Johnson was reading his friend Richardson’s novels with an understanding of the works as a kind of conduct literature. In a letter from 1751, he encourages Richardson to construct a conduct book by collecting particularly instructive moments from the novels:

I wish that You would add an *Index Rerum* that when the reader recollects any incident he may easily find it, which at present he cannot do unless he knows in which volume it is told; for *Clarissa* is not a performance to be read with eagerness and laid aside for ever, but will be occasionally consulted by the busy, the aged, and the studious, and therefore I beg that this Edition by which I

¹⁹ It is worth noting that meaning five in the definition of “life” in the *Dictionary* reads “Conduct; manner of living with respect to virtue or vice.” For an excellent discussion of Johnson’s work to make his writing applicable to how his readers live, see Lipking’s article “Johnson and the Meaning of Life” in *Johnson and His Age*, 1984.

suppose Posterity is to abide, may want nothing that can facilitate its use. (*Letters* 1:48)

Richardson did put together a “Collection of the Moral and Instructive Sentiments, Maxims, Cautions, and Reflexions, Contained in the Histories of *Pamela*, *Clarissa*, and *Sir Charles Grandison*” in 1755. But the important point for my purposes is to note Johnson’s belief that “the busy, the aged, and the studious”—not the novel readers he worries about in *Rambler* 4—will all look to a novel for instruction; indeed, they will rely on it so heavily that it is worth Richardson’s time to pick out the most instructive moments. Johnson wants Richardson to exert the author’s authority in determining what is appropriate for the reader to learn from the book, but he also assumes that readers will find it natural to turn to a secular text as a devotional manual that can instruct them on the conduct of life. Johnson’s recommendation to Richardson reminds us that he valued the genre. Widely read in any number of genres, Johnson was clearly acquainted with a number of the most popular conduct books of the eighteenth century. A brief survey of conduct literature from the eighteenth century with an emphasis on works that we know Johnson knew, especially ones that are only marginally conduct works, can give us a better sense of the tradition that Johnson was responding to in inventing self-help.

The genre of conduct literature may hardly seem like a genre at all because its form varies so widely, but there are a few forms that are most common. Some works, such as *The Whole Duty of Man*, consist largely of extended prose essays that are not limited in length as periodical essays are. Other books, notably *Introductio ad Prudentiam* (1727) and *The English Theophrastus* (despite the implications of the name),

contain collections of aphorisms, precepts, and maxims with relatively little expansion on these short bits of moral wisdom. Other works emphasize fictional portraits that serve as moral *exempla*. William Law's *Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* (1729), a book that Johnson credited as having a profound influence on him, contains a number of characters who serve as examples of how—or more commonly how *not*—to behave. *The Courtier* models another form of conduct book, the dialogue. An extraordinarily common form of conduct book, especially by the eighteenth century, is the collection of other texts. Mary Wollstonecraft's *The Female Reader*, for example, presents extracts from texts such as *The Spectator* and *The Rambler* and Chesterfield's *Letters*. The book opens with "Select Desultory Thoughts: Addressed to Females," followed by narratives, didactic pieces, allegories, dialogues and conversations, and, finally, devotional pieces. Wollstonecraft's book shows amazing breadth of reading, and the collection is intellectually rigorous.

Not all collections come together this impressively; frequently the collections read as relatively random, or at least exhibit an unplanned quality. In fact, some conduct books look very much like commonplace books. One of the best examples of this type of conduct book is *Introductio ad Prudentiam*, Thomas Fuller's book of advice to his son, first compiled in 1726 and 1727, where Fuller borrows freely and without acknowledgment from classical and modern sources alike. He ends up producing, for the most part, a list of aphorisms, most of them traditional and unoriginal, without any sort of discernible organization. The first five, for example, read as follows:

“1 Wish not so much to live long as to live well. / 2 Since thou art not sure of an Hour, throw not away a Minute. / 3 Beware of a fine Tongue, it will sting thee. / 4 Be not concern'd with what concerns not thee. / 5 Never be weary of well-doing.”

Fuller includes 1,761 maxims in 217 pages, though they stretch out into essays by the end of the second volume. The point of mentioning Fuller's book is to note the implications of his format—here the writer of the book does the work that the reader was traditionally expected to do. Instead of putting together a list of quotations from one's own reading, now someone interested in learning can purchase a ready-made guide to moral instruction. It also fits another standard category of conduct literature, the advice book from parent to child. Fuller explains the disorganization of his precepts and aphorisms in the Introduction to his text:

I could have disposed my Matters under proper Heads, and divided them into distinct Chapters, and so have brought them into such plain Order as might have rendered all obvious and easy; but I chose rather to observe no more Regularity or Method, than Nature hath in strewing of Flowers in the Fields; designing thereby that the Reader should imitate the Industry of the Bees, that painfully fly all about to search for their Honey.

This passage bears a remarkable similarity to Erasmus and the tradition of the commonplaces. Really, this is just a commonplace book after all; the only difference is that Fuller does not use alphabetical organization, which he claims makes readers too lazy. Readers remember their learning better if he makes them work through his book instead of just giving them an index and letting them go straight to what they want;

though traditionally, of course, the better tactic for learning these precepts would have been for the readers to collect them themselves, through their own study. Still, the use of precepts for teaching conduct is the model that Johnson recommends Richardson use and one he lauds in *The Rambler*, and I note this tactic as a way of highlighting the importance of sententious wisdom and traditional precepts in eighteenth-century didactic writing. Johnson depends on this tradition to give him the foundation of many of his essays, as the epigraphs and the number of first lines that consider commonplaces indicates. *Sententiae* were a staple of contemporary conduct literature.

Another key element to consider in the history of conduct books is authority—why should readers trust a particular book or author? Conduct books and conduct book authors achieve authority in a number of ways, and not every book depends on its author’s standing to establish its authority. By shifting the authority to the book, as in *The Boke Named the Governour*, the authority comes from the text itself. This tactic of using the book as the authority rather than the author exists in part because of the reliance on tradition that marks conduct literature; many works claimed status as a “cabinet” or a storehouse of collected wisdom, so that the authority was in the book, but only by the virtue of tradition. *The Whole Duty of Man* was anonymously written; only in the twentieth century did scholars come to agree that the book was probably written by Richard Allestree. Johnson speculates in 1773 that the author of this book remained anonymous to give the book more authority—because the author might have been a clergyman who felt that the book could more effectively come from someone else, or one whose character might have reflected poorly on the book, or because he was a man “of

rigid self-denial” who did not think he deserved the rewards of writing so fine a book (529). For Johnson the book has its own authority, and the author does not need to be known.

Other conduct books depended almost entirely on the nature of the author; books written, or purported to be written, by parents for children fit most easily into this category. For these books—such as Francis Osborne’s *Advice to a Son* or Chesterfield’s *Letters*—the authority of the book depends largely on the natural authority that the (noble) father had in speaking to the son.²⁰ Books written by masters for apprentices depend on a similar dynamic: the invoked audience must pay obeisance to the author, and any wider audience that comes to the book would understand that kind of submission. Other conduct books have authority not because of the author’s personal standing but because the author is an effective compiler; many conduct books rely largely, even exclusively, on collections of wisdom and advice from classical and modern authors. Especially in the second half of the eighteenth century, more and more conduct books were anthologies of moral writing from classical, Christian, and contemporary sources. The periodical essays of Addison and Steele were especially popular starting points for these books.

A closer consideration of specific texts illustrates the nature and concerns of the genre more clearly. Because it was probably the most popular conduct book of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, I begin with *The Whole Duty of Man*. Not only did

²⁰ Chesterfield’s *Letters* present an especially good example of the author’s authority legitimizing the book: Chesterfield did not publish the letters as a book. His family, looking to cash in on his name after his death, released the collection.

it appear in twenty-five editions between 1658 and 1700, but it was widely reprinted in the eighteenth century as well with at least another twelve editions (Sutherland). Johnson knew the book well and thought highly of it. In 1779 he ordered a copy of the book “handsomely bound” to give as a gift, and in 1780 he began reading some of the book every Sunday, as the author recommended on the title page it should be read (*Letters* 3:158). It was also a book he recommended as essential reading for Thomas Astle in 1784 (*Life* 1306). Perhaps the key to understanding the importance of Richard Allestree’s *The Whole Duty of Man* is the last phrase of the subtitle: “suitable for the meanest reader.” Far from being specific to the court, the *Whole Duty of Man* assumes that it can speak to an audience that goes beyond even the middle class, mostly because it relies almost entirely on religious advice and is thus, in the author’s eyes, applicable to every audience. *The Whole Duty of Man* identifies three obligations, “to God, Ourselves, our Neighbour,” in the full title of the work. Even in the title, then, we see the importance of the concept of civility in the inclusion of “neighbour” and the exclusion of the sovereign. *The Whole Duty of Man* is a religious work, but it is not quite a devotional manual—behavioral choices are largely discussed in secular terms without constant resort to allegory or dramatization of religious choice as generally happened in devotional manuals.

The English Theophrastus, another book that Johnson apparently knew,²¹ does not quite meet the expectations we may bring to it. The book does include portraits of characters to imitate or avoid under the headings of various virtues and vices, somewhat

²¹ He refers to this book specifically in the *Life of Addison*.

in the style of William Law, and the second edition tacks forty-one brief literary portraits of characters given foreign-language names that reflect their characters or occupations (Agricola, Tranquillus, Valerio, etc.) But the bulk of the book is comprised of collections of quotations, aphorisms, and other general advice on how to conduct oneself, some taken from French authors like Bruyere and Rochefoucauld and a significant number from such English authors as Bacon, Cowley, Raleigh, Dryden, Temple, Wycherley, and Brown. The table of contents is organized as a commonplace book, containing all of the topics in the book “Alphabetically Digested.” These topics are useful in part because they give us some insight into the typical concerns of conduct books of the period. All of the topics included in *The English Theophrastus*—for the sake of example, Admiration, Advice, Afflictions, Ages of Life, and Ambition are the first five entries—appear in other works, though they are not always so clearly categorized. And even *The English Theophrastus* is arranged haphazardly; the alphabetical organization applies only to the table of contents, not to the contents themselves.

William Law’s *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* (1729) frequently falls under the large category of religion when it is catalogued (see Donald Greene and Paul Tankard), but as many readers have noted, it can easily be classified as conduct literature as well, since its stated mission is not to explain doctrine or explore theological inquiry but to direct its readers in how to live. Further, Law’s preferred device throughout the book is to include portraits of characters who do not live their life up to his prescribed Christian standards. Like *The Whole Duty of Man*, with which Law’s book shares a

similar valuing of charity and good works, this book aims to reach a large audience: “Adapted to the State and Condition of All Orders of Christians.” Johnson famously stated that Law’s book proved enormously powerful for him, and Katherine Balderston has intriguingly speculated about Law’s influence on Johnson. It is interesting, then, to read *A Serious Call* and note how distant it seems from what we might expect Johnson to find moving. *A Serious Call* does not have the rigorous intellectual and scholarly content that we might think would influence Johnson. Instead, Johnson’s valuing of this book suggests a real appreciation for conduct literature. Law wrote serious books of theology, eventually drifting into Christian mysticism. But *A Serious Call* is a book of simple prose and straightforward exhortation. It is, ultimately, an appeal to a common sense approach to Christianity in that Law does not depend on any recondite arguments or clever interpretations of scripture. The point from which he begins is that “either Reason and Religion prescribe *rules* and *ends* to all the ordinary actions of our life, or they do not: If they do, then it is as necessary to govern all our actions by those rules, as it is necessary to worship God” (7, emphasis Law’s). And, of course, for Law, religion does prescribe these rules and ends: “Our blessed Saviour and his Apostles are wholly taken up in Doctrines that relate to *common life*. They call us to renounce the world, and differ in every *temper* and *way* of life, from the spirit and the way of the world” (8). Far from being an intellectual inquiry into what constitutes Christian conduct, Law’s book hectors the audience to begin living better immediately. There is little subtlety, but there is an undeniable power about the book: the light portraits of sloth and waste and sinfulness

are impressive in that they do not rely on cartoon versions of characters; they are accomplished in their detail and provide convincingly human stories.

This may, perhaps, be an influence on Johnson's choice to include portraits of characters in several of the moral essays, as Walter Jackson Bate suggests. In many ways, Law's (and Allestree's) notions of how to live a moral, Christian life permeate *The Rambler*: the importance of good works, of proper behavior on a daily basis, defines the moral and ethical mission of *The Rambler*. More importantly in considering Law's relationship to *The Rambler*, we have the essence of a self-help book: an emphasis on creating an inner life that creates the proper conditions for one's actions but also advice about concrete actions one can take to improve one's life (which, for Law, means improving one's faith). Law emphasizes achieving deep religious faith through private devotions. I think that we can call this approach self-help because Law emphasizes what a believer can accomplish on his or her own, notably eschewing the importance of public displays of worship.

Another important aspect of conduct literature to consider is audience. Many books advertised themselves as applicable to anyone. Subtitles reveal the optimistic scope of conduct books. For example, *The Gentleman's Library* (1715) advertises itself as "Containing Rules for Conduct in All Parts of Life." Thomas Fuller's *Introductio ad Prudentiam* (3rd edition, 1743) contains "Directions, Counsels, and Cautions, Tending to Prudent Management of Affairs in Common Life," while a more religious work such as *The Whole Duty of Man* declares that it is "Suitable Even for the Meanest Reader." Conduct literature authors had long since ceased to see their audiences as a small group

of nobles. They now had advice for everyone, not a surprising reach when we consider the latent egalitarianism of (particularly) Protestant Christianity and also the relative increase in social mobility in the eighteenth century.

Also important, though, were the more targeted conduct books that identified the particular concerns of a narrower audience. For example, Daniel Defoe produced *The Complete Tradesman*, which contains a great deal of practical instruction on running a business but primarily offers advice on ethical conduct. And a hugely important audience for conduct literature (and the area of conduct literature that has been most studied) is conduct literature for women. One popular example is *The Whole Duty of Woman*, which draws its title from a presumed need to complement *The Whole Duty of Man*, and which advertises itself as appropriate to a large audience. In this case, the book is appropriate for women from ages sixteen to sixty (“for between these periods there is found the truest portion of good in this life”). The book conforms to almost every expectation a modern audience would have about eighteenth-century conduct books. First, the book is only about one-third the length of *The Whole Duty of Man*, suggesting something about the importance of the woman’s role in eighteenth-century life. More suggestively, of the eleven chapters in the book, four are devoted to religious duties, one is devoted to medicines, four cover cooking and food preparation, and one instructs women on the “artificial embellishments” of beautifying. Nor is this kind of book exceptional. The three conduct books for women that Johnson mentions in *Rambler 51* are all domestic handbook and cookbooks; all three focus on cookery above all. Aside from domestic life, the most common subject of conduct books for women seems to be

advice on preserving their virginity until marriage to a proper man—exactly the sort of conduct advice that Richardson supplies in the novel that grew directly out of an advice book, *Pamela*. The title page of *The Whole Duty of Woman* claims that the author derives her authority from her long experience of living—age is the foundation of expertise. Thus Johnson opts for an *eidolon* who is older than he is; the illusion of age lends more authority to his advice, a tactic that Paul Hunter has noted that the conduct book also shares with the novel (*Before Novels* 43).

Johnson's contention that we go to literature for instruction comes as no surprise if we remember his discussion of Shakespeare. In the Preface, Johnson describes Shakespeare's plays are full of "practical axioms and domestick wisdom" and argues that "from his works may be collected a system of civil and oeconomical prudence" (7:62). Later in the Preface, enumerating Shakespeare's faults, Johnson argues that from Shakespeare's plays "a system of social duty may be selected, for he that thinks reasonably must think morally" (7:71). Further, Johnson argues that "it is always a writer's duty to make the world better" (7:71). Granted, Shakespeare's domestic wisdom is not the centerpiece of Johnson's praise of the playwright; in a way, the mention of practical wisdom is so casual that it implies a lack of importance. But that casual assumption of domestic wisdom, combined with the idea of what constitutes a writer's duty, reveals Johnson's expectations of that guidance that literature can and should provide its readers.

Johnson's opinions on Shakespeare and Richardson are important to my argument because of what they suggest about his attitudes towards English literature. If

Shakespeare, the center of Johnson's canon as surely as he is the center of Harold Bloom's, can be praised and celebrated for what he contributes to "domestic wisdom," and if Addison's achievement can be summed up fairly as being a master of common life, then we have more of a sense of Johnson's goals. Johnson's attempt to merge conduct literature and "English literature"²² is perhaps more natural to him than it is to us. For all the hierarchy construction that takes place in the eighteenth century, for all the talk about Johnson's ordering of the arts, literature is perhaps a less limiting category for him than has been generally believed and the scope of what literature can offer is much broader. In *Rambler 2*, writing about what authors may (or may not) expect to achieve, Johnson identifies two primary goals of writing: "to enlarge or embellish knowledge" and, second, "to regulate the conduct of the rest of mankind" (3:13).

Robert DeMaria, in his heavily speculative history of Johnson's life of reading, argues that Johnson was drawn to self-help writing as a reader, though DeMaria does not consider self-help to be a separate genre distinct from other conduct-book traditions. DeMaria writes, "What appealed to Johnson were works of religious self-help that recommended hard work, self-control, and a degree of self-laceration and that, in addition, combined these recommendations with some scheme of psychology that acknowledged the reality of pain and suffering" (115). DeMaria's argument about Johnson's reading works to explain his writing as well, which DeMaria suggests when he refers to *Rasselas* as an example of a self-help book in which Johnson argues for the

²² I use this phrase because it seems first to have been Johnson's; according to the OED Johnson is the first person to write of English literature in a way that implies a collection of texts that are somehow better and more worthy than texts that are not "literature."

importance of persistence (109). DeMaria's argument does not pursue a definition of what self-help means and what kinds of values self-help as a discourse might construct. It does, however, remind us of an important element that marks conduct literature in the eighteenth century (as well as today): predictability. Conduct literature tends to be derivative, and the advice of one book can be passed down in numerous texts, and, as Paul Hunter notes, the invocation of familiarity may in fact be the primary rhetorical strategy of much conduct literature (*Before Novels* 258). Wisdom, whether about the state of existence or manners at table, was not likely to be found in innovation in Johnson's time. Still, Johnson was innovative in his approach to self-help; in *The Rambler*—though not, say, in his meditations and prayers—Johnson removes the elements of self-laceration that DeMaria refers to in favor of a belief in the powers and possibilities of the hard-working self.

Identifying *The Rambler* as conduct literature does not necessarily suggest a new way of seeing it; instead, treating the series as conduct literature looks back to old ways of seeing these essays, or, really, any series of periodical essays. Periodical essays, which adopt the topics and tactics of conduct books, were themselves selected and repackaged as conduct books throughout the eighteenth century. The editor of *The Moral Miscellany*, for instance, reprints essays from *The Spectator*, *The Guardian*, *The Adventurer*, *The World*, *The Rambler*, and other sources “to form the minds of youth to just and proper sentiments on the most interesting subjects” (A2). Anne Fisher, editor of *The Pleasing Instructor, or Entertaining Moralist* (1757), includes three *Rambler* essays—a small number in a work that includes 81 pieces, but relatively impressive when

we consider that she publishes her work only five years after the end of *The Rambler*'s run. Further, three *Rambler* essays appear in the book *The Matrimonial Preceptor* (3rd ed., 1765).²³ Three of 208 essays is, of course, a tiny number, but still it is suggestive that Johnson's essays were approachable and readable enough that they could be inserted, without editing, in a book of advice on marriage. Eighteenth-century audiences must surely have looked to periodical essays for instruction if they can constitute the bulk of conduct books such as these. Johnson seems to have appreciated reading as a search for instruction, once declaring to Hester Thrale, "Books without knowledge of life are useless, for what should books teach but the art of *living*?" (Hill *Johnsonian Miscellanies* I:324). The art of living according to a philosophy of self-help was just what Johnson sought to teach in *The Rambler*.

²³ The full title of this work: *The Matrimonial Preceptor; A Collection of Examples and Precepts Relating to the Married State from the most Celebrated Writers Ancient and Modern*. The editor of the work is unknown. The third edition contains sixty-five articles giving advice on marriage, consisting—despite the implications of the full title—almost exclusively of eighteenth-century texts. *The Spectator* is the most quoted from work, constituting seventeen of the sixty-five entries.

Chapter 2, *The Rambler* and Mastery of Common Life: The Discourse of Self-Help

If *The Rambler* has never much impressed audiences with its originality, that only reflects Johnson's stated intentions. In his famous formulation, "men more frequently require to be reminded than informed"; that is, the job of the writer is to recall readers, through fresh and interesting writing, to what they already know (3:14). While I am arguing that in *The Rambler* we see a new discourse coming into being, Johnson builds that discourse on an old foundation. Specifically, Johnson's choice of topics reflects his reliance on the conduct-book tradition and its reminders of accepted paths to virtue.

As discussed earlier, there have been critical moves in the direction of understanding Johnson not as an author of "wisdom literature," as Walter Jackson Bate and Harold Bloom would have it, but as an author intimately concerned with the conduct of everyday life. Thus this chapter has two purposes: 1) to establish Johnson's use of the topics of conduct literature as a guide for many of the essays and 2) to examine Johnson's creation of a new discourse, self-help. For the latter argument, I note some of the changes that Johnson makes from conduct books of the period, but, most of all, I emphasize how Johnson breaks with the example set by Addison and Steele, who were writing similar periodical essays but with an eye towards establishing civility rather than with managing the inner life. The force of Johnson's inventiveness comes through most clearly when we see how he moves away from the tactics and tropes of *The Spectator*.

The Spectator and The Rambler

In the last chapter I argued that Johnson consciously followed Addison into the tradition of conduct literature, conceiving of his own essays as an exploration of manners, morals, and common life. In this chapter I want to emphasize how Johnson breaks away from the influence of *The Spectator*. Briefly, the earlier series tends to reflect the interests of a discourse of civility, while Johnson deploys the discourse of self-help. *The Rambler* differs from *The Spectator* in terms of the emphasis that the texts place on discipline, both the site of the discipline and its means. Addison and Steele regularly emphasize control and care of the body, while Johnson pays little attention to concerns of the body. Instead, Johnson, in helping to create a method of self-help, emphasizes the discipline of the mind. Addison and Steele assume social life as the central experience, and central metaphor, for understanding our existence. All the world is a stage, and *The Spectator* helps to balance our understanding of our inner selves with the demands of the social stage: the urban landscape that Mr. Spectator, the other personalities that write papers, and *The Spectator's* readers all inhabit.

In *The Rambler*, Johnson rarely defines the performative self as central to our sense of being. Certainly he argues for a discipline of the mind that will inform how we interact with others and how we approach the world, but Johnson brings the innovation of emphasizing an internal control. No metaphor such as the stage is quite so central to Johnson's thinking, but he does envision all lives as being lived something like the writer's life, as a series of projects that demand our attention and labor and that present obstacles to be overcome. As a result, one important difference between Johnson's

approach to conduct—and one of the innovations of self-help advice—is the greater emphasis on positive encouragement towards endeavor rather than arguments against bad behavior. Most conduct literature consists of injunctions against certain forms of conduct, and *The Spectator* tends to follow in this direction. As Scott Paul Gordon explains, Mr. Spectator’s corrective function depends on his status as “an elusive figure *always present in potential*” which “compel[s] cautious readers to act always as if he *were present*” (102; emphasis in original). Readers of *The Spectator* learn the dangers of being conspicuous and singular in front of strangers; to practice perfect civility, they need to blend in with those who surround them. Johnson’s self-help discourse stresses the importance of constructing an individual self, one that must frequently define itself against others.

Steven Lynn has argued that the first four *Ramblers* can be read together as rewritings of *The Spectator*, as Johnson considers his relationship to that periodical and his own labors as an essayist. Further, in the first ten or so essays, Lynn argues, “Johnson constructs a drama in which Mr. Rambler tends in various ways to oppose *The Spectator*, while his correspondents in some sense tend to continue it” (49). This drama reaches its climax in an essay that, oddly enough, Lynn chooses not to mention: *Rambler* 23. In this essay Johnson declares his independence from *The Spectator*’s example. He twice names *The Spectator* as a forerunner that his readers would like to see him imitate, but he takes as the guiding principle for composition the idea from moralists that “every man should regulate his actions by his own conscience, without any regard to the opinions of the rest of the world” so that one is not “distracted by a boundless variety of

irreconcilable [*sic*] judgments” (3:125-6). At the end of the essay Johnson calls himself “a ship in a poetical tempest [. . .] held upright by the contrariety of the assailants” demanding that he address topics of their choosing (3:130). But he here announces that he chooses to ignore these demands, which mostly ask Johnson to take more notice of social life. Some of these demands and comparisons from *Rambler* 23 shed important light on the shifting discourse of instruction.

The first complaint that Johnson details: “Some were angry that the Rambler did not, like the Spectator, introduce himself to the acquaintance of the publick, by an account of his own birth and studies, and enumeration of his adventures, and a description of his physiognomy” (3:128-9). And, as that last phrase suggests, one of the core distinctions between the two periodicals is the role of the body.²⁴ The opening of each series reinforces this difference. In the first issue of *The Spectator*, the narrator responds to the desire of readers to know an author, and, first of all, to know what an author looks like—to know the man as a body, “whether the writer of [the text] be a black or a fair Man” (1:1). Johnson, on the other hand, creates a psychological drama of how an author should select an opening, lamenting that no standard procedure exists for an essayist. The attention moves away from biography to the process of producing text and the mental anxieties that attend authorship.

The difference in emphasis continues throughout the series. Much of the advice that Addison and Steele give in *The Spectator* depends on proper care of the body; physical well-being appears again and again. *Spectator* 66, for example, complains,

²⁴ Roy Porter’s chapter “*The Spectator: The Polite Self in the Polite Body*” in his book *Flesh in the Age of Reason* (2003) expertly explains the importance of the body in *The Spectator*.

“The general Mistake among us in the Educating our Children, is, That in our Daughters we take Care of their Persons and neglect their Minds; in our Sons, we are so intent upon adorning their Minds, that we wholly neglect their Bodies.” Later, in *Spectator* 543, Addison would argue that “the Body of Man is such a Subject as stands the utmost Test of Examination,” encouraging readers to understand the body anatomically and as a part of the self. And that understanding, it seems, should also encourage readers to learn how to control their bodies. Temperance is one method of disciplining the physical self:

Were I to consider my Readers as my Patients, and to prescribe such a Kind of Temperance as is accommodated to all Persons, and such as is particularly suitable to our Climate and Way of Living, I would copy the following Rules of a very eminent Physician. Make your whole Repast out of one Dish. If you indulge in a second, avoid drinking any thing Strong, till you have finished your Meal; at the same time abstain from all Sauces, or at least such as are not the most plain and simple. A Man could not be well guilty of Gluttony, if he stuck to these few obvious and easy Rules. (*Spectator* 195)

Exercise²⁵ is the other means for bringing the body into line, and it is essential for good health on many levels:

This general Idea of a Human Body, without considering it in its Niceties of Anatomy, lets us see how absolutely necessary Labour is for the right Preservation of it. There must be frequent Motions and Agitations, to mix, digest,

²⁵ In *Spectator* 195, Addison makes the close relationship between Exercise and Temperance explicit with his use of the word “sequel”: “Having designed this Paper as the Sequel to that upon Exercise, I have not here considered Temperance as it is a Moral Virtue, which I shall make the Subject of a future Speculation, but only as it is the Means of Health.”

and separate the Juices contained in it, as well as to clear and cleanse that Infinitude of Pipes and Strainers of which it is composed, and to give their solid Parts a more firm and lasting Tone. Labour or Exercise ferments the Humours, casts them into their proper Channels, throws off Redundancies, and helps Nature in those secret Distributions, without which the Body cannot subsist in its Vigour, nor the Soul act with Chearfulness. (*Spectator* 115)

Not that Mr. Spectator concerned himself only with care of the body; after all, one reason to care for the body was its integration with the soul. Care of one fed care of the other. Still, the body remains central to *The Spectator*; even the title reminds us of the importance of visible bodies.

Johnson does not ignore the body entirely, but care of the body plays a far smaller role in *The Rambler*, as Johnson emphasizes exercise and physical care in only two or three essays. Instead, *The Rambler* advises a care for the self that depends on the discipline of the mind—the famous “moral discipline of the mind” of *Rambler* 8: “My purpose,” writes Johnson, “is to consider the moral discipline of the mind, and to promote the increase of virtue rather than of learning” (3:42). That sentence announces an emphasis on a social action—“the increase of virtue” is not limited to theoretical virtue. But action, the sentence reminds us, begins with thought: to be virtuous in action, we must first discipline the mind. The body, as Norbert Elias has shown, had been disciplined by endless numbers of books with advice. And so Johnson gives the reader something new, something that requires rethinking how we think. Johnson, following Locke, knows that our train of thoughts can sometimes overtake us: we lose

control of what we're thinking, and, as we see with the astronomer in *Rasselas* who thinks he controls the weather, that way madness lies (141-54).

That explanation of madness depends on a division of the mind, a division that many scholars have commented upon, but too often they have commented on this division to show how Johnson prefigures Freud.²⁶ By reading Johnson as essentially Freudian, we obscure an important aspect of Locke's influence, and especially the importance of what the philosopher Charles Taylor calls Locke's "punctual self." Taylor argues that Locke objectifies and reifies the mind. We must first conceive of the mind as a thing that can be controlled before we can believe that we are controlling the mind. Objectified, the mind becomes subject to discipline—hence Johnson's "moral discipline of the mind." Further, Taylor has described how John Locke's philosophy changed the assumptions of the past, including the assumptions of past conduct literature. In this difference we can see how Johnson breaks with Addison. Writes Taylor,

Of course the great classical moralists also call on us to stop living in unreflecting habit and usage. But their reflection turns us towards an objective order. Modern disengagement by contrast calls us to a separation from ourselves through self-objectification. This is an operation which can only be carried out in the first-person perspective. It doesn't tell us, like Stoicism, to be aware of what is worthwhile for humans as such or, like Plato, to focus on the properties of reason and desire and their relation to what we know about the happy life. It calls on me to be aware of *my* activity of thinking or *my* processes of habituation, so as to

²⁶ Walter Jackson Bate's *The Achievement of Samuel Johnson* began this interpretation (see p. 93ff). Bate continued to develop this theory in his biography of Johnson.

disengage from them and objectify them. Indeed, the whole (strange and ultimately questionable) picture of myself as objectified nature which this modern turn has made familiar to us only became available through that special kind of reflexive stance I am calling disengagement. (175; emphasis in the original)

What we see in this passage is the development of a philosophy that undergirds self-help: the self must be objectified if it is to be helped. The difference between Johnson's *Rambler* and *The Spectator* is that *The Spectator* tries to fit readers into a pre-ordained social system—it teaches a reader principles to live by. *The Rambler*, in the act of helping to create the self-help book, asks the reader to examine not just actions, and especially not just actions according to principles, but also the motivations for action. But to discover motives, one must objectify the self, treating the self as a mechanism whose motivations can be discovered. The next step, of course, is to regulate that self by controlling motivations and disciplining the self.

One other indicator of the differences in the series is the difference in metaphor contained in the titles. *The Rambler*, though it announces itself as aimless in the title, still implies motion. And though the motion of “rambling” does not provide a governing metaphor for the series (except perhaps in preparing us for the lack of connection between topics) it does suggest a process of traveling and even of change and, most importantly for separating the series from *The Spectator*, *The Rambler* implies engagement in the world and, therefore, engagement in change. Mr. Rambler is more than a spectator commenting from the sidelines of life; he is involved in life, though not the coffee-houses and theaters that *The Spectator* employs as settings for so much of the

series. In *Rambler* 23, the essay in which Johnson lists reader complaints, we find him acknowledging that fans of *The Spectator* would like him “to have a special eye upon the various clubs of this great city” since “much of the Spectator’s vivacity was laid out upon such assemblies” (3:129). But the social life of the reader is not what Johnson concerns himself with most. The creation of subjectivity in *The Rambler* is a *process*.

The advice that *The Rambler* offers depends on the idea that readers can change themselves, that they can make themselves better—in the sense that they can become happier and in the sense that they can become more virtuous (for Johnson, as we would expect, those two qualities are closely connected). To return to *Rambler* 23, Johnson states that one complaining reader “is very much offended whenever he meets with a speculation, in which naked precepts are comprised, without the illustration of examples and characters” (3:129). Johnson wants to throw responsibility onto the reader to apply the precepts—to ramble through the experience of life, we might say, rather than be a spectator of another character or example. Johnson sometimes dithers on the subject of the efficacy of precepts, but in setting himself against *The Spectator* in this case, he votes firmly for their effectiveness. Finally, Johnson also implies that he is uninterested in some of the topics that interested *The Spectator*, noting, “He [Mr. Rambler] has been censured for not imitating the politeness of his predecessors, having hitherto neglected to take the ladies under his protection, and give them rules for the just opposition of colours, and the proper dimensions of ruffles and pinnars” (3:129). Is it possible to read that passage without hearing a sneer? Johnson piles on a bit more sarcasm, noting that another complaining reader has asked him “to fix a particular censure upon those

matrons who play at cards with spectacles” (3:129). Johnson implies a dismissal of presumably trivial topics that depend too much on petty rules of social conduct. In doing so, he shifts the role of a master of common life to topics that are, perhaps, less transient and more internal. Still, he borrows heavily from the traditions of conduct literature to guide his choice of topics.

Traditional Topics: *The Rambler* and Conduct Literature

The idea of the conduct book truly becomes important in *Rambler* 5, where Johnson turns in the last paragraph to a specifically defined audience. In this case, Johnson exhorts young readers “to make use at once of the spring of the year, and the spring of life; to acquire, while their minds may be yet impressed with new images, a love of innocent pleasures, and an ardour for useful knowledge; and to remember, that a blighted spring makes a barren year, and the vernal flowers, however beautiful and gay, are only intended by nature as preparatives to autumnal fruits” (3:29-30). Johnson’s reference to a young audience only occurs at the end of the essay; earlier sections seem devoted to an older audience, one that has perhaps seen the practice of assuming that good things will happen next spring as a vain delusion. Indeed, most of *The Rambler*, even when ostensibly written for the young, seems more tailored to an older audience.

After a few weeks, though, Johnson moves from more serious topics to more mundane ideas, as he signals with his epigraph for *Rambler* 10: “For trifling sports I

quitted grave affairs”²⁷ (3:50). In this essay Johnson prints letters written by Hester Mulso that ask for more advice for women and, in one case, advice for a young writer. In *Rambler* 11 he provides an early signal about his role as an essayist. This essay opens with a consideration of an axiom from Periander of Corinth, whom Johnson quickly identifies as “one of the seven sages of Greece” (3:56). In the first clause, therefore, we have Johnson’s connection to intellectual prestige and to a tradition of grave wisdom. A writer who wears his learning prominently and heavily: this is a Johnson we know, the Johnson who writes a series of essays explicating *The Vanity of Human Wishes* (as Bate suggests).

But the next few paragraphs set up a Johnson that has too often been overlooked. In the second paragraph Johnson considers what kinds of anger Periander might have been warning his audience against and suggests that Periander means to condemn the anger that turns into malevolence and that is married to great power: the kind of anger that can destroy cities and nations. This kind of anger is *not* the purview of Mr. Rambler: “But this gigantick and enormous species of anger falls not properly under the animadversion of a writer, whose chief end is the regulation of common life, and whose precepts are to recommend themselves by their general use” (3:57). We are still early in the series, so this essay is especially telling in how it sets up expectations for the next two years of essays. Simply put, Johnson, like Addison before him, envisions these essays as helping readers to shape a subjectivity that does not depend on ideas of greatness or on a historical sense. When Johnson writes about anger, he writes about those who call

²⁷ The original, from Virgil’s *Eclogues*, reads *Posthabui tamen illorum mea seria ludo*. The translation, unattributed, presumably comes from Johnson himself.

themselves ““passionate men,”” not the wrath of Achilles. The key idea in this essay is that the anger of “passionate men” is not justified by the lives they lead; instead, their anger reflects a failure of self-control, and a failure to appreciate what causes their anger. In other words, Johnson probes the psychological causes of anger and offers advice on how to avoid it: “[T]he reflection upon his violence must show him that he is mean enough to be driven from his post by every petty incident, that he is the mere slave of casualty, and that his reason and virtue are in the power of the mind” (3:59). That power of the mind is subject to conscious control; the reader sees that he has the ability to change his conduct.

A week later, in *Rambler* 13, Johnson takes up the topic of secrets, in particular the difficulty of keeping secrets. As Johnson points out, the proof that one is good at keeping secrets usually lies in revealing a secret, making revelation that much more tempting. As with the choice of anger, Johnson opts for a topic that that could either reflect a concern with affairs of the highest importance (e.g., secrets of the state) or affairs of domestic life (the secrets we keep from friends), and once again he opts not to write about an issue where “the affairs are of publick concern” because “these scruples, if not too intricate, are of too extensive consideration for my present purpose, nor are they such as generally occur in common life” (3:73). In other words, the reader needs strategies for handling the secrets of common life, not an essay on secrets in politics. Ultimately, Johnson concludes that the ethical issues surrounding secrecy are so complex that it is better not to learn them, so that one does not have to consider the trickiness of

the issues. But let us look at a sampling of the language of the last paragraph from this essay to note his style:

The rules therefore that I shall propose concerning secrecy, and from which I think it safe not to deviate, without long and exact deliberation, are—Never to solicit the knowledge of a secret. Not willingly, nor without many limitations, to accept such confidence when it is offered. When a secret is once admitted, to consider the trust as of a very high nature, important as society, and sacred as truth, and therefore not to be violated for any incidental convenience, or slight appearance of contrary fitness. (3:73)

These three rules of behavior are notable for their lack of psychological framing: there is no move to control one's thinking about secrets; instead, Johnson recommends three behaviors for the reader to adopt. Here Johnson emphasizes conduct, not motivation, and that is something that much Johnson criticism has not taken into account. But the real point is control: Johnson assumes that we can change ourselves and control and conduct our mental states and our behaviors.

No topic better illustrates the shift from courtesy and civility to self-help than ambition. Though Johnson recognizes the dangerous possibilities of ambition and acknowledges that historically moralists have warned against it, he largely encourages the quality. *Rambler* 49 provides the best example of Johnson's attitude toward ambition. He recognizes it as a common spur to activity and concedes that is one of the "adscititious passions" that is "ambiguous and disputable" (3:265). Ambition can lead to good or bad actions; the difficulty presented by ambition is that it provides "no certain

principle for the regulation of [. . .] conduct” (3:267). Johnson’s solution is that “the love of fame is to be regulated, rather than extinguished” (3:266), and those who seek fame must remember that the “true satisfaction” of fame “must arise from the hope, that, with our name, our virtues will be propagated” (3:268).

In contrast, many eighteenth-century conduct books see all ambition as a moral failing and a danger. In the *English Theophrastus*, for example, there is no concern for considering degrees of ambition: instead, ambition should be feared because it masks vices. The author writes, “All Passions Tyrannize over us, yet Ambition suspends all the other Passions, and gives us for a while the appearances of all the Virtues. This Man who has all manner of Vices, I took him to be Sober, Chast[e], Humble, Liberal, and even Devout; nay, undoubtedly he would be so still, if he had not made his Fortune” (65). The drive to greatness may present the appearance of virtue, but it does not create the reality of virtue. Further, the ambitious cannot, as Johnson would have it, regulate this passion: “Ambitious Men abuse themselves when they pretend to limit the Ambition; for their very Ends when they are gain’d, are but converted into means, subservient to farther Pursuits” (65). *The Whole Duty of Man* takes a similar approach to ambition: “Now Ambition is not only a great sin in it self, but its puts men upon many other: there is nothing so horrid, which a man that eagerly seeks greatness will stick at; lying, perjury, murder, or any thing will down with him, if they seem to tend to his advancement” (163). In Johnson’s view, the self can be regulated effectively: even vices can be controlled and channeled into the creation of an improved self; that belief

represents a significant break from many of his contemporaries, and it moves Johnson from controlling conduct to devising strategies for self-help.

Rambler 129 offers a similar argument about ambition. In its celebration of endeavor and desire to overturn traditional approaches to boldness, it may be the most fully realized development of the discourse of self-help in *The Rambler*. Johnson knows that this essay departs from the traditions set by other moralists and advice writers. “Every page of every philosopher is crowded with examples of temerity that sunk under burthens which she laid upon herself,” he overstates, and he then proposes that the history of advice has valued timidity too highly (4:322). Johnson finds this natural enough: most readers prefer advice that encourages ease rather than work. Further, temerity “is the vice of noble and generous minds, the exuberance of magnanimity, and the ebullition of genius,” which means that we tend to be less sympathetic to it when we see it (4:323). Those, then, who hope to earn the affection of others will avoid it. In identifying temerity as the vice of people with these spectacular qualities, Johnson makes the vice more attractive, in large part because he wants to redefine temerity as a virtue, at least in cases where “numbers will receive advantage by success, and only one be incommoded by failure” (3:323). In this essay, Johnson defines endeavor and effort—broadly conceived, with only the stipulation that they be honest and contribute something to “the hereditary aggregate of knowledge and happiness”—as our duty (4:325). Johnson’s break with tradition moves him into a new form of advice giving that focuses especially on hope and encouragement. Noting that many things previously thought impossible had been attempted and accomplished, Johnson suggests, “Nor is

there yet any reason to doubt that the same labour would be rewarded with the same success” (4:325). The lack of specificity in this advice is telling; Johnson wants to encourage an optimistic approach to the general idea of endeavor. Industry benefits us all; work is rewarded. These concepts become central to *The Rambler*, especially when Johnson wants to encourage writing, but also as a general ethic for life. He teaches readers to value endeavor and labor as rewards in themselves or as religious duties, not as paths to wealth.

One of Johnson’s strategies for self-help involves coming to an understanding of what constitutes appropriate and in appropriate ambition. When Nicholas Hudson reads the story of Misocapelus in *Rambler* 123, he sees Johnson’s “considerable scorn for merchants and tradesmen who, in the tradition of Defoe, attempt to emulate the fashions and manners of the gentry” (*SJ and the Making* 19). Misocapelus, who has earned his fortune as a haberdasher, tries to fit into different ways of life. Hudson correctly identifies that Misocapelus’s mistake lies in trying “to gain the respect due to rank,” but the overall effect of the two letters that Misocapelus writes (Hudson does not mention 116), is not a dismissal of Misocapelus for his mistake. After all, he writes to Mr. Rambler to tell his history and assert, in the last sentence, his revised ambition “to secure esteem by honesty and truth” (4:295). Misocapelus’s misery among the gentry results from a desire to participate in activities, though, that might not meet with Johnson’s approval, such as gaming and hunting.

Perhaps even more tellingly, Misocapelus also frequents a coffee-house to become a wit, where he becomes the one “to lead the hiss and clap” so that he becomes

“feared and hated by the players and poets” (4:294). Misocapelus does not overreach so much as he reaches for the wrong goals. He does make one good decision when he tries to hide his training in trade, writing, “I hope I shall always be wise enough to retain my punctuality, and amidst all my new arts of politeness, continue to despise negligence, and detest falsehood” (4:292). Certainly Misocapelus attempts to be something he is not; more dangerously, he attempts to be someone no one should want to be. The virtues he acquired in trade surpass the virtues of his brother, who was a legitimate member of the gentry but “died of a drunken joy, for having run down a fox that had baffled all the packs in the province” (4:258). In other words, the gentry hardly provide a respectable model. Misocapelus’s error lies in a mistaken understanding of desire; if Johnson targets him for scorn, it seems more likely it that he does so because Misocapelus overlooks real virtue for phony virtue—the values of a tradesman for the values of the gentry, and not that he attempts to act as part of a higher class. The gentry in these essays appear as corrupt and trivial, and Misocapelus, though certainly naïve, does not truly appear corrupt until he tries to prove himself a gentleman according to the terms of the gentry. Trying to join a higher but non-working class is clearly misplaced ambition.

Johnson also takes on the subject of ambition in essays devoted to encouraging perseverance as a quality individuals should cultivate. As I discuss in the next chapter, perseverance might be the most important quality for writers, but Johnson repeatedly writes about this virtue for all his readers. *Rambler* 43 worries about those of great ability who might begin projects with great enthusiasm that then dissipates: “[T]oo much vigour in the beginning of an undertaking, often intercepts and prevents the steadiness

and perseverance always necessary in the conduct of a complicated scheme” (3:234). The answer, Johnson offers, is “the resistless force of perseverance” and “the habit of vanquishing obstinate resistance by obstinate attacks” (3:235). Here we see Johnson’s emphasis on the difficult and his sense that we can create a moral habit of perseverance. Perseverance becomes the universal virtue for Johnson; in this essay, those who tend to grow overconfident must be reminded of the power of sustained effort, but in *Rambler* 25, discussed at more length in the next chapter, perseverance also serves those who might doubt themselves. And in *Rambler* 63, we might be distracted “by virtue and by vice, by too much or too little thought,” but the same answer applies: “he that steadily endeavours at excellence, in whatever employment, will more benefit mankind than he that hesitates” (3:33). Thus Johnson makes labor central to our identity; whatever we want to do, we must work to construct a life and a self.

A similar theme pertains in one of the more famous essays, *Rambler* 59, in which Johnson describes Suspirius the screech-owl. The screech-owl stands for a human type, the constant complainer. Screech-owls burden others with their complaints, and present the ultimate danger that they “weaken for a time that love of life, which is necessary to the vigorous prosecution of any undertaking” (3:315).²⁸ Putting labor and endeavor at the center of life once again, Johnson suggests a self-help tactic that sounds thoroughly modern: surrounding ourselves with people who support our ways of thinking and being—almost, indeed, surrounding ourselves with the power of positive thinking, since

²⁸ It is worth acknowledging the care with which Johnson qualifies this essay written against chronic complaining. At the end of this essay he acknowledges that hearing complaints “with patience, when complaints are vain, is one of the duties of friendship” and that “he who complains acts like a man, like a social being who looks for help from his fellow-creatures” (3:318). Regard from others is too important for us to deny displaying our regard for them.

too much complaining will draw us away from an engagement with life. This essay underscores how self-help depends on the influence of others. More frequently, Johnson highlights how the practices of self-help expand outward to influence society.

Johnson's essays on frugality illustrate how the virtues of self-help grow into virtues for all of society, and they also illustrate Johnson's attempt to balance larger, philosophical principles with their practical application. Johnson opens *Rambler* 53 with a grand pronouncement: "There is scarcely, among the evils of human life, any so generally dreaded as poverty" (3:284). And he illustrates the horrors of this evil: "But in the prospect of poverty, there is nothing but gloom and melancholy; the mind and body suffer together; its miseries bring no alleviations; it is a state in which every virtue is obscured, and in which no conduct can avoid reproach; a state in which cheerfulness is insensibility, and dejection sullenness, of which the hardships are without honour, and the labours without reward" (3:284-5). Even this small sampling of Johnson's language applied to frugality gives us a sense of how seriously he approaches this issue. But amidst this high language he acknowledges that his essay focuses not on "such as ruin their fortunes by expensive schemes of buildings and gardens" but "the thoughtless, the negligent, and the dissolute" who are "engaged in habits of expence" (3:285). Still, four essays later, Johnson invents a correspondent to call attention to what might be a potentially overwrought treatment of frugality. Johnson seems to know, and to regret, that he has treated the issue of poverty with heavy philosophy, and he effectively rewrites the essay in language more specifically geared to influence individual conduct—language more geared to the regulation of common life.

In *Rambler* 57, Sophron (“wise”) writes Mr. Rambler to praise him. He opens, “I am always pleased when I see literature made useful, and scholars descending from that elevation, which, as it raises them above common life, must likewise hinder them from beholding the ways of men otherwise than in a cloud of bustle and confusion” (3:305). The point of Sophron’s letter—which, of course, is written by Johnson, as almost all the letters to Mr. Rambler are—is to reinforce the earlier exhortation to frugality in No. 53:

Your late paper on frugality was very elegant and pleasing, but, in my opinion, not sufficiently adapted to common readers, who pay little regard to the musick of periods, the artifice of connection, or the arrangement of the flowers of rhetorick; but require a few plain and cogent instructions, which may sink into the mind by their own weight. (3:305)

Sophron’s letter represents a common tactic in the *Rambler*: Johnson frequently uses the letter-writing readers to advance or exemplify arguments that Mr. Rambler has put forward in other essays. He claims to be simplifying the content—though Johnson’s characteristic voice intrudes with that triplet—and Sophron’s wisdom relies heavily on traditional adages. The most striking instance of practical wisdom in this letter comes when Sophron offers a maxim from “mercantile wisdom” that is appropriate for everyone “from the statesman to the apprentice”: ““A penny saved is two-pence got”” (3:308). Obviously this aphorism catches our attention because Benjamin Franklin later modifies it and makes it famous, but it also exemplifies Johnson’s concern with practical advice for his readers.

Sophon does not stop with just one maxim. He offers other traditional aphorisms: “[A] man’s voluntary expence should not exceed his revenue;” “Let no man anticipate uncertain profits;” “Let no man squander against his inclination” (3:308-9). He offers these observations because our individual choices and actions will accumulate to have large effects. His enthusiasm for frugality grows so heated that he is “sometimes inclined to imagine, that, casual calamities excepted, there might, by universal prudence, be procured an universal exemption from want” (3:307). The recommendation of frugality becomes part of the rhetoric of self-help, another expression of the self-control and self-denial that marks that discourse. But it is striking how the purpose of this advice differs from the purpose of Franklin’s similar injunctions to frugality. Whereas Franklin’s frugality is a means to the end of accumulating personal wealth, Johnson sees thrift as a moral triumph for the whole society—frugality might end *all* poverty, not just advance the frugal man to a different class.

Johnson’s interest in practical advice makes sense when we consider his frequently reiterated belief that most of life passes in small moments, or, as he has Eutropius call them in *Rambler* 98, “petty transactions,” “trifling amusements,” and “slight gratifications.” In offering advice on small moments, Johnson can be highly traditional and offer essays on topics derived straight from conduct books. Eutropius writes particularly on the importance of politeness and recommends “the universal axiom [. . .] ‘That no man should give any preference to himself’” (4:162). That care for others and anticipation of their feelings in a social situation represents the core ideals of civility literature. *Ramblers* 72 and 74, paired essays about good and ill humor, also reflect

traditional conduct book advice about civility. In warning readers against the “disease of the mind” known as ill humor, he cautions that giving way to peevishness, as Johnson also calls ill humor, prevents the mind from exhibiting benevolence, “the chief duty of social beings” (4:23). In 72, Johnson has the correspondent Philomides define good humour as “a habit of being pleased; a constant and perennial softness of manner, easiness of approach, and suavity of disposition,” again reiterating the social ideals of civility (4:13). We see Johnson’s adoption of traditional conduct book topics and the hanging on of the tropes of civility. But significantly, Johnson farms out the voices of civility; Eutropius and Philomides seem to step in to offer letters that cover ground more suited to Mr. Spectator than to Mr. Rambler.

Both Philomides and Eutropius exhibit the defensiveness that characterizes many of Johnson’s writings on conduct. Philomides opens his letter with the complaint that writers “who exalt themselves into the chair of instruction [. . .] have not sufficiently considered how much of human life passes in little incidents” (4:12). Eutropius justifies his letter by writing, “To an author who [. . .] equally intends the advantage, and courts the perusal of all classes of mankind, nothing can justly seem unworthy of regard, by which the pleasure of conversation may be increased, and the daily satisfactions of familiar life secured from interruption and disgust” (4:160).

Eutropius’s letter on politeness follows the number that Samuel Richardson contributed to the series, an essay in which Richardson fondly recalls the role of *The Spectator* in correcting “the fashionable follies” of the grandmothers of the current generation of young women (4:154). Johnson may be responding to Richardson’s

invocation of *The Spectator* and embracing the writing on civility that he knows his audience craves. In *Rambler* 99, two essays after Richardson's, Johnson writes on the importance of "similitude of manners" between friends (4:168). But Johnson cannot keep up the imitation of *The Spectator*, and in *Rambler* 100 Johnson has Chariessa write to ask that Mr. Rambler write to the benighted peoples of the country and use his "charitable endeavours to raise in them a noble emulation of the manners and customs of higher life" (4:170). She worries that people outside London value "[b]lunt truth, and downright honesty, plain clothes, staying at home, hard work, [and] few words" when they need to learn the value of such things as "delightful indolence" and "the enchantments of flattery" (4:171). Johnson's satire of Chariessa grows heavy-handed when he has her recommend the shallowness of city life "as it is so very clear a case, that nobody ever dies" (4:173). Johnson does not equate *The Spectator* with such a flippant attitude, but most of the comparisons that Johnson draws to his predecessor—or, better said, the comparisons that he has his correspondents draw—highlight how *The Spectator* focuses on London social life. But the London of *The Spectator* and the London of *The Rambler* differ greatly.

***The Rambler* as Urban Document**

J. Paul Hunter argues that the Guide tradition arose in part because of the increasingly complexity of people's lives in the eighteenth century and in response to breaks with oral and family traditions, especially in the cases of young people who

moved to the city for greater career opportunities (*Before Novels* 265-6). Johnson, whose pronouncements on London remain a staple of marketing copy for the city's tourism industry,²⁹ had come to London from Lichfield, so he was well qualified to instruct the newcomer on how to adjust to London life. And the urban experience is essential to the construction of self-help, particularly the urban experience as it is changing in the mid-eighteenth century. In this section I emphasize how *The Rambler* reflects an urban experience—how it depends upon and shapes urban values and how it responds to a different London from that in which Addison and Steele were writing. Johnson's London experience demands a turn from Addison and Steele's civility to the increased interiority of self-help. Johnson offers essays that can guide the reader to the creation of a properly urban self, one who reacts against the affected manners of urban roles but that does have the correct responses of an autonomous self in the city.

In an illuminating essay on Johnson and Hume's similar approaches to happiness, Adam Potkay highlights the importance of what urban life offers. Potkay writes, "[H]appiness, here on earth (which is for Hume and is not for Johnson the only site of happiness), is necessarily social; a necessary condition of happiness is therefore city living, preferably in 'great cities' that are commercial hubs, as well as the seats of assemblies and dancing schools" (179). Potkay's article usefully reminds us of the centrality of urban life in Johnson's thinking, but it does not address the particular nature

²⁹ It is worth noting that his most famous utterance along these lines is disputed. Donald Greene, with characteristic anger at Boswell, credits the saying "When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life; for there is in London all that life can afford" to Boswell's embellishment of Johnson's talk. See "The *Logia* of Samuel Johnson and the Quest for the Historical Johnson" in *The Age of Johnson*, 3 (1990): 1-33, particularly 1-3.

of Johnson's urban experience that gives rise to self-help. For that, we have to consider changes in the nature of the coffee-house between Addison's day and Johnson's.

The Rambler is not London-centered in the same way as *The Spectator*, which makes a great show of its connection to London coffee-houses and urban landmarks. In fact, one of the great differences between *The Spectator* and *The Rambler* involves the representation of coffee-houses. Mr. Spectator lists several of the coffee-houses that he frequents—St. James's, the Grecian, Jonathan's—in the first number of the series. The presence of coffee-houses in *The Spectator* perhaps takes on an outsized importance for modern readers since Jürgen Habermas builds his theory of the eighteenth-century public sphere in part on their presence. Still, the coffee-house is a defining site for eighteenth-century life, an orderly public realm that helps give shape to the experience of everyday life. Coffee-houses served as information centers and as places where urban dwellers could enjoy an accepted illusion of equality. Even visitors who had nothing to contribute to the discussion—the silent Mr. Spectator, for example—were part of the scene.

In *The Rambler*, on the other hand, the coffee-house exists for two purposes. One goes to the coffee-house because one is a fool or because one wishes to be surrounded by fools. In particular, young authors on the verge of learning the vanity of human wishes race to coffee-houses in hopes of hearing celebrations of their recently published work. For Johnson, the coffee-house represents a declining public realm. In the age of Addison and Steele the identity of the speaker in the coffee-house was less important than the content of his speech, as the coffee-house was an opportunity for public participation. In *The Rambler* the cultivation of an autonomous, named self takes place. As the

sociologist Richard Sennett has shown, the decline of the public space resulted in the rise of private spaces, and in one of these private spaces, the club, a new exclusivity defined the limits of participation (83-4). Only those who could be counted on to contribute—the “clubable,” in Johnson’s famous neologism—were admitted (Boswell 4:254fn2).

When Johnson advises readers on navigating urban life, he tends to emphasize readers’ psychological reactions to urban life rather than how they live that life in the public sphere. In particular, Johnson’s urban essays look to discipline the reader’s mind to have correct responses—awareness of dangers and alertness to possibilities—to urban phenomena. The two letters from Misella, *Ramblers* 170 and 171, frequently cited as evidence of Johnson’s sympathy for women,³⁰ tell the moving story of Misella’s descent into prostitution. But the essay does not invoke a female audience; Misella is not writing what Lisa Berglund calls “exemplary autobiography” meant to instruct other women in how to avoid prostitution. Instead, the essay teaches the male reader how an urbanite properly reacts to the realities of the city.

Misella’s misery is overdetermined, the product of so much misfortune that she presents an example of horrendous luck about which she can do nothing. Johnson carefully portrays her as a figure to whom things happen, not as one who made bad choices. Johnson needs Misella to be helpless because he needs the reader to find her wholly sympathetic. As a result, Johnson has Misella make emotional appeals that draw on a shared sociological experience: “No place but a populous city can afford

³⁰ For example, James Basker, in “Dancing Dogs, Women Preachers and the Myth of Johnson’s Misogyny,” argues that in these two essays “Johnson’s empathy and anger on behalf of women are more fully engaged than in any other” (75). For another discussion of this essay, one that focuses on questions of gender, see Chapter 4.

opportunities for open prostitution, and where the eye of justice can attend to individuals, those who cannot be made good may be restrained from mischief” (5:145). Johnson has found an area of particular concern for urbanites: London was not just the center of commerce and government in the eighteenth century imagination, it was also the center of vice, but in the case of prostitution the vice might be ameliorated by the cultivation of sympathy. The pathos of the essay means to inspire in the audience—Londoners who see on their streets women who are in Misella’s situation—feelings of pity. In 1758 London would see the erection of the Magdalen Hospital, a charity based on the idea that prostitutes were victims rather than perpetrators of evil (Henderson 184-6). Though the essays of Misella are much more memorable and more frequently studied by Johnson scholars than other paper’s on women’s issues, Johnson mentions a hospital for prostitutes earlier in the series, in a letter reported to be written by Joseph Simpson in *Rambler* 107.

In this letter Simpson asks what happens to the mothers of foundlings and concludes that the mothers, whom he describes as largely the victims of libertines, need to have a refuge as well. According to a 1787 letter from Mary Adey to Hester Piozzi concerning this letter, “Doctor Johnson said he believed the Magdalen Hospital took its rise from it” (*Rambler* 4:207fn3). Even if Johnson uttered that phrase or something similar, it is obviously an overstatement. But Johnson took the dream vision that this letter represents seriously. This letter, like Misella’s, gently emphasizes an urban setting; this is a London problem. In Simpson’s words, prostitutes are “ladies of the town” whom the “gay and thoughtless” might have seen “in their evening frolicks” (4:208-9).

Johnson's move to create sympathy for prostitutes as victims is an attempt to create a sympathy that is largely applicable to Londoners; not everyone needs to have this particular kind of sympathy. Urban life demands particular ways of feeling as well as particular ways of acting—and in this case feeling proper sympathy for prostitutes will lead to charitable actions.

The more important lessons of urban life, though, are warnings against the affectation of upper class manners. Johnson's urban writing invites the reader to construct a self that reacts against the shallowness that dominates urban manners. Self-help embraces an identity that does not depend on the model of the gentry. The city often appears as the origin of what Johnson views as a particularly dangerous snobbery and the affectation of London manners. In a letter from Ruricola in *Rambler* 61, we are introduced to Mr. Frolick, a young man who was taken from the parish school and sent to London for an education. When he returns seven years later, the rural inhabitants learn "the effects of a London education": "His dress, his language, his ideas, were all new, and he did not much endeavour to conceal his contempt of everything that differed from the opinions, or practice, of the modish world" (3:326). Frolick has become an arrogant fop who lies about his life in London, telling of grand adventures, his excellence in art and music criticism, his close acquaintance with the most famous people, and, generally, how "the time is not yet come when the nation shall know how much it is indebted to the genius of Frolick" (3:328). Ruricola's suspicion of Frolick is wonderfully understated as he asks Mr. Rambler if he might be misjudging Frolick for "I cannot hitherto persuade myself to see that Mr. Frolick has more wit, or knowledge, or courage, than the rest of

mankind, or that any uncommon enlargement of his faculties has happened in the time of his absence” (3:328). Johnson clearly targets a London audience, particularly those whose forays into the fashionable world have led them to believe in their superiority over rural people, and calls for modesty and for respecting those who are not part of the fashionable life of London.

In *Rambler* 147 Johnson offers us letters from readers who have seen fashionable London and determined to reject this world. We cannot just say that Johnson dismisses the aristocracy here, for the problem with London is not necessarily money but the adoption of a code of behavior defined only by social relations. In other words, London appears as a world where the fashionable measure their behavior by the reactions of others instead of by an inner self that sees no necessity in conforming to the world of others. That code of self-reliance defines for Johnson an essential moral principle, passed down through the ages: “That every man should regulate his actions by his own conscience, without any regard to the opinions of the rest of the world, is one of the first precepts of moral prudence” (3:125). The advice may be traditional, but Johnson has given it a new spin as a response to a particularly urban threat: the dominance of manners that work against one’s “true” self.

A similar warning against a superficiality that derives from London occurs in *Rambler* 147, and it places Johnson’s view of conduct against both traditional courtesy and modern etiquette. The anonymous letter writer whom Johnson employs for this essay is a well-educated son of a gentleman. When the writer’s uncle comes down from London, the young man is captivated by the successful uncle’s social abilities. After

watching the uncle put a room full of people at ease the young man remarks: “I soon discovered that he possessed some science of graciousness and attraction which books had not taught, and of which neither I nor my father had any knowledge; [. . .] and that by some occult method of captivation, he animated the timorous, softened the supercilious, and opened the reserved” (5:19-20). The young man describes a quality that sounds tantalizingly like Chesterfield’s essential component of etiquette: *je ne sais quoi*, the “thousand nameless things, which nobody can describe, but which everybody feels, conspire to form that *whole* of pleasing” (62, emphasis in original).

Johnson might suggest that the *je ne sais quoi* is the result of there being no there there. The uncle—whom the writer frequently refers to as “the courtier”—takes the young man to London, but the trip quickly exposes the uncle’s shortcomings; the young man discovers “that poverty of ideas which had been hitherto concealed under the tinsel of politeness” (5:20). After this dismissal of politeness, Johnson also undermines the importance of the concept by having the letter writer’s family treat him impolitely. His relatives treat his indignation as “bashfulness” and a lack of “assurance” and hound him in any social situation to which he does not conform to their idea of propriety (5:21). Their version of politeness prevents the young man’s entry into their social group. The final paragraph of the essay is his—and, it seems, Johnson’s—advice to the young, many of whom will have been “harassed in the same manner” about the importance of assurance (5:22). He warns readers “that cowardice and delicacy are not to be confounded, and that he whose stupidity has armed him against the shafts of ridicule will always act and speak with greater audacity than they whose sensibility represses their

ardor, and who dare never let their confidence outgrow their abilities” (4:22). The modern courtier, therefore, becomes associated with a blind confidence, and for Johnson urban manners too often authorize this confidence.

Johnson rejects “courtesy” and “courtliness” in their modern urban guises as inappropriate for the pursuit of virtue. The courtesy of the city comes closer to what we call etiquette: a system of social behaviors designed to put others at ease. Johnson dismisses that kind of system as superficial, and to counteract this superficiality his sympathetic character turns inward and attempts to balance his internal confidence with his outward display of confidence. In fact, what Johnson offers in his diagnosis of urban courtesy is an example against which his readers can define themselves. Just as the nephew of “the courtier” rejects the superficial values of London high society, so do readers have the opportunity to imagine themselves as separate from—and, crucially, more virtuous than—the urban elite. Industry is the key virtue that Johnson seeks to cultivate in his readers; industry will allow these readers to imagine themselves as part of a community (or a class) of hardworking, self-reliant individuals who labor in this world for happiness and, ultimately, for divine rewards. With Johnson, we do not see the promise of riches that so many associate with self-help. Instead, self-help offers the pleasures of avoiding superficiality and of belonging to what we might call the middle class.

Another essay that offers middle-class readers a strategy for defining themselves against the idle upper classes is *Rambler* 135. In this essay Johnson attacks those who leave London during the summer. Specifically, Johnson attacks the members of high

society who, rather than going to the country to experience nature, go to the country to live their London life over in a different setting: “They pay and receive visits in the usual form, they frequent the walks in the morning, they deal cards at night, they attend to the same tattle, and dance with the same partners” (4:353). One of the interesting aspects of this essay, and the reason I quoted the previous sentence, is the importance of the third-person pronoun. The readers of this essay—written on July 2, 1751, after “almost every one, considerable enough to attract regard, has retired” to the country—seem to be members of the urban middle class, those who will be, like Johnson, spending the summer in the city (4:351). In other words, the audience for this essay must learn from the negative example of the upper classes, who go from place to place but neglect to try to better themselves. Johnson explicitly warns his readers that “almost all absurdity of conduct arises from the imitation of those whom we cannot resemble” (4:351). In this essay, therefore, we have evidence for Nicholas Hudson’s argument about Johnson’s desire to present himself as a member of the middle class, a spokesman for the tradesmen and others who were adopting a coherent group identity that was opposed to the notion of a leisured class (“Discourse of Transition” 37-8). Johnson gives readers a strategy for constructing an identity opposed to the superficiality of upper class Londoners. While they fritter away their time in the country, the sturdy middle-class practitioners of self-help remain in the city, practicing their virtues.

One final set of essays develops the theme of the dangers of imitating the urban upper classes. In a mini-series of three essays (*Ramblers* 132, 194, and 195), Johnson recounts the story of a provincial who comes to London as a warning about the dangers

of urban life. Johnson has the scholar Eumathes write three letters to Mr. Rambler, letters spread out over several months—June of 1751 to January of 1752; this slow development of a narrative suggests that Johnson believes he has an attentive audience, one willing to invest careful attention in the *Rambler* series. Eumathes, the letter writer, squanders his small inheritance on unfocused learning, sometimes spending half a day deciding what studies to pursue. When a creditor pressures him, Eumathes takes a job as a tutor to the son of a wealthy family, and the narrative assumes a new course as the focus shifts to the boy and his family. In particular, the boy, whose mother does not want him to become too good a scholar and thus lose his social abilities, moves to London for the season and becomes a student of stylish urban life: “He has at once caught the infection of high life, and has no other taste of principles or actions than the quality of those to whom they are ascribed” (4:340). Eumathes does not oppose the diversions of urban life absolutely; he opposes his student’s neglect of learning in favor of fashion, both literal and metaphorical. Study, argues Eumathes, would make the young man better in society, offering stores of knowledge to make him wittier and the judgment to understand the dangers of flattery. Perhaps more importantly, the boy would learn “the honest ardour of studious ambition” (4:338).

It is not to be: the student becomes lost in the charms of London life, sneaking away to a card game where he is robbed and beaten. Unrepentant, the boy is sent back to the country for two years and the family releases Eumathes. Johnson argues for two dangers in London life, then. First, there is the danger of passing one’s time overly concerned with fashionable life, and in the beating that the boy receives after a card game

we have a dramatic representation of these dangers. Second, Johnson suggests that the boy simply has too many options; focused ambition would benefit him greatly.

Eumathes, though his stint at tutoring has unfortunately ended, had actually been able to pull himself out of a similar distraction. His earlier suffering resulted from “desultory application and unlimited enquiry” (4:336). The project of tutoring the boy had given him purpose and direction: he has practiced effective self-help, which Johnson reinforces by asking us to see the pupil’s failure do so; even with Eumathes’s help he cannot overcome the influence of the parents and of London to learn the same patterns of behavior.

Significantly, Eumathes’s pupil was sneaking away to a card game when he was beaten. That small moment warning of the dangers of gambling reflects a recurrent topic for Johnson. Gambling, a frequent candidate for attack in conduct literature, receives similar treatment from Johnson.

Gambling

In *Rambler* 15 Johnson sets up a theme that he will return to repeatedly in this series: the dangers of gambling. Gambling serves as much as a metaphor as a practice, and Johnson extends the meaning of the word to activities that do not involve gaming, dice, or cards. Gambling becomes the twin of idleness, another vice that opposes industry. Hoping to get something for nothing is a corrupting desire in Johnson’s thinking, and Johnson extrapolates the psychology of gambling into situations that are not obviously analogous to gambling. He also follows the example of Addison and

Steele and devotes an essay to attacking the lottery, focusing his attack on how the lottery undermines the principles of self-help that a successful London trader embodied before being corrupted by gambling.

One example of gambling that Johnson returns to several times sounds strange to modern ears: he issues repeated warnings against the “gamble” of waiting on an inheritance. In part, Johnson’s admonitions against gambling rely on the idea of the vanity of human wishes: gamblers are wishing for immediate rewards, and those wishes are vain. Gambling also represents a loss of time: all of Johnson’s gamblers pass their lives waiting for a happiness that will not arrive. The core problem, therefore, lies in the distraction that gambling represents from legitimate endeavor. Gambling isn’t working.

In the epigraph for No. 15 Johnson quotes a Dryden translation of Juvenal: “What age so large a crop of vices bore, / Or when was avarice extended more? / When were the dice with more profusion thrown?” (3:80). This essay consists of two letters from women, Cleora and an unnamed correspondent whose letter was written by David Garrick. The letter from Cleora adopts a tactic that Johnson will use several times: the perspective of the naïve young person coming to London. In this instance Cleora comes to London to be with her aunt, who recently lost a child. Cleora’s parents surprise her with their eagerness to dispatch her: “The hope that I should so far insinuate myself into their favour, as to obtain a considerable augmentation of my fortune, procured me every convenience for my departure, with great expedition; and I could not, amidst all my transports, forbear some indignation to see with what readiness the natural guardians of my virtue sold me to a state, which they thought more hazardous than it really was, as

soon as a new accession of fortune glittered in their eyes” (3:83)³¹. This excitement about the possibility of inheriting a fortune is a type of gambling that arises again and again in Johnson’s essays, though nowhere is it quite so disturbing as in when these parents gamble their child in the hopes of winning an inheritance. That gambling, though clearly criticized by Johnson, is not actually the focus of the letter. Instead, Cleora complains about the obsession with cards that marks London social life. When her aunt convenes “a finer assembly than had been seen all the winter,” their partygoers’ only interest lies in the card games (3:83). Cleora, who had expected “some prudential lessons” from her aunt, has instead found her aunt “incapable of any rational conclusion,” which is perhaps a subtle condemnation of gambling in itself, in that many eighteenth-century critics of gambling concentrated on its irrationality (3:83).³² But, interestingly, Johnson chooses another focus for his anti-gambling essays. Ultimately, gambling represents a dangerous abuse of *time* in *The Rambler*.

Rambler 181 is a letter about gambling from an unnamed linen-draper who grows obsessed with winning the lottery. In the beginning of the letter he makes the standard claim for the importance of his narrative because he was subject to a passion he has “reason to believe prevalent in different degrees over a great part of mankind” (5:187). Early in his career the linen-draper is the model of a successful tradesman thanks to his discipline and frugality, but a near-win with a lottery ticket feeds his imagination, and he quickly loses control of himself; he can think only of winning the lottery. And halfway

³¹ The use of the word *hazardous* reinforces the gambling. See the Introduction to Thomas Kavanagh’s *Enlightenment and the Shadows of Chance* for an interesting discussion of the etymology of *hazard*.

³² For an excellent brief historical survey of different forms of opposition to gambling, see Gerda Reith’s *The Age of Chance: Gambling in Western Culture*, particularly pages 81-7.

through his narrative, he does win, but he has dreamed of such wonderful prizes that he finds his fifty-pound prize “despicable” (5:189). So even after winning once, the linen-draper remains committed to winning a bigger prize, and when trying to figure out the winning numbers for a 5,000 pound prize, he was “unable to satisfy [him]self by any modes of reasoning” and “allotted five hours every day” to throwing dice to see how often the numbers he had selected would come up; he reports throwing the dice 336,000 times (5:189). Here, then, we have the two major problems with gambling: the loss of reason and the waste of time. Johnson has the character comment briefly that he “lost thirty pounds by this great adventure,” but the waste of money is hardly the central point, as the conclusion of the essay makes clear.

In the last paragraph a clergyman, Eumathes,³³ warns the linen-draper against the dangers of gambling, focusing particularly on how he has “long wasted [. . .] time” and how he is also “fretting away [his] life,” and then enjoining him to “return to rational and manly industry, and consider the meer gift of luck as below the care of a wise man” (5:191). Michael Chappell, in an article that focuses exclusively on this essay, suggests that the choice to end this essay with the words of the sermon leaves the essay “not resolved but open ended” because we cannot be sure that the linen-draper follows the clergyman’s advice (488). Chappell argues, “A more definitive closing would have the linen-draper admit his problem and confirm that he had conquered his addiction” (488). Chappell’s language has a distinctly modern cast: the use of the word *addiction* implies that he thinks Johnson has medicalized the problem, but I think the use of the

³³ This Eumathes apparently bears no relation to the Eumathes who appears as a tutor in *Ramblers* 132, 194, and 195.

clergyman's sermon argues against this reading of the linen-draper as addict. Johnson includes Eumathes because he thinks that this sort of call to virtue, which includes the practical instruction "return to rational and manly industry," is enough to change the linen-draper's conduct (5:191). The linen-draper's testimony, the letters to Mr. Rambler, represent Johnson's evidence that the obsession is over; the character can now use his experience to warn others of the danger of becoming consumed by gambling. The linen-draper does not need treatment; he needs the precepts from Eumathes that would allow him to regulate his mind and help himself out of his problem. Even more than those precepts, though, the linen-draper needs to work—he needs *industry*. Twenty years after *The Rambler*, in 1772, Johnson drew the distinction between trade and gambling, remarking, "Gaming is a mode of transferring property without producing any intermediate good. Trade gives employment to numbers, and so produces intermediate good" (*Life* 2:176). That distinction helped shape eighteenth-century understanding of the difference between the stock market and the lottery, a distinction that was for some murky and others nonexistent.³⁴

Addison and Steele had earlier commented on the dangers of the lottery in both *The Spectator* and *The Tatler*. Steele's two essays in *The Tatler* most directly engage the dangers of this particular form of gambling, but Steele's approach does not emphasize the virtues of self-help that Johnson's approach does. For Steele, the greater dangers lie in the possibilities of social mobility, particularly the rise of the poor into the ranks of the

³⁴ Early in the eighteenth century the lottery bore a close resemblance to playing the stock market because "investors" could realize returns even without winning the largest prizes, for the money paid for lottery tickets was considered a loan to the government. The government did not keep the revenue from lottery sales, as happens in modern lotteries, until 1769, sixty years after the lottery had been established. See Justine Crump's "The Perils of Gambling," pp. 11-15.

rich. Johnson, of course, worried that tradesman who had practiced middle-class, self-help virtues of thrift and industry might fall in their social standing. Steele goes so far as to worry that lottery winners may not be able to bear their new status gracefully. Steele writes in *Tatler* 203, “He must be very well stock’d with Merit, who is not willing to draw some Superiority over his Friends from his Fortune: For it is not every Man that can entertain with the Air of a Guest, and do good Offices with the Mien of one that receives them” (183). Part of Steele’s anxiety about the lottery derives from the worry that lottery winnings might disrupt the social order by including outsiders in the wealthy, ruling classes. In *Tatler* 124, Steele mockingly encourages “all Masters and Mistresses to carry it [themselves] with great Moderation and Condescension towards their Servants still next *Michaelmas*, lest the Superiority at that Time should be inverted” (179). This is a joke most of all on the lower classes that dream of winning, but behind that mockery seems to be some real apprehension that those who grow rich from gambling might really think themselves equals to their former masters.

Compare Steele’s arguments to *Rambler* 182, which works as a companion piece to the tale of the lottery-obsessed linen-draper. In 182 Johnson reiterates the dangers of trying to acquire wealth without working: “The folly of untimely exultation and visionary prosperity, is by no means limited to the purchasers of tickets; there are multitudes whose life is nothing but a continual lottery” (5:192). This essay details the story of Leviculus, who “determined to commence fortune-hunter” and sets out to marry a rich woman (5:193). He fails to entice any prospective brides, and the end of the essay reveals that he has “spent his time, till he is now grown grey with age, fatigue, and

disappointment” (5:196). This essay also calls to mind an earlier essay, *Rambler* 73, where the gambler is the fortune hunter waiting for someone to die. In this letter Cupidus (along with the rest of his family) waits for a rich aunt to die, and after his fifty-year wait, he grows bored with his riches and returns to dreaming of a better future because he is “accustomed to give the future full power over [his] mind” (5:22). Once again, gambling becomes a surrendering of mental control. The eighteenth century sees these two linked in many contexts, and Johnson focuses on condemning gambling as a species of idleness, a vice that obsessed Johnson for all of his career.

Idleness and Industry

The loss of time is one of Johnson’s primary themes not only in *The Rambler* but in much of his work and his diary; idleness was surely Johnson’s most feared vice in himself, as Sarah Jordan has shown.³⁵ Johnson cares deeply how his readers spend their time. Throughout *The Rambler* Johnson argues for the power of labor as a way of fulfilling our duty to God and as a way of achieving happiness in life. Work and endeavor allow us to access to genuine improvement in our lives. One point cannot be stressed too much: the vanity of human wishes, an idea that does recur in *The Rambler*, does not equate to the vanity of human endeavor. Work and effort are central to *The Rambler* and to the discourse of self-help.

³⁵ See Chapter 5, ““Driving On the System of Life”: Samuel Johnson and Idleness” in Jordan’s *The Anxieties of Idleness: Idleness in Eighteenth-Century British Literature and Culture*. Jordan argues in this book that industry, as the opposite of idleness, became the “societal cement” that held British identity together in the eighteenth century. It is unclear in Jordan’s book how Johnson’s particular obsession fed this identity; the idea that Johnson contributes to a discourse of self-help complements her argument.

Paul Fussell, citing *Rambler* 178, suggests that *The Rambler* recommends a low-grade Stoicism when faced with the difficulties of the world: “It can be said, however, that one important aspect of the *Rambler* is to describe and recommend the psychological technique by which contentment is to be achieved, by which a degree of happiness is to be derived from an acceptance of unalterable circumstance” (145). Fussell’s defense of this claim is brief, and his textual evidence is the following sentence: “The reigning error of mankind is that we are not content with the conditions on which the goods of life are granted.” But the “conditions” that Johnson refers to here are specific: “the future is purchased by the present” and “Many of the blessings universally desired, are very frequently wanted, because most men, when they should labour, content themselves to complain, and rather linger in a state in which they cannot be at rest, than improve their condition through vigour and resolution” (5:174, 173). Johnson calls for disciplining the self without incentives such as the gaze of *The Spectator* or even the rewards of eternity. The motivations for the improvement of one’s condition is the improved condition itself, but there is also the promise of being part of a class of individuals who have practiced similar virtues. We all understand, says Johnson, the “value of knowledge, the advantages of health, [and] the convenience of plenty,” but a lack of self-discipline prevents us from reaching these goals because we are drawn by “the couch of sloth,” “the enjoyment of an hour,” and “the whirl of pleasure” (5:175-6). In short, concludes Johnson, “Great numbers who quarrel with their condition have wanted not the power but the will to obtain a better state” (5:176). Whatever success one wants, one can have, and “no man has a right [. . .] to consider himself as debarred from happiness by such

obstacles as resolution may break, or dexterity may put aside” (5:176). Johnson constructs his arguments carefully, and he concedes that difficulties and unhappiness can strike anyone,³⁶ but he creates an ethic in which hard work will lead to success. Privileging labor and focusing the rewards on individual happiness rather than acceptance by society marks the great difference between self-help and earlier forms of advice.

The difference between *Ramblers* 85 and 127 reveals some of the differences between traditional ways of approaching idleness and the discourse of self-help. Traditionally, industry is the antidote to idleness. *Rambler* 85 celebrates industry in line with this tradition, valuing any kind of labor as healthier for both body and mind than idleness. Labor does not even require external rewards: “such is the constitution of man, that labour may be stiled its own reward; nor will any external incitements be requisite, if it be considered how much happiness is gained, and how much misery escaped by frequent and violent agitation of the body” (4:83). Johnson has a special eye out for writers in this essay, as they are the workers most likely to let their health decline through physical sloth, but Johnson maintains that everyone can benefit from manual exertion of some sort, including women, who “should be taught some arts of manufacture, by which the vacuities of recluse and domestick leisure may be filled up” (4:85).

In *Rambler* 127, however, Johnson writes about labour for a different reason, arguing that the effects of labor are more far-reaching. Labor keeps us from vice and

³⁶ “[I]ndeed it must be confessed that we are subject to calamities by which the good and the bad, the diligent and the slothful, the vigilant and heedless, are equally afflicted” (5:176).

makes us happier in *Rambler* 85; in *Rambler* 127, labor becomes a way of defining the self. First, we should note that Johnson elides labor with endeavor. Johnson writes about labor as an abstract concept in this essay (in *Rambler* 85 labor refers almost exclusively to manual practices), which allows him to shift his focus from a practice that passes time to labor as the pursuit of a goal. The problem with goals, Johnson asserts, is that we lose sight of them. Sometimes major disasters occur; sometimes we realize that we had overvalued our goal in the first place; sometimes the work takes too long and we slowly grow distracted. In this essay labor becomes sanctified as a kind of worship. The great problem with the person who grows discouraged lies in his failure to understand why he pursues goals: “But the consideration that life is only deposited in his hands to be employed in obedience to a Master who will regard his endeavours, not his success, would have preserved him from trivial elations and discouragements, and enabled him to proceed with constancy and cheerfulness, neither enervated by commendation, nor intimidated by censure” (4:315). This philosophy of salvation by effort alone converts obstacles into spiritual opportunities (and if we remove the word “spiritual” from that phrase we have something that sounds remarkably like the motto of a modern motivational speaker: effort can convert obstacles into opportunities). This cultivation of difficulty as something soul-affirming and self-affirming becomes the essence of Smilesian self-help. In Johnson’s work the best examples of relishing difficulty for difficulty’s sake occur when writes about the labor of writing, but he makes difficulty central to all our lives.

Earlier in the series, in a dream-vision allegory about the importance of hope in *Rambler* 67, Johnson describes the “craggy, slippery, and winding path, called the Streight [*sic*] of Difficulty ” from Reason to Hope (3:357). Only those who understand the importance of taking the Streight of Difficulty, rather than simply gazing on hope from afar, can retire to “the bowers of Content” (3:357). Most of the time in *The Rambler*, laboring is not enough. Simply being busy is not enough. Real achievement comes only through facing up to difficulty.

One way to keep busy and face up to our difficulties is frequent reflection on one’s goals and practices, as outlined in *Rambler* 155. In this essay Johnson begins by considering how easily we can overlook our own faults. The problem, he asserts, lies not in an inability to know ourselves, but in an unwillingness to admit the truth about ourselves. Thus we accept flattery, which “consoles our wants,” but detest advice “because it shows us that we are known to others as well as to ourselves” (5:61). Johnson frequently expresses doubt about the efficacy of offering advice, an act that he nevertheless engages in repeatedly in *The Rambler*. The advice that he offers in this essay mostly advises the reader to fight indolence, which is probably the most dangerous vice since it is the one that can always be indulged (“To do nothing is in every man’s power; we can never want an opportunity of omitting duties” [5:64]). The means for fighting indolence is frequent reflection on the state of one’s activities and goals; Johnson suggests, “He that thus breaks his life into parts, will find in himself a desire to distinguish every stage of his existence by some improvement, and delight himself with the approach of the day of recollection, as of the time which is to begin a new series of

virtue and felicity” (5:65). While indolence is a traditional idea to be attacked, Johnson here offers a strategy that is to become an essential aspect of self-help literature: the division of our lives into tasks, and the tight control of time in the relentless pursuit of personal improvement. Contrast this treatment of indolence with that by Steele in *Spectator* 100. In that essay, Steele argues that indolence can be combated with “a Disposition in our selves to receive a certain Delight in all we hear and see” (1:421). Indolence for Steele is not an opposite of labor and achievement so much as it is a social failing; for Johnson, the only antidote of indolence is labor, and we can always accomplish more labor by carefully apportioning our time.

Near the end of the series, Johnson takes the example of the tradesman and identifies the primary virtue of that profession, punctuality, as one that “the interest of mankind requires to be diffused thro’ all the ranks of life” even though “many seem to consider [it] as a vulgar and ignoble virtue, below the ambition of greatness or attention of wit” (5:283). In this moment Johnson self-consciously rewrites a contemporary understanding of what constitutes virtue, elevating a quality associated especially strongly with trade to the status of a universally desirable trait. “Punctuality” entails more than just time in Johnson’s understanding, expanding to “an exact and rigorous observance of commercial engagements” (5:283). And the motto attached to this essay, a translation from Juvenal by George Stepney, underscores the importance of punctuality: “Convince the world that you’re devout and true, / Be just in all you say, and all you do; / Whatever be your birth, you’re sure to be / A peer of the first magnitude to me” (5:282). Assigning the title of “peer” to someone of “whatever [. . .] birth” anticipates the

rhetoical function of Samuel Smiles's final chapter in *Self-Help*, where he attempts to define the "true gentleman" as one who practices the virtues outlined in his book, not those born into the nobility. But most importantly, this essay places punctuality and industry—timeliness and productivity—at the center of our identity. And these virtues place indolence and idleness as the primary faults to be avoided.

The famous *Rambler* 134,³⁷ usually referred to as the essay on procrastination, continues Johnson's attack on indolence. As he acknowledges, most of the ideas that he covers rehearse conventional arguments against idleness, told through the example of his own experience of writing the essay: he waited, he reports, to the last minute to compose it. In that choice of topic, we again see Johnson's tendency to see the writer's experience as a metaphor for all life, imagining life as a series of discrete endeavors (writing projects) that, met with labor, can be overcome. In this essay Johnson argues that labor regularly meets with rewards, a form of positive encouragement that assumes success without evidence that success is necessary. Johnson explains that we sometimes "neglect our duties, merely to avoid the labour of performing them," which makes little sense because our labour "is always punctually rewarded" (4:348). The reward that Johnson assumes for labor is tranquility, a break between endeavors. But generally he treats rest only as the preparation for new opportunities to labor again—for new endeavors, projects, and pursuits. Sometimes, as in *Rambler* 134, Johnson foregrounds

³⁷ *Rambler* 134 remains one of the best known essays in the series, largely because of the story, reported by Hester Piozzi, that Johnson wrote the essay in Joshua Reynolds's parlor with the printer's courier waiting at the door. Bate and Strauss point out in a footnote in the Yale edition that Johnson did not even meet Reynolds till well after *Rambler* 134 appeared; Steven Lynn memorably drives this point home in his book (117). Such is the power of the anecdote, though, that Sarah Jordan repeats it in her chapter on Johnson (157); she does not cite Lynn at all in her book.

the possibility of failure. “It is true, he writes, that no diligence can ascertain success; death may intercept the swiftest career” (3:349). But endeavor becomes, and effort composes, their own rewards, and we can craft a heroic self through the pursuit of goals. Johnson ends the essay with this almost aphoristic point: “[H]e who is cut off in the execution of an honest undertaking, has at least the honour of falling in his rank, and has fought the battle, though he missed the victory” (4:349). The shift in metaphor from laboring writer to valiant fighter only highlights the nobility of facing obstacles. That celebration of challenges as opportunities and Johnson’s repeated claims for the power of working to transform and improve the self constitutes the essence of self-help discourse. The measure of our success comes in our ability to shape ourselves in relation to our labor, independent of how that labor plays out in our social relations.

* * * * *

In this chapter I have treated self-help as a discourse and ethic that Johnson views as universally applicable. I have argued that Johnson imagines life for all of his readers based on a model of the writer’s life. But sometimes that “model” life gives way to straightforward advice to writers on how to live the writer’s life. The discourse of self-help in *The Rambler* applies to no audience so well as it does an audience of fellow writers, and in the next chapter I argue that Johnson’s *Rambler* creates a self-help guide for becoming a professional writer.

Chapter 3, Establishing the Profession: Self-Help for “Men of Study and Imagination”

The Rambler’s Audiences

Johnson studies have rarely emphasized issues of audience—the biography of the author has always received more attention. Considerations of *The Rambler’s* audience have limited themselves to addressing the idea that Johnson writes to a broad middle class or to educated readers or, because it is the phrase of Johnson himself—“common readers.” A representative text in this regard is Iona Italia’s 2003 article “Johnson as Moralizer in *The Rambler*.” Italia argues that Johnson works to unite readers whom he fears will split apart according to professional identity; indeed, she claims that Mr. Rambler is “a representative of humanity in whose essays [Johnson] could voice the common concerns of all mankind” (74). Italia contrasts *The Rambler* with the magazines of the day, particularly *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, which celebrated the wide variety of topics in its pages as a way of offering something for *every* male reader, regardless of his interest. As a result, Italia argues, in *The Gentleman’s Magazine* interest depends largely on the reader’s occupation, encouraging a division that she thinks Johnson works consciously to avoid. Italia offers three quotations to build the case for Johnson’s emphasis on the importance of a universal community of people (55); she homes in on the phrases “great republick of mankind” and “universal league of social beings” (4:62). Two of the quotations, drawn from a single paragraph in *Rambler* 81,³⁸ are from a

³⁸ Italia’s citation style quietly obscures the fact that two quotations are from one essay: the first two quotations are identified by essay number, volume number, and page number, while the last quotation is identified only by volume and page number. I am not suggesting an intention to mislead, but the

discussion of a magistrate's responsibility to the law and to others, which examines natural law that assumes a social contract. Johnson does invite readers to define themselves broadly, but this definition is not in opposition to one's professional identification. In fact, as Italia's third quotation suggests—when read in context—Johnson takes a serious interest in what particular professions owe to a larger community. When Italia quotes the words “great republick of humanity” in *Rambler* 136, she is quoting Johnson's discussion of the responsibility authors have to the community around them and to posterity; in other words, he singles out a profession and, indeed, partially defines the profession by explaining how this “faction” (to employ the word that, for Italia, represents the divisions that Johnson wants to avoid) can serve the whole.

Johnson's use of the phrase “republick of humanity” does not imply that Johnson believes that membership in this republic is necessarily one's primary identification. To be sure, Johnson does go to great pains to establish universal human nature in many of the essays, particularly when he writes about readers' relationships with God. And often when he writes about particular individuals, he does so to illustrate and emphasize a shared experience of humanity. But to believe in a “universal league of social beings” or universal human nature or any other essentializing description does not mean that all readers need the same content in what they read, nor does it mean that Johnson does not emphasize particular audiences. Even though Johnson employs strategies meant to include readers of varying backgrounds, repeatedly in *The Rambler* he ends up

establishment of a pattern that dominates an essay series of 208 pieces might be better served by the identification of at least three essays that establish the pattern.

concentrating on the writer, offering the writer's life as a single, if vital, example and arguing for the writer's unique circumstances or particular interests. As such, James Boswell might be an excellent representative of *The Rambler's* central audience—a young man who comes to London hoping to establish himself as a writer and intellectual.

Young writers constitute one of the specific audiences Johnson invokes in *The Rambler*. The other audience, women, has been more extensively studied in the last few decades. The work of Lisa Berglund and Kathleen Nulton Kemmerer has led to excellent studies of *The Rambler's* depiction of women and the assumptions Johnson makes about women readers—a subject I address in the next chapter. But a brief look at *Rambler* 10, the first essay in which Johnson opts not to write a direct moral essay or piece of criticism, gives us an early indication, perhaps, of the people he believes to be reading this series. Johnson's translation of a line from Virgil notes that he is taking a different approach in this essay: "For trifling sports I quitted grave affairs" (3:50). After nine essays that set *The Rambler's* morally and intellectually serious tone, he offers responses to four imagined readers with frivolous demands and questions as to why he does not show the lightness of *The Spectator*. The letters in this essay deflate the pretensions of Johnson's first nine numbers and suggest that *The Rambler's* readers expected something quite different from their periodical essays.

Hester Mulso writes these short letters, three from women who would like Johnson to write more about their social world and one from a young man who would like to help Johnson write *The Rambler*. Though this essay treats these imagined readers with humor, it also signals that women and young scholars—two audiences that do not

overlap in *The Rambler*—are two of the primary audiences that Johnson has in mind in this series. In other words, Johnson's *Rambler* is not just a generalized call to virtue; it is a text written with specific audiences in mind that offers specific advice about different paths to virtue for different audiences.

A few scholars have acknowledged the primacy of the writer's life in *The Rambler*. Brian Hanley, Betty Rizzo, and Thomas Wharton have all pointed out that in *The Rambler* Johnson relies on the example of the author with amazing frequency.³⁹ All three interpret this move as part of Johnson's advocacy for authors and suggest that Johnson introduces the figure of the author so much to train readers to have a greater respect for the moral and social value of writers.

Lawrence Lipking's superb 1999 biography of Johnson's career as a writer develops the theme more fully. Lipking argues that in all of Johnson's writings he is preoccupied by conceptions of the author, and that, in *The Rambler*, Johnson relies on the figure of the author to illustrate principle after principle, lesson after lesson. Lipking writes, "If the subject of *The Rambler* as a whole is life, its main example is the life of an author. Thus Johnson makes his private world a gift to the public" (153). Lipking goes on to argue that this gift is appropriate because no life is more representative than the author's. Authors elevate fantasizing to a profession; they are particularly subject to loneliness and disappointment, and they are constantly embattled (153-60). Thus for

³⁹ Hanley's chapter "Book Reviewing in the Moral Essays: Johnson's Commentary on Recently Published Books in the *Rambler*, *Adventurer*, and *Idler*" argues that Johnson takes his contemporary writers seriously as a way of encouraging authors to think more highly of themselves. Rizzo's brief article (really a conference paper) argues that Johnson writes to encourage others to think of authors as significant. Wharton argues that Johnson encourages writers to think more highly of themselves and to encourage non-writers to respect the literary profession more.

Lipking, Johnson chooses to write about writers so much because the subject matter allows him to emphasize aspects of life that all know well; he turns to one kind of example because it is a universal example.

However, if Johnson does think of writers as the best examples for others, he does not drive such a point home in his essays. Though writers pop up with great frequency as examples, Johnson does not always tie the example to a didactic lesson for all readers. In some essays, such as *Rambler 25* (discussed at length later in this chapter), Johnson writes large sections specifically to authors. In this essay he encourages writer/scholars to cultivate the virtue of persistence. As readers, we can easily map persistence in scholarly endeavors onto other situations and therefore interpret Johnson's motivational writing for writers as advice applicable to any endeavor. Surprisingly, in *Rambler 25* Johnson moves from the general consideration of persistence to the specific recommendation of applying that virtue to writing and then declines to reverse the process. Persistence is essential in writing, he argues, but he ends the essay with that point rather than using writing as a metaphor for the lives of others. In fact, in this essay Johnson emphasizes the particularity of cowardice in authors, thus emphasizing even more strongly that he aims his advice at writers. He applies the general principle to the situation of authors but does nothing in the end to reinforce the general principle as generally applicable. The figure of the author is a nod to an insider audience more than an illustration for those beyond the profession.

The audience of non-writing readers is important, and for some of them the author's life might well serve as an exemplum. But more interesting to me is the notion

that Johnson creates and writes to a community of authors in *The Rambler*. His arguments for the greater respect he feels authors are due largely focus on having authors think of *themselves* as professionals. He steers the essays towards the creation of a manual of professionalization for would-be independent authors. By constructing a discourse of self-help that advises authors on their professional and personal lives, Johnson works to create a community of scholars and authors.⁴⁰ Ultimately, Johnson is arguing for a conception of the author as an important, productive member of the urban middle class: he is arguing for writing as a profession. He wants to separate these writers from the leisured gentlemen who have dominated (polite) learning in favor of a class of writers that looks more like the merchant class—the sort of people becoming increasingly important in London, the sort of people who might be bothered by the upper class’s idleness (hence Johnson’s contempt for those who move to the country in the summer to idle away their time just as they do in the city in season). His conception of authorial identity depends especially on how they think about themselves.

Johnson pardons himself for narrowing his audience in *Rambler 9*, where he notes that “most men have a very strong and active prejudice in favor of their own vocation, always working upon their minds, and influencing their behavior” (3:47). Usually this prejudice expresses itself relatively harmlessly, as individuals take special delight in insults directed toward rival professions, such as linen- versus woolen-drapers. As such, the essay concludes that the competitiveness between professions is not a

⁴⁰ I use the terms “scholars” and “writers” and “authors” basically interchangeably in this chapter. By “scholar” I mean to refer to the London writers who are not affiliated with universities; Johnson sometimes uses academics as models in these essays, as I note in the chapter, and in those cases he usually distinguishes those attached to the university as “academicks”; “scholars” usually refers to independent scholars who make their living by what they can publish.

negative: “This passion for the honour of a profession, like that for the grandeur of our own country, is to be regulated not extinguished” (3:50). Thus we have an early *apologia* for a particular emphasis on treating the life of the writer: Johnson himself has a prejudice in favor of the author-scholar, and he will work to build up the dignity of his profession through the course of *The Rambler* papers, offering advice to other writers on how to make the profession more professional.

It may be that, as Lipking argues, Johnson is writing autobiographically when he writes about writers. Lipking contends that Johnson seems to have wanted to think of himself as a Renaissance scholar⁴¹, and his advice on how scholars should conduct themselves we might also read as a way of fashioning himself: conduct literature for the young scholar might also have been conduct literature for the lexicographer approaching middle age. Lipking emphasizes that this choice is unselfish: Johnson’s “defense of authorship [. . .] represents the strongest obligation he feels, his debt not to any would-be patron of learning but to ‘the propagators of knowledge’ and ‘teachers of truth’” (27). Lipking here explains the choice of topic but overlooks the issue of audience. Celebration of authors happens in *The Rambler* because Johnson wants to instruct writers on how to think about themselves.

This preoccupation with instructing writers explains why Johnson focuses so intently on establishing Mr. Rambler’s identity as a writer. In the first few numbers of the series, Johnson writes extensively about the process of launching a series of periodical essays, a move without precedent in Addison and Steele. As Iona Italia has

⁴¹ A similar claim about Johnson’s desire to present himself as a Renaissance humanist appears in Robert DeMaria’s critical biography (1993).

pointed out, Mr. Spectator calls our attention to his status, reporting that he was “[b]orn to a small hereditary estate” (1:56). Mr. Spectator is first and foremost a gentleman. But Johnson, as Mr. Rambler, repeatedly calls attention to himself as a writer; he implies a lineage of Homer, Horace, Thucydides, and Plutarch in the first eight paragraphs. Mr. Rambler may not stay in one place, according to his name, but he does not dabble: he is an author, and unlike Mr. Spectator he does not supply a list of other accomplishments and qualifications. *Author* provides identity enough. As a result, Johnson feels freer to work out some of the difficulties of composition in the text of the essays. The process of writing periodical essays—wondering how to succeed, hoping for a good reception, choosing a topic—becomes part of the subject of the periodical essays themselves. The writing and publication processes become central to *The Rambler* because these processes are central to Mr. Rambler’s and Johnson’s lives and to the lives of many audience members. Johnson frequently uses the opportunity of the essay to explain ways to negotiate the writer’s life and instruction on how to improve the profession.⁴²

In short, Johnson has two primary audiences in *The Rambler*. The first, the audience to which he addresses more papers and the subject of this chapter, is the audience of writers and scholars, for whom he is constructing an ethic of self-help. The

⁴² Lisa Berglund has argued for *The Rambler*’s emphasis on the power and importance of writing. Berglund argues that learning to read *The Rambler* is a way of learning to be a writer; for Berglund, Johnson’s letters from imagined correspondents models the liberating power of writing and teaches readers—particularly women, since so many of the letters to Mr. Rambler are from young women—to earn a kind of intellectual and moral independence through writing. But that formulation is suspiciously close to modern ideas of why we teach students to read and write, a way of finding in Johnson concern for the forms of empowerment that English teachers frequently like to laud as part of their mission. In other words, this is a way of praising Johnson for being like us. See “Writing to Mr. Rambler: Samuel Johnson and Exemplary Autobiography.”

second audience, distinct from the male audience of writers, is women, an audience I discuss in the final chapter.

Invoking an Audience of Writers

In *Rambler 2* Johnson first acknowledges that his experiences as an author might instruct others. Worrying about the writer's tendency to get too excited about the prospect of success, Johnson writes, "I shall, therefore, while I am yet lightly touched with the symptoms of the writer's malady, endeavour to fortify myself against the infection, not without some weak hope, that my preservatives may extend their virtue to others, whose employment exposes them to the same danger" (3:12). Johnson's experiences as a writer can inform the experiences of other writers; by concentrating in only the second essay on the lessons that he can teach other writers, Johnson signals a reason for reading *The Rambler* and invites a particular audience into his instruction.

Rambler 17 presents a similar phenomenon. This essay's first eleven paragraphs explore the importance of *memento mori*, but the last three paragraphs of the essay take a more practical turn, a turn that focuses on advising writers on how to manage their professional goals as surely as it focuses on what subject writers ought to take up in their work. Johnson writes, after noting that the history of how great leaders overstep their abilities cannot be that useful for the average reader, that "the fate of learned ambition is [nonetheless] a proper subject for every scholar to consider; for who has not had occasion to regret the dissipation of great abilities in a boundless multiplicity of pursuits, to lament the sudden desertion of excellent designs, upon the offer of some other subject, made

inviting by its novelty, and to observe the inaccuracy and deficiencies of works left unfinished by too great an extension of the plan?" (3:96). Here we see Johnson using the scholar as example in the way that Lawrence Lipking argues for: simply a model for all lives. However, the next paragraph focuses the advice for scholars, imploring them—through the use of the first-person plural—to set reasonable goals for their achievements. Johnson writes at the end of the essay, "The uncertainty of our duration ought at once to set bounds to our designs, and add incitements to our industry; and when we find ourselves inclined either to immensity in our schemes, or sluggishness in our endeavours, we may either check, or animate, ourselves, by recollecting, with the father of physic, "that art is long, and life is short" (3:97). The quotation of Hippocrates draws the sense of the passage back to those who produce art—that is, though we could read this sentiment as applicable to any common reader, Johnson limits the audience to those who produce writing. The scholar/writer becomes the focus of the advice, that writers remember the importance of persistence when they might otherwise be idle—advice that, as we shall see, is central to Johnson's construction of self-help for writers.

One more essay provides a fine example of Johnson writing an essay ostensibly for a general audience and ending with a specific admonition to writers. My purpose here is to demonstrate the strangeness of Johnson's approach: he shifts unexpectedly to a narrower audience than the essay will admit. In *Rambler* 48 Johnson writes, somewhat tediously, on the importance of good health. Eight long paragraphs, including a lengthy Greek quotation on the importance of health to all other aspects of life, lead to a final paragraph that focuses exclusively on writers. After noting in the penultimate paragraph

that some hurt their health through work and others through the pursuit of pleasure, Johnson narrows his focus: “Those who lose their health in an irregular and impetuous pursuit [*sic*] of literary accomplishments are yet less to be excused; for they ought to know that the body is not forced beyond its strength, but with the loss of more vigour than is proportionate to the effect produced” (3:263). Johnson worries about those “whose endeavour is mental excellence,” as they are particularly prone to overlooking the health of the body (3:263). Even for an essay series that authorizes randomness in its title, *The Rambler* oddly switches from claims about universally applicable truths to narrow discussions of strategies that writers need to negotiate their lives.

Those strategies fall into three general categories. First, Johnson focuses on the great work that goes into writing and scholarship, reinforcing the importance of intellectual labor as more important than physical labor. By reminding writers of the achievement that writing represents, Johnson motivates writers to push themselves to continue their work. And by emphasizing achievement Johnson creates a standard of professional identity, thus suggesting a distinction between professional authors and scribbling dilettantes. Second, Johnson turns away from writing about work itself to writing about the author’s life outside of writing: in particular, Johnson advises authors to be socially engaged. Wide acquaintance with the world will inform the authors’ writing as well as give them needed social outlets from the pressure of work. Alleviating the pressures of work is one of Johnson’s techniques of caring for the self. Third, Johnson emphasizes the importance of a writer’s independence. In an attempt to establish a professional status for writers, Johnson writes against the malignant influence

of the patron, who infantilizes authors by requiring flattery and encouraging dependence. Together, these three approaches to writing represent a strategy for professionalization, a code of behavior for professional writers: a discourse of self-help.

Professional Labor and Professional Identity

Though the argument that identifies *The Rambler* as a prose version of *The Vanity of Human Wishes* is ultimately dissatisfying, several essays in the series certainly touch on that theme. In *Rambler* 16 Misellus, who identifies himself as the young man who asked for advice in *Rambler* 10, recounts his miserable fate as an author “condemned, irreversibly condemned, to all the miseries of high reputation” (3:88). What follows is a wonderfully ludicrous description of the price of fame. Misellus solicits the opinions of his friends by inviting them out to dinner, and they are more than happy to pay him all the compliments that he can soak in—so long as they can soak in good wine and food at Misellus’s expense. Misellus also reports some ridiculous delusions. He claims that he has “good reason to believe that eleven painters are now dogging [him],” as they hope to make their fortune by being the first to paint his portrait (3:91). Furthermore, Misellus must keep his new writings under lock and key, and he changes addresses more frequently than hardened criminals to keep the admiring hordes away. Because writers live so much in their minds, they are especially subject to the dangers of dreaming, and so Johnson approaches the same theme of literary delusion later in the series. *Rambler* 146, however, has a less satirical, more seriously cautionary tone, and Johnson notes that “[t]he hope of fame is necessarily connected with such considerations as must

abate the ardour of confidence, and repress the vigour of pursuit” (5:17). In that line, we see the real danger of Misellus’s fantasy and the fantasies that any writer has of fame: airy dreams of success lead to idleness, taking the writer away from the real work that writing entails. Johnson finds much more to praise and recommend in literary workers than in literary dreamers.

Linda Zionkowski has written that the *Lives of the Poets* “display an unprecedented focus on the theme of literary labor, or the kind of productivity that according to Johnson distinguished the poet from the versifier, the professional from the amateur” (179). Zionkowski presents a compelling case for Johnson’s favoring of poets who were not leisured gentlemen, those who had to exhibit “discipline and sustained labor” to establish themselves in the literary marketplace (181). This emphasis on labor is not quite unprecedented in Johnson’s writing, as *The Rambler* argues for the importance of the writer’s labor as well. In fact, in *The Rambler* Johnson’s class consciousness, which Zionkowski sees as central to the rise of authors’ status in the eighteenth century, is even stronger than it is in the *Lives of the Poets*. Establishing the status of the hack writing in the marketplace is more urgent and more direct in *The Rambler*, as Johnson goes so far as to engage in special pleading for appreciating the work of abridgers, translators, and editors in *Rambler* 145.

Johnson first compares Grub Street writers to manual laborers, arguing that both groups receive little regard though they provide essential services to the community. But Johnson clearly hopes to elevate the reputations of these writers to the level of intellectual workers. The exigence for this essay comes from the large number of authors

“who because their usefulness is less obvious to vulgar apprehension, live unrewarded and die unpitied, and who have been long exposed to insult without a defender, and to censure without an apologist” (5:10). Johnson’s defense of authors focuses on those writers who do not aspire to permanence, who do not “indulge the chimerical ambition of immortality” and who write “[t]hese papers of the day, the *Ephemerae* of learning, [that] have uses more adequate to the purposes of common life than more pompous and durable volumes” (5:11). Johnson’s essays, of course, might be just the kind of ephemerae that he writes of here—an intriguing possibility in light of the drive by readers ever since to make Johnson’s work durable and canonical, if not pompous. This essay argues for treating authors and, importantly, also frequently neglected intellectual workers such as abridgers, translators, and editors, as professionals worthy of respect and as people who contribute to society just as other craftsmen do—and as other writers do. Johnson asks that these intellectual workers be “adopted into that order of men which deserves our kindness though not our reverence” (5:11). Hacks might take confidence from *The Rambler*’s praise of their work. Johnson ascribes an uncommon dignity to formerly undignified work. More established writers might see in this essay an attempt to create a community of working writers that defines itself against aristocratic men of letters rather than assuming a division between literary writers and hacks. Thus Johnson’s last sentence: “the common interest of learning requires that her sons should cease from intestine hostilities, and instead of sacrificing each other to malice and contempt, endeavour to avert prosecution from the meanest of their fraternity” (5:12). Common

interests and the possibility that a writer “however high he may now stand” might be reduced to hack work should encourage writers to band together.⁴³

Working to convince writers of their own abilities and possibilities, Johnson stresses the necessity of perseverance. In *Rambler* 25 Johnson begins with a principle that he asserts applies to all walks of life—in this case, the value of presumption over hesitation. He argues that moralists of all ages have preferred rashness over cowardice even though “they may be conceived equally distant from the middle point, where true fortitude is placed” (3:136). He examines the truth of traditional advice while at the same time offering memorable imagery such as, “We know that a few strokes of the axe will lop a cedar; but what arts of cultivation can elevate a shrub?” (3:137). But after nine paragraphs, without any clear connections or smooth transitions, Johnson writes, “There is often to be found in men devoted to literature, a kind of intellectual cowardice [. . .]” (3:138). The previous paragraph does have an exemplary figure, but he is a generic “man once persuaded, that any impediment is insuperable,” not the man of literature that Johnson turns to here. Johnson now applies the importance of perseverance to a particular instance, the traditional move from general to particular that has been often examined by many Johnson critics. But, strangely, this essay makes no attempt to argue

⁴³ *Rambler* 145 might encourage us to reread the previous essay, 144, as a companion piece to this advice. In *Rambler* 144 Johnson introduces “the persecutors of merit,” the “Roarers, Whisperers, and Moderators” (5:5). Johnson’s taxonomy of insulting gossips uses the same three examples to illustrate the methods each type employs; first, he describes how they would insult a tradesman, then a woman, then, of course, a writer. Though the analysis in No. 144 is not limited to writers, the opening paragraphs, which examine how “a new name makes it way into the world,” recall the first essays in the series where Johnson explores how a writer of periodical essays can establish a new series (5:3). Combined with the examination of the writer’s professional battles detailed in the following essay, No. 144 looks very much like an introduction to the ways that young writers will be attacked by others, while 145 then serves as a corrective to this behavior.

that writers are an example for others. There is no reminder in the second half of the essay that this lesson might be applied to other occasions in life. Instead, Johnson focuses *exclusively* on the importance of perseverance for those who would make their name through learning. “Every man,” he writes, “who proposes to grow eminent by learning, should carry in his mind, at once, the difficulty of excellence, and the force of industry; and remember that fame is not conferred but as the recompense of labour, and that labour, vigorously continued, has not often failed of its reward” (3:138). Not only does Johnson celebrate the labor of writing in this essay, but he also assures the writer that the effort will meet with success in almost all cases. The absence of negative injunction and the promise of success based on hard work help to create the discourse of self-help.

In *Rambler 21* Johnson analyzes how writers think about other careers, asking his audience to compare themselves to professions where they can easily acknowledge greatness. He first notes that those who lead contemplative lives are quick to point out the problems with those who live active lives in politics and business. The problem, “the studious and speculative part of mankind” suggests, is that public lives are subject to too much instability; the “profits and honours” of these careers can only be acquired with “hazard, vigilance and labour” (3:116). But Johnson wants the scholars who have these thoughts to understand that they are subject to the same vagaries of success as anyone else. Writes Johnson, “The garlands gained by the heroes of literature must be gathered from summits equally difficult to climb with those that bear the civic or triumphal wreaths, they must be worn with equal envy, and guarded with equal care from those

hands that are always employed in efforts to tear them away; the only remaining hope is, that their verdure is more lasting, and that they are less likely to fail by time, or less obnoxious to the blasts of accident” (3:117). “The heroes of literature” that Johnson here celebrates seem to need to learn their own worth, a worth created by laboring in the face of difficulty. Johnson is explicit about the ennobling effects of labor: “[. . .] [E]minence of learning is not to be gained without labour, at least equal to that which any other kind of greatness can require” (3:117). Here work is far from simply a means of fighting idleness or vacuity of mind; it is a means of creating a self, one worth honoring. Johnson suggests the need for a labor of vigilance following accomplishment, for there are always those “employed in efforts to tear [their honors] away” (3:117). Johnson does not identify who precisely these perfidious forces trying to strip writers of their honors might be. He may be referring to critics, competing writers, or, more generally, any person who envies success. The forces of destruction might be vague, but the strategy is clear: only valuable honors are worth taking away, so in setting up the honors due a writer as important, Johnson situates writing in the plane of important professions. He has also given writers one more type of difficulty that they must overcome, reminding them yet again of the centrality of labor in their identity.

In *Rambler* 108 Johnson offers a more specific strategy for handling the writing life, a strategy that incorporates both persistence and the importance of labor. Johnson here develops the idea that the productive use of small pieces of otherwise wasted time holds the real key to intellectual accomplishment: “[T]he most successful students make their advances in knowledge by short flights between each of which the mind may lie at

rest” (4:213). The essay picks up a persistent Johnsonian theme, anxiety about the enormous amount of time that we spend in doing nothing in particular, idle time that does not even include the time we spend “in a rotation of petty cares, in a constant recurrence of the same employments” (4:211). Men of learning, it seems, have a special opportunity to make the most of the time that would otherwise be lost to idleness, for learning occurs most effectively in these short bursts. Johnson anticipates that many scholars, when they want to learn something new, will try to set aside time from their current business, or limit their leisure time, which he perceives as a mistake: “The disposition to defer every important design to a time of leisure, and a state of settled uniformity, proceed generally from a false estimate of the human powers” (4:213). The accumulated work of small, persistent efforts, he argues, will even outpace the work that we can do in long stretches of time. Johnson holds up Erasmus as the great exemplar of one who can accomplish much in short stretches of time, citing his authorship of *The Praise of Folly* “on the road to Italy” (4:214). The point here is that Johnson seeks to advise writer/scholars on the best path to success, and he has specific strategies for them to follow: the steady accumulation of small bits of work.

Rambler 137 is a two-part essay; the first half offers advice about the progress of an intellectual career while the second, discussed in the next section of this chapter, argues for the importance of social interaction with non-scholars. The essay points out that “those who have not accustomed themselves to the labour of enquiry” will frequently avoid intellectual work of any kind, in part because they lack the confidence that is built by “conquests over difficulty” (4:360). The sober and scholarly tone of this

essay, together with Johnson's characteristic prose— syntactically challenging and dense with allusion—indicates that Johnson is not writing to those unaccustomed to enquiry. Instead, he writes to those who put their labor into intellectual work, and he goes to great pains to underscore the gravity of this labor that goes into scholarship. Others might be afraid that things they do not understand are “too high to be reached, or too extensive to be comprehended” (4:360). Johnson here slyly praises his readers, reminding them of how accomplished scholars are and how brave they are to tackle the subjects that others avoid. By reinforcing that achievement of intellectual work, he teaches readers to value themselves more highly. He then recommends that scholars remember that intellectual work mimics manual work in that the steady repetition of effort leads to accomplishment (4:361). Thus Johnson teaches readers pursuing scholarly or intellectual careers to avoid being discouraged when facing large projects by breaking them into pieces that are more easily handled. And the most important attribute is, again, persistence, for “[t]o expect that the intricacies of science will be pierced by a careless glance, or the eminences of fame ascended without labour, is to expect a peculiar privilege, a power denied to the rest of mankind” (4:362). The persistent reminder of what kind of work must go into scholarship, and the reminder of the achievement that great learning represents is perhaps Johnson's core strategy for teaching would-be writers and scholars to think of themselves as professionals. He celebrates scholars again in this essay when he uses the phrase “heroes in literature” as a reference to scholars, not characters (4:362). Though the second half of the essay, discussed later in this chapter, offers warnings against working

too hard on scholarship, a great part of this essay works to remind scholars that study is a profession.

No. 154 invokes an audience in the second paragraph, where Johnson directs the essay to the man “who hopes to become eminent in any other part of knowledge” [in addition to politics, mentioned in the first paragraph] (5:55). In essence, the first half of this essay presents an argument for the importance of the study of intellectual tradition, whether historical, literary, political. Johnson complains about those who would ignore the labor of intellectual inquiry: “The mental disease of the present generation, is impatience of study, contempt of the great masters of ancient wisdom, and a disposition to rely wholly upon unassisted genius and natural sagacity” (5:55). Again we see Johnson focusing on the achievement that learning represents as he complains that too many overvalue perceptiveness at the expense of steady application. Indeed, he argues that great native intelligence should be more inclined to strenuous study—they should have more “incitements to labour”—because their superior capabilities make it possible for them to add something new to the store of knowledge; we must make use “of the labours of past ages” so that the world does not “remain always in the infancy of knowledge” (5:57). The repetition of the word “labour” calls our attention to the achievement that learning represents, another Johnsonian call to the virtue of perseverance. The second half of the essay goes on to address those who accept the importance of study—and encourages them to show more diligence in advancing knowledge. Johnson writes, “But though the study of books is necessary, it is not sufficient to constitute literary eminence. He that wishes to be counted among the

benefactors of posterity, must add by his own *toil* to the acquisitions of his ancestors, and secure his memory from neglect by some valuable improvement” (4:58; emphasis added). Again Johnson draws us back to the importance of work and effort in scholarship as a way of elevating the status of intellectual endeavor. While perhaps the great thrust of this essay, whose most quoted line is surely “No man ever yet became great by imitation,” is to celebrate originality, Johnson goes to great pains to ensure that anyone reading this essay understands that original work, which benefits from the work that others have put into building knowledge, requires, above all, *work*.

Note how different Johnson’s treatment of writers is from Pope’s in the *Dunciad*. Pope was not attacking hack writing as simply of lower quality; he also insulted the cash nexus in which Grub Street authors were working. In short, Pope contrasts the working writer—the hack—with the genteel tradition of writers as aristocratic men of leisure. As Maynard Mack has written, Pope, a serious craftsman who labored extensively over his poems, bragged about how little work he put into his writing (“I lisped in numbers, for the numbers came”). Johnson attacks this very practice in *Rambler* 169, where he takes up the topic of composition, or, more particularly, authors’ vanity about the ease with which they compose. Johnson argues that great writing has always been writing that was put aside for some time and revised significantly, and those who boast of “negligence and hurry” “justly incur contempt and indignation” (5:130). While many biographers have written extensively about Johnson’s last minute writing (see particularly, Paul Fussell), in *The Rambler* Johnson writes consistently about the importance of perseverance and hard work for writers. So the image of the writer at work that he

endeavored to create has never been seriously applied to Johnson. Perhaps, as Alvin Kernan argues, Johnson's achievement, made possible by the advent of print culture, lies in his ability to cultivate a style, and a style of working, that allowed him to produce the great quantities of prose that print culture demanded. Johnson's constant reminders about the labor of writing recalls, too, Ben Jonson's rhetorical move of titling his collected writing *Works*. Separating himself from the more leisured, courtly culture that wanted to separate itself from commercial writing, Jonson argued that plays be taken more seriously as a genre. Johnson presents a similar argument on behalf of Grub Street writing, though he does not limit himself quite so much. Any writer who might designate himself a scholar or an author—"men of learning and imagination"—should remember the laboring aspect of work and the importance of busy-ness—or, only a letter change away—business. For Johnson's conception of the laboring writer in the city resembles closely the image of the shopkeeper or merchant, working, always working, to produce. The merchant class displays a work ethic—they stay in the city in the summer, tending to their business—just as writers should. This strategy for establishing the professionalism of writers reflects a relatively common view for the mid-eighteenth century, when periodical writers were interested in "representing fashionable society in both a synecdochic and antithetical relation to commercial society" (Guest "These Neuter" 174). Writers need to work this diligently because hard work will ultimately reward them and establish writers as part of the new class.

Johnson eventually, I think, takes this thinking much further, arguing that writers constitute the greatness of the nation, an echo of Defoe's argument that merchants

constitute the greatness of the nation. For Johnson, labor also provides the basis for a nation's power, only Johnson privileges intellectual labor. As he writes in the Preface to the *Dictionary*, "The chief glory of every people arises from its authors," which is why he has "devoted this book, the labour of years, to the honor of my country." Having mixed his labor with the language of his nation just as Locke's primal man mixed his with the objects of the world⁴⁴, Johnson can claim a kind of ownership, if not of language, then of national greatness. And though he goes on to question—or pretend to question, I think—his contribution, the length of his statement of doubt reminds the reader of how very much Johnson's labor has accomplished: "whether I shall add any thing by my own writings to the reputation of English literature must be left to time: much of my life has been lost under the pressure of disease; much has been trifled away; and much has always been spent in provision for the day that was passing over me; but I shall not think my employment useless or ignoble, if by my assistance foreign nations, and distant ages, gain access to the propagators of knowledge, and understand the teachers of truth; if my labours afford light to the repositories of science, and add celebrity to Bacon, to Hooker, to Milton, and to Boyle." When he reminds us that "foreign nations, and distant ages" may turn to his work, Johnson ensures that we understand the gravity of his accomplishment; providing a list of names that encourages us to append his reinforces the importance of Johnson's contribution to national greatness. This *Dictionary* would, even if deeply flawed, only reveal that Johnson had

⁴⁴ I am using Locke's theory of labor creating value from the *Second Treatise*: "Thus Labour, in the Beginning gave a Right of Property, where-ever any one was pleased to employ it, upon what was common. . . and is yet more than mankind makes use of" (II.45.1-4).

“failed in an attempt which no human powers have hitherto completed,” and Johnson observes that the French and Italian dictionaries, given the labor of many more men than his, were imperfect themselves. The world of language has the characteristics of Locke’s America: limitless goods which can be made valuable by labor. And all forms of language manipulation—including, of course, lexicography—thus have a productive aspect. Johnson thus fuses the Renaissance humanist ideal of learning with a Puritan work ethic.

Besides the emphasis on work and labor, Johnson also sets up criticism as both a skill requiring professional knowledge and as a force that helps to create other writing. Both of these tactics come through clearly in Johnson’s essays on *Paradise Lost*. These critical essays serve to professionalize writing in two primary ways. First, the practice of criticism reifies other writing as a practice to comment upon. Second, Johnson’s criticism carves out a special niche for the critic by using sophisticated vocabulary and techniques that create a professional jargon to separate critics from casual readers.

In five essays from early 1751, Johnson invokes Addison’s precedents explicitly. Johnson even publishes his essays in the Saturday *Ramblers* in what must be a nod to Addison, whose Milton essays also appeared only on Saturdays. But the differences between the essays are stark. Addison’s essays on Milton are about developing taste and learning to appreciate the beauties of Milton. Addison performs good taste in his discussions of Milton, quoting at length from *Paradise Lost* and expecting the reader to trust his superior understanding of what constitutes good poetry. We might think of Johnson’s Milton essays as a performance of superior knowledge. In his first essay on

Milton, he apologizes for the technical terms he will use, then proceeds to dissect Milton's prosody in a series of highly technical essays. Addison teaches us to appreciate Milton; Johnson, to respect Milton. Addison teaches us to appreciate Addison's good taste; Johnson teaches us to respect his own impressive intellect. Johnson treats the serious study of poetry as a practice that demands skills beyond the reach of the casual reader, beyond the scope of the politely learned gentleman. Johnson establishes his own credentials as a professional critic through two strategies: first, he emphasizes the specialized knowledge that good literary criticism requires; and, second, he repeatedly refers to the great labor that his criticism requires.

Even though Johnson gingerly introduces his Milton criticism with a deferential acknowledgment that as a critic he "may fall below" Addison, "the illustrious writer who has so long dictated to the commonwealth of learning," much remains to be written because Addison "passed willingly over those [objects of criticism] which were most barren of ideas, and required labor, rather than genius" (4:88-9). Or consider the epigraph to *Rambler* 90: one line translated from Virgil's *Georgics* by Johnson himself⁴⁵ reminds the reader that Johnson is a serious critic: "What toil in slender things!" (4:109). "Labor" and "toil" stand out in these quotations as the words that characterize the critic's task. In *Rambler* 90 Johnson again calls attention to the possibility that his scholarly task might alienate some readers because "to throw a multitude of particulars under general heads, and lay down rules of extensive comprehension, is to common understandings of little use" and those who practice such criticism might "fright" the reader "with rugged

⁴⁵ Johnson only translates a handful of epigraphs himself. Bate and Strauss provide a count of the translations provided by others in their introduction to the Yale edition (1:xxx).

science” (4:109-10). Thus the real separation between the Addison and Johnson as critics lies in Johnson’s willingness to work harder, to be a truly professional critic whose intellectual ability surpasses “common understandings.”

This professionalizing strategy again becomes apparent in the second paragraph of *Rambler* 88, where Johnson writes, “Since, however minute the employment may appear, of analysing into syllables, and whatever ridicule may be incurred by a solemn deliberation upon accents and pauses, it is certain that without this petty knowledge no man can be a poet” (4:99). Johnson may dismiss the study of rhythm as “petty,” but a lack of that knowledge would still, in his formulation, prevent one who did not understand rhythm from claiming the title of poet—or critic. Addison, by contrast, argues that critics should be learned, but he never claims the specialized knowledge that Johnson makes central to the critic. In Addison’s view, from *Spectator* 291, the critic must have “a good Insight into all the Parts of Learning,” which sounds much more like the education of a gentleman, and much less specialized, than what Johnson values. In that same essay Addison identifies the function of the true critic: “A true Critick ought to dwell rather upon Excellencies than Imperfections, to discover the concealed Beauties of a Writer, and communicate to the World such things as are worth their Observation.” Johnson, on the other hand, demands productivity of the critic, and his view on the task of criticism is worth quoting at length:

It is, however, the task of criticism to establish principles; to improve opinion into knowledge; and to distinguish those means of pleasing which depend upon known causes and rational deduction, from the nameless and inexplicable

elegancies which appeal wholly to the fancy, from which we feel delight, but know not how they produce it, and which may well be termed the enchantresses of the soul. Criticism reduces those regions of literature under the dominion of science, which have hitherto known only the anarchy of ignorance, the caprices of fancy, and the tyranny of prescription. (4:122)

Where Addison seems content to enumerate and quote “elegancies,” Johnson seeks to explain how the poetry works and then to create something new out of that inquiry.

Johnson’s critical essays in *The Rambler* are not limited to his essays on Milton, and his other topics also serve to legitimize and professionalize literature and literary criticism. Literary criticism helps to professionalize literature by setting its limits. Clifford Siskin explains the power of criticism this way: “[W]riting was professionalized only when it came to be accompanied by the alternative forms of institutional self-control which we know collectively as *criticism*” (160). Johnson’s criticism works to establish limits as to what is and is not workable and what would contribute to enhancing a national literature. According to *Rambler* 121, for example, while poets might choose to imitate Spenser’s “fictions and sentiments,” they would be silly to copy “his diction or his stanza,” which do not take advantage of the English language (4:121). In the next essay, though, he suggests that English writers might pursue historical narrative, for the nation “has been hitherto remarkably barren of historical genius” (4:289). Or, in *Rambler* 152, Johnson notes a similar shortcoming among English writers in epistolary style. Letters may not have the dignity of other forms of writing, he acknowledges, but the national literature would benefit greatly from models of epistolary style: “It had

therefore been of advantage if such of our writers [. . .] had supplied us with a few sallies of innocent gaiety, effusions of honest tenderness, or exclamations of unimportant hurry” (5:44). Also missing from the national literature—the result of the lack of good epistles—are “criticisms upon the epistolary style” (5:44). Clearly, Johnson understands criticism as an art that legitimizes and shapes literary production, and his essay stands as a first strike in favor of adding letters to the national literature. Moreover, *Ramblers* 121 and 152 show Johnson’s consciousness that there is even such a thing as *English literature*. Johnson begins to put writers at the center of the national identity; in fact, the nation takes its identity from the writers, not vice versa. One of the incentives for authorial self-help, therefore, is the contribution they can make to English identity—if only writers will recognize themselves as professional workers.

The Writer in the World: Advice on Social Graces

Johnson does not, however, recommend that writer/scholars give themselves over entirely to their work. The importance of living a balanced life recurs in Johnson’s advice to writers: he repeatedly stresses it. Frequently in these essays, Johnson worries that scholars will become too isolated from other people and from the world. This concern has two motivations: on the one hand, isolated scholars will be limited as thinkers and as people; and on the other hand, isolated scholars will be less able to produce work that matters to the public that, as we will see later in this chapter, Johnson strongly believes constitutes the important audience for scholarly works.

Rambler 24 provides an excellent example of Johnson's concern for the social life of scholars. In this essay Johnson addresses one of the central topics of conduct literature, the importance of self-knowledge. This issue is, in Johnson's view, universally important; it's wisdom that has been passed down through the ages; "know thyself" is a commonplace of wisdom. Interestingly, Johnson chooses the example of a scholar, Gelidus, as a negative example, someone who does not live properly. Gelidus is a scholar "of great penetration, and deep researches," but he suffers from "[t]he great fault of men of learning," which is that they "appear willing to study any thing rather than themselves" (3:132). Oddly, for this essay is ostensibly about an issue of universal moral importance, Johnson worries about the public relations of scholars, about how they "appear" to be emphasizing the wrong kind of knowledge. The problem, Johnson argues, lies not in the state of the scholar's soul. The real problem with scholars not heeding the admonition to know themselves is that they will be "despised by those, with whom they imagine themselves above comparison; despised, as useless to common purposes, as unable to conduct the most trivial affairs, and unqualified to perform those offices by which the concatenation of society is preserved, and mutual tenderness excited and maintained" (3:132). Not knowing themselves properly will feed feelings of anti-intellectualism in the public. Johnson devotes four paragraphs of this fifteen-paragraph essay to the story of Gelidus, and at the end of this character sketch Johnson reminds his readers "that, though there are hours which may be laudably spent upon knowledge not immediately useful, yet the first attention is due to practical virtue" (3:133). After the tale of Gelidus, Johnson also mentions how other professions fail to know themselves:

stock-jobbers pretend to be lighthearted and soldiers to be learned, for instance. But then he turns again to examples from scholarship to show the dangers of affectation:

“mathematicians labour to be wits” and “the academick hopes to divert the ladies by a recital of his gallantries” (3:134).

The aphorisms of this essay, plucked from context, sound awfully similar to the kinds of inspirational sayings that might go on corporate posters today. Even the epigraph to *Rambler* 25 from Dryden’s translation of the *Aeneid* has a cheerleading tone that, were it not so clichéd for us by sports and self-help books, might resound with wisdom for readers: “For they can conquer who believe they can” (3:135). Johnson begins by considering how universally this sentiment has been respected, and in his much considered style of moving from general to particular, he first considers how the principle of considering some vices better than others has always accorded more respect to rashness than to cowardice. Johnson spends the next eight paragraphs considering why moralists and others have always preferred those who overreach to those who underreach, and he reaches the conclusion that “vehemence and activity [. . .] are always hastening to their own reformation” (3:138). Ambition will be corrected by occasional failure, but a lack of ambition contains no natural checks. A lack of trying cannot teach one to try because one cannot meet with failure or success.

A late essay that opens as a piece of literary criticism, *Rambler* 168 is a short study in the way that “low words,” when used to express distinguished thoughts, disgust readers. That principle “operates uniformly and universally upon readers of all classes,” but the difficulty arises when we try to agree on what constitutes a “low word.” Johnson

argues, “No word is naturally or intrinsically meaner than another; our opinion therefore of words, as of other things arbitrarily and capriciously established, depends wholly upon accident and custom” (5:126). In Bate and Strauss’s categorization, this essay goes under literary criticism, and clearly that approach makes sense. But criticism usually focuses on the text that has been produced and that is to be consumed by an audience.⁴⁶ In this essay, the last two paragraphs shift emphasis from the texts being criticized (and even the topic of low words) to the importance of having writers who understand the world. Consider the change in topic:

These imperfections [from *Macbeth*] of diction are less obvious to the reader, as he is less acquainted with common usages; they are therefore wholly imperceptible to a foreigner, who learns our language from books, and will strike a solitary academick less forcibly than a modish lady.

Among the numerous requisites that must concur to complete an author, few are of more importance than an early entrance into the living world. The seeds of knowledge may be planted in solitude, but must be cultivated in publick (5:128-9).

These paragraphs are most striking, I think, for their lack of transition; presented here, in the order in which they stand in the original essay, the connection is not clear at all. Johnson’s essays often turn on a dime to engage opposite conclusions and alternative theories (Paul Fussell and James Boyd White note this), but this leap of topic is remarkable. However, if we consider *The Rambler* as a guide for writers, this essay’s

⁴⁶ An audience not only of readers but also of auditors: Johnson’s examples in this essay are drawn from *Macbeth*.

intent becomes much clearer. Many of the essays we might characterize as literary criticism do not stop at teaching readers how to understand the work Johnson is writing about; nor is the idea of advice for scholars based merely on the idea that Johnson is modeling good criticism (though that argument seems to me to have merit). Johnson frequently goes a step further to explain how his critical practices exemplify an important principle of literary criticism so that, taken together, many of his works of criticism in *The Rambler* constitute a *vade mecum* for young scholars or authors. *The Rambler* offers guidelines for what skills must be developed and what background makes for a good critic. Even in this essay that we would classify as a piece of criticism, Johnson opts to instruct the scholar or author on the importance of interaction with the world in addition to interaction with books.

Rambler 89, by contrast, represents one of the purest examples of Johnson's identification of scholars as his audience. In this essay he considers one of the primary dangers facing authors and offers specific advice on behavior to counter this tendency. This essay focuses on the dangers of dreaming one's time away: "There is nothing more fatal to a man whose business is to think, than to have learned the art of regaling his mind with those airy gratifications [daydreams mentioned in the previous paragraph]" (4:106). In some ways this number is of a piece with some of Johnson's obsessions in *The Rambler*—these human wishes are vain, and they are treated as much more dangerous than we might expect. The tone here sounds like genuine alarm:

This is a formidable and obstinate disease of the intellect, of which, when it has once become radicated by time, the remedy is one of the hardest tasks of reason

and of virtue. Its slightest attacks, therefore, should be watchfully opposed; and he that finds the frigid and narcotick infection beginning to seize him, should turn his whole attention against it, and check it at the first discovery by proper counteraction. (4:107)

A passage like this one is as fascinating for what it suggests about Johnson's biography as for the professional conduct that it recommends. The advice that Johnson offers to his readers as a cure for this dangerous tendency is advice that he seems to have taken for himself: conversation. Johnson suggests that one of the reasons that scholars should engage in conversation is that "There must be time in which every man trifles," and it is better to trifle in company—but mainly because that is not really trifling, so long as one passes the time with people from whom one will learn something. He writes, "He that amuses himself among well chosen companions, can scarcely fail to receive, from the most careless and obstreperous merriment which virtue can allow, some useful hints" (4:108). We can see in Johnson's advice a particularly eighteenth-century conception of the work of the writer as one who works with many others, who engages in a public conversation and a public sphere: the ideal writer is not a lonely warrior against society or an isolated genius so much as an active participant in the world around him.

Rambler 137, discussed in part above because the first half outlines steps to intellectual success, also takes up the theme of social development for scholars. The second half of this essay focuses on those who actually work in academic settings and study recondite topics, for the primary idea behind the essay is that scholars should make every effort to relate to others because while their difficult study may earn admiration, it

does not earn friendship. And for Johnson, friendship is what really gives pleasure in life; he argues that a scholar may feel as though he is descending from the study of higher things when he concerns himself with social relations. But Johnson has an answer based on a classical reference:

By this descent from the pinacles of art no honour will be lost; for the condescensions of learning are always overpaid by gratitude. An elevated genius employed in little things, appears, to use the simile of Longinus, like the sun in his evening declination, he remits his splendor but retains his magnitude, and pleases more, though he dazzles less (4:364).

Thus *Rambler* 137 sketches an ideal social role for the scholar, one that does not always fit with the description of intellectual life even in other *Rambler* essays.

Rambler 157 presents a letter from Verecundulus (“shame-faced”), who writes to Johnson asking for advice on how to marshal his intellectual powers so that he can conduct himself properly in social situations. Verecundulus worries particularly that he has spent a great deal of his life in study, only to have his knowledge go wasted when he should be the center of conversation. One week later, in *Rambler* 159, Johnson addresses the problem that Verecundulus asks for help with, even mentioning Verecundulus by name. In effect, Johnson makes an advice column of these two essays, offering a (pseudo)correspondent specific advice on social conduct. And the invoked audience for this essay, Verecundulus, is a scholar, and though the advice is applicable to the lives of many people, it is telling that Johnson opts for the social instruction of a scholar once again.

The most important part of the essay is Johnson's correction of Verecundulus's self-involvement. Johnson assures the reader in the last paragraph that we should not feel too important even though no one wants to hear that: "The most useful medicines are often unpleasing to the taste. Those who are oppressed by their own reputation, will perhaps not be comforted by hearing that their cares are unnecessary. But the truth is, that no man is much regarded by the rest of the world" (5:84). And the reader that Johnson invokes seems clearly to be a scholar: the first paragraph of No. 159 notes that "[t]he imbecillity with which Verecundulus complains that the presence of a numerous assembly freezes his faculties, is particularly incident to the studious part of mankind" (5:81). Part of the problem, Johnson avers, lies in the isolation that study requires of the young, and the social difficulties of the learned sometimes result from the bashfulness that the isolation produces, though more frequently these scholar/authors suffer from "the unhappy privilege of courage made arrogant by consciousness of strength" (5:82). In other words, one of the occupational hazards of the scholar/author is a great arrogance attached to great learning. Johnson also highlights this professional weakness in *Rambler* 31, where he writes, "Of all mortals none seem to have been more infected with this species of vanity [hating to be wrong], than the race of writers, whose reputation arising solely from their understanding, gives them a very delicate sensibility of any violence attempted on their literary honour" (3:169). Johnson follows this statement with an example from Dryden, who had been attacked for an illogical sentence and who provided an unlikely source for the sentence in Virgil, which leads Johnson to claim that there is not "a single reader of this poet, who would not have paid him greater veneration,

had he shewn consciousness enough of his own superiority [. . .] and owned that he sometimes slipped into errors by the tumult of his imagination, and the multitude of his ideas” (3:31).

We can get an interesting sense of what Johnson was doing with these essays if we consider the mottoes attached to each of them. No. 157 contains a quotation from Homer, translated by Elphinston as “Shame greatly hurts or greatly helps mankind” (5:70). As Robert Olson notes, Verecundulus’s shame has inhibited him in social situations, “and his request for help from Mr. Rambler indicates that shame does him more harm than good” (R-157-1)⁴⁷. The motto for *Rambler* 159, from Horace’s *Epistles*, translates as, “The pow’r of words, and soothing sounds appease / The raging pain, and lessen the disease” (5:80). What is interesting about this motto is the implication that Johnson can offer a treatment for the disease of bashfulness in the form of his writing; after all, he does not recommend that Verecundulus look to any other set of words for help. Johnson’s words are help enough.

Rambler 179 tells the story of Gelasimus, a scholar who lacks confidence in social situations: “He was distressed by civilities, which he knew not how to repay, and entangled in many ceremonial perplexities, from which his books and diagrams could not extricate him” (5:179-80). He discovers that humor can be a tool for lubricating social situations, but he never can figure out that he is not funny. The real point behind this essay, as Johnson lays out for us in the introduction to the text, is the danger of

⁴⁷ The citation style results from Olson’s unique pagination: the “R” stands for *Rambler* (his book also analyzes the mottoes for Johnson’s other two essay series); the “157” refers to the number of the essay; and the “1” indicates that this is the first page of analysis on this particular essay.

affectation. Gelasimus is affecting a humor and liveliness that his scholarly, retired life has not taught him. And the lesson of the essay is that affectation never earns one an award for trying. Had Gelasimus been content to be a great scholar and been willing to endure the relative isolation of being uncomfortable in social situations (situations at which he was, Johnson makes clear, an honored guest because of his great learning) he would have always earned the respect that he deserved; it was affectation that ruined his social opportunities. But in the next essay Johnson examines the opposite fault. In 180, he emphasizes the importance of social activity for otherwise retired scholars, producing, by placing these essays back-to-back, an argument for what might be the ideal balance of retired scholarliness and active socializing.

The essay begins with a story from Le Clerc in which a merchant has the “common ambition”—common because, Johnson argues, the uneducated always imagine the educated to have something of great value—to raise his son as a scholar. The man interviews many different scholars before hiring a tutor, and after having “learned each man’s character, partly from himself, and partly from his acquaintances,” he decides that the life of a scholar does nothing more than “vitiating the morals, and contracting the understanding” (5:182). After the comic opening, the moral of the essay is simple: “He that devotes himself to retired study naturally sinks from omission to forgetfulness of social duties; he must be therefore sometimes awakened, and recalled to the general condition of mankind” (5:183). On the other hand, the social life of the scholar can also go awry when he pays too close attention to pleasing others and mingles too freely in the social world. For scholars have a “want of fortitude, not martial but philosophic” and

“the most obsequious of the slaves of pride [. . .] are collected from seminaries appropriated to the study of wisdom and of virtue” (5:184; 185). In other words, when scholars do pay attention to social life, they tend to fall for the charms of the patron, who “commonly enchants [the scholar] beyond resistance” (5:186). Johnson’s language in this essay implies a seduction by the patron, who can offer the scholar the material comfort and the social approval that study should have taught him to avoid. And the scholar’s compliance with the patron leads to a number of social vices: compliance breeds haughtiness; cowardice, insolence; obedience, pride (5:186). In short, Johnson locates the problems of patronage less in the patron than in the scholar. Oddly, in the final paragraph of the essay Johnson opts for a conclusion that does not follow the rest of the paper closely. Johnson recommends that “candidates of learning fix [. . .] their eyes upon the permanent lustre of moral and religious truth” so that they might “find a more certain direction to happiness” (5:186). Note here that the reward for pursuing “religious truth” is *happiness*, not something more secular. Note too that the discussion of patronage does not dominate this essay: patronage is one aspect, but the bulk of the essay offers general instruction for the conduct of scholars with Johnson recommending a course of conduct that will lead to professional success as well as personal happiness. Further, Johnson emphasizes that the greatest danger is not in the practice of scholarship but in the failure to study practical morality in addition to abstruse wisdom: “But the distant hope of being one day useful or eminent, ought not to mislead us too far from that study which is equally requisite to the great and mean, to the celebrated and obscure; the art of moderating the desires, of repressing the appetites; and of conciliating, or retaining

the favour of mankind” (5:184). This essay is directly addressed to the scholarly audience, one of the few numbers that does not even claim to have a lesson applicable to all of mankind.⁴⁸

Another essay potentially addressed to a scholarly audience is *Rambler* 202, which opens by citing how frequently the learned complain about abuses of language. But, this essay argues, the learned frequently abuse the word *poverty*. In particular, “poets [and] philosophers” have abused the word by failing to present poverty as an evil for most who endure it. Instead, writers offer up pictures of happiness without envy, health unmarred by sickness, and the freedom from fear of others (5:288). This essay can easily be seen to have been written to a wide audience—anyone who has read celebrations of poverty and its help in giving up material desire or who has read Johnson’s review of the work of Soame Jenyns can appreciate Johnson’s point. But Johnson seems to be targeting an audience of writers, who are likely to repeat the same claims he cites here if they do not consider his argument. The evidence for this audience lies in the repeated references to the writers who perpetuate this myth; Johnson does not worry about advising readers against accepting these claims so much as he warns writers against making them. Thus Johnson’s advice for authors is also instruction on the correct way to present some ideas and even what the correct ideas are.

⁴⁸ Contrast this with the next essay, *Rambler* 181, a supposed letter from a linen-draper: “As I have passed much of my life in disquiet and suspense, and lost many opportunities of advantage by *a passion which I have reason to believe prevalent in different degrees over a great part of mankind*, I cannot but think myself well qualified to warn those who are yet uncaptivated, of the danger which they incur by placing themselves within its influence” (5: 187, emphasis added). Johnson frequently wants to universalize complaints and conditions, perhaps to make sure that readers do not dismiss the essay as specific to a small group of people.

In *Rambler 77* Johnson begins by positioning himself outside the community of writer/scholars, as an impartial observer of the claims of the learned. The first half of this essay notes that those who hope to grow rich or famous “from an opinion of their intellectual attainments” (4:38) have long complained about the ingratitude and disrespect—moral, financial, and intellectual—that the rest of society shows them. Johnson separates himself and his audience, whom he invites to share his impartial view, so that together they may judge the accuracy of these claims. And here Johnson backs away from a true assessment of the moral life of scholars, instead shifting to a defense that he also puts forth in *Rambler 14*: too often, society expects too much from writers because they expect writers to exhibit the virtue recommended in the writers’ work. But, Johnson argues, the standard sets the bar too high since “no man has power of acting equal to that of thinking” (4:41). That argument is the core of No. 14, and in No. 77 Johnson means to scold not audiences with high expectations, but writers with low moral standards in their work. Indeed, this essay effectively presents an argument that would favor the hypocrisy of writers who showed no personal virtue but whose writing did because those writers have not “attempted to lure others after them” (4:42). But the main thrust of this essay’s argument lies in the warning to other authors about the harm they can do. The intensity of the language is astonishing; writing about writers who “set fashion on the side of wickedness,” Johnson fumes:

What were their motives, or what their excuses, is below the dignity of reason to examine. If having extinguished in themselves the distinction of right and wrong, they were insensible of the mischief which they promoted, they deserved to be

hunted down by the general compact, as no longer partaking of social nature; if influenced by the corruption of patrons, or readers, they sacrificed their own convictions to vanity or interest, they were to be abhorred with more acrimony than he that murders for pay; since they committed greater crimes without great temptations. (4:44)

Writing so that vice is attractive is worse than murdering for pay: this essay makes Johnson seem unhinged. The language is uncharacteristically violent, and this paragraph and the following one, which draws us back the Parable of the Talents, and asserts that the ability to write well is like “light imparted from heaven,” contain no qualifications or compromises. Further, Johnson offers no options for the reader to respond to the writers he complains about (unless, perhaps, readers want to help with the “hunt[ing] down”). In fact, readers seem utterly helpless, able only to be harmed, and certainly unable to control their reactions to literature. Thus, I read this essay as directed towards writers, to caution them about their power, though Johnson’s rhetorical position, as fire-and-brimstone preacher, differs markedly from his usually avuncular, encouraging voice.

In *Rambler* 173, Johnson directly addresses scholars, in particular teachers, who affect a more social personality than they have and present themselves as ludicrous figures. A traditional reading of *The Rambler* that looks to find Johnson’s moral lesson sees this kind of essay as offering instruction for every reader. For example, John Worden, in his study of the contents of *The Rambler*, sees this essay as part of Johnson’s overall theme of the importance of being one’s true self. But that interpretation seems to oversimplify the essay and to give it a particularly Romantic, American reading. We

might more plausibly see the essay as a pattern of the concern Johnson has for how scholars see themselves in society and his recurring advice on how they should behave. Johnson's essay offers advice on how to play a role in society and how *not* to play a role in society. Repeatedly we see Johnson striving to make sure that scholars understand how to balance their lives.

Sometimes only part of an essay seems devoted to the scholarly audience. Johnson will focus for most of the essay on principles that would appeal to a wide audience of readers. For example, in *Rambler* 164 the focus falls for nine of ten paragraphs on how individuals choose role models after whom to pattern their lives. In the tenth paragraph, Johnson narrows the focus of the essay as he writes, "It is particularly the duty of those who consign illustrious names to posterity, to take care lest their readers be misled by ambiguous examples. That writer may be justly condemned as an enemy to goodness who suffers fondness or interest to confound right with wrong [. . .]" (5:109). This admonition is a characteristic move in *The Rambler*. I would place this essay under the category of calls for professional identity because Johnson argues for a kind of professional responsibility that writers have to readers, posterity, and each other. Johnson's criticism in *The Rambler* works more frequently as instruction for fellow writers than it does as a guide for readers hoping for insight in how to read. Perhaps the more notable aspect of this essay, though, is that literary criticism is not even its ostensible purpose; Johnson sneaks instruction for writers into an essay that focuses on how to use others as an example for living.

Ramblers 82 and 83 are a pair: the first is a letter from Quisquilius, an avid collector of valueless natural objects and antiques. In the next letter, after we've been led to believe that Quisquilius is an example of how not live our lives or play out our intellectual interests, Johnson mounts a mild defense of Quisquilius's curiosity. Paul Fussell reads this pair of essays as evidence for Johnson's lack of planning—the constant contradiction of the essays shows that Johnson is working out the plan of the essays as he goes along. But we might also see it as Johnson's attempt to strike a balance between correction and encouragement. He is not a satirist, and he has no interest in reducing Quisquilius, and those people Quisquilius represents, to cartoons. In fact, what Fussell sees as a lack of care, I read as potential evidence of caring too much—Johnson takes the work seriously because he is advising people on how to live their lives ethically. So Johnson must carefully balance the advice that he offers—he cannot be so harsh that he discourages the intellectual curiosity that is, after all, basically harmless and that may in fact accumulate into a collection of real knowledge. Moreover, Johnson acknowledges, the regard that many people feel for collectibles might be “intended as an incitement to labour,” thus justifying the attraction to what seem to be useless items (4:74).

Rambler 177, a letter from Vivaculus, describes a club of book collectors who know nothing of what is in their books. They collect books based on their value as publishing curiosities. Vivaculus's tone is clearly disapproving, and he is particularly disappointed because he sought out such a group as a way of improving his social skills when he was suffering from too much time spent alone with his own books. The motto of the essay, from Martial translated by Roscommon, also makes clear that the essay

means to mock these book collectors: “Those things which now seem frivolous and slight, / Will be of serious consequence to you, / When they have made you once ridiculous” (5:168). The governing word in this essay might be “curiosity”: Vivaculus has chosen to live off a small estate so that he can indulge curiosity and the collecting members of the club are “curious men,” with a dual sense of the word “curious”: they’re interested in particular branches of learning but also strange (5:170). On the other hand, they lack curiosity about the world outside their narrow interests and are “equally strangers to science and politer learning,” and Vivaculus is relieved that they do not extend him an invitation to their group (5:171). Vivaculus’s letter reads as a cautionary tale: but for the experience of meeting these men, he might have become one of them, so lost in curiosities—not even in the content of books—that he was unable to function in society. That may be our sense of the letter, but, curiously, Johnson adjusts our reading by appending commentary to Vivaculus’s letter that pardons these men since “he who does his best, however little, is always to be distinguished from him who does nothing” (5:172). This ambivalence towards curiosity—worry about how it is misdirected, and then a defense of that misdirection—recalls *Ramblers* 82 and 83, and, I think, suggests that Johnson frequently does not know how to handle some of these issues. He can create an ideal situation: scholarly endeavor should be balanced with social life and should even improve social relations since one always has something to offer others in conversation. But he does not expect all his readers, even all of the writers, to match this standard. Even those whose curiosity (or, probably, given the generic nature of

Johnson's addendum to this essay, whatever other distraction) takes them somewhat astray have something to offer, so long as their distraction keeps them from idleness.

The Independent Author: Becoming a Professional

Jacob Leed and Dustin Griffin, the two foremost scholars of Johnson and patronage, argue that Johnson's discussions of patronage in *The Rambler* do not focus solely on the negative aspects of patronage. Leed's essential article, "Patronage in *The Rambler*, claims, "There are passages in the *Rambler* in which he expresses sympathy for patrons and approval of patronage" (7). Dustin Griffin, considering Johnson's approach to patronage across his career, argues that Johnson is relatively fully invested in the patronage system and that in *The Rambler* patronage "is treacherous[,] but it is not an institution beyond redemption" (*Literary Patronage* 224). Both Leed and Griffin are looking to read the essays as at least partly autobiographical; Leed in particular wants to use *The Rambler* as a means for discovering more about Johnson's relationship to Chesterfield.⁴⁹ Griffin wants to examine the whole of Johnson's career and show the reader that Johnson was an active participant in the system of patronage throughout his career. Leed reckons that forty-two essays make some mention of patronage, but the majority of these essays contain only a passing reference, or include the word "patron"

⁴⁹ Indeed, the case of patronage provides an excellent example of the trend to read Johnson almost exclusively for biography. Leed's study of patronage in Johnson, which sparked a small debate with Paul Korshin in *Studies in Burke and His Time* in the early 1970s, is predicated almost entirely on the idea that it can help us understand Johnson's relationship with Chesterfield. I do not mean, however, to denigrate the work, which was perhaps most important for reminding scholars that Johnson is not uniformly dismissive of patronage. Most of Johnson's quotable moments about patronage damn it without qualification, and many scholars like to embrace Johnson as someone opposed to that powerful system.

without exploring the meaning. We actually have a stronger sense of Johnson's attitudes towards patronage if we emphasize the essays where he explores the topic more fully, and there are four primary essays that take patronage as their primary topic. Importantly, Johnson almost never approaches patronage from the point of view of the patron, and, indeed, in only one instance does he suggest that patrons need to be careful about what projects they choose to support. Because Johnson was writing to other writers, I focus not on what his personal attitudes or practices were but on how he presents the writer's career in relation to patronage in *The Rambler*. Dustin Griffin has also argued that Johnson writes to writers when he discusses patronage. Griffin argues that "Johnson's real concern is not with patrons but with young writers, whose vain hopes need to be suppressed" (224). But Johnson is not just out to suppress hopes; he attempt to develop tactics for the young writer to establish himself as an independent author, strategies that have been discussed throughout this chapter. This returns us to the main point: What did a young writer learn about patronage when reading Johnson's *Rambler*?

Most of all, he learned that patronage is dangerous. Leed and Griffin work hard to discover nuance in Johnson's discussions of patronage, and over the course of his lifetime, we do seem to see a tempering of Johnson's opinions. But *The Rambler* has almost no positive mentions of the system, and, I would argue, does not encourage anyone to believe that the patronage system can be repaired. Leed has traced every use of the words "patron" or "patronage" in the essay series, and in reviewing these uses, I am impressed by the venom Johnson employs when writing about patrons and patronage. There are neutral uses of the word in *The Rambler*, but more typical are phrases such as

“the usurpations of patronage” in No. 21 (3:120) or this sentence from Eubulus, the correspondent in No. 26: “If it be unhappy to have one patron, what is his misery who has many?” (3:145). More tellingly, the two centerpiece essays on patronage, 91 and 163, which have patronage as their central topic, are unequivocal in condemning the system.

The first crucial essay on patronage in *The Rambler* is No. 91, the allegory of Patronage. Originally, the allegory tells us, a “synod of the celestials was [. . .] convened, in which it was resolved, that Patronage should descend to the assistance of the Sciences (4:116). Patronage was taught by Truth and accompanied by Hope, Liberality, and Fortune. The Sciences, finally properly appreciated, benefited mightily for a time as “Patronage was known to neglect few, but for want of the due claims to her regard” (4:117). Then, as with all Golden Ages, decline sets in: first Patronage make errors that embolden some of the less deserving students of the Sciences to keep trying. These unworthies are befriended by Hope and then Impudence, which feeds their determination to receive undeserved awards. The real downfall, though, begins when Patronage marries Pride and so begins ignoring Truth. Caprice and Flattery arrive next, and Patronage constructs a Hall of Expectation, where she had “learned to procure herself reverence by ceremonies and formalities” (4:118). Infamy, Envy, Suspicion, and Refutation all invade this Hall of Expectation, and ultimately those who seek the help of Patronage count themselves lucky if Caprice allows them to become “chained to her [Patronage’s] foot-stool, and condemned to regulate their lives by her glances and her nods” (4:120). Eventually Caprice will cast these “lucky” ones out, too, and drive them

“into the habitations of Disease and Shame, and Poverty, and Despair” (4:120). The final paragraph tells us that the Sciences left Patronage and “were led at last to the cottage of Independence, the daughter of Fortitude; where they were taught by Prudence and Parsimony to support themselves in dignity and quiet” (4:120).

I describe this essay at such length because it is the centerpiece discussion of Patronage, one whose power is never truly undermined by the limited defenses of the patronage system elsewhere in *The Rambler*. Jacob Leed argues otherwise, suggesting that Johnson’s allegory is about a Golden Age but that “in real time, of course, patronage can still have its original virtue” (7). I would argue that an allegory about the decline from the Golden Age is meant as a commentary on the current state of affairs; otherwise, an allegory would be an odd, even ridiculous, choice. It is a rare reader, I would think, who chooses to believe that allegories are meant only to describe the state of affairs inside the created world in the allegory. In fact, the allegory suggests that patronage is probably irredeemable, that independence, and thus the practical virtues of prudence and parsimony, are now the only options available to a writer.

The other essay in the series that takes patronage as its main topic is *Rambler* 163, one of the relatively rare essays where Johnson devotes the bulk of the paper to a correspondent but still offers some commentary on what the correspondent writes. In this case, Mr. Rambler opens the essay, praising the contribution of Liberalis for powerfully illustrating “the vexations of dependance [*sic*]” (4:102). Thus Johnson opts to control our reading from the start by instructing us on how to interpret the lesson of Liberalis’s letter before we even get to the letter. The lesson here revolves around the

dangers of patrons. Mr. Rambler's commentary before Liberalis's letter compares the station of the author who depends on patronage to that of Tantalus, for exposure to the life of the aristocracy, and the continual denial of its pleasures, are a central part of the life of the author who has found a patron. Mr. Rambler quotes Homer's description of Tantalus at length, and he observes that "[t]his image of misery was perhaps originally suggested to some poet by the conduct of his patron" (4:102). This essay is not nuanced criticism that leaves a great deal of space for a positive patronage. Jacob Leed argues that this essay is less an attack on the system of patronage than it is on the particular failures of patrons who lead authors to believe that they will support them adequately and then fail to live up to their promises, but that seems to me to be underselling the vehemence of the attack on patronage. Consider the English translation of the epigraph, a pair of lines that Johnson may have put together specifically to condemn patronage⁵⁰: "Bow to no patron's insolence; rely / On no frail hopes, in freedom live and die" (5:100). Further, we should note that Johnson here targets an audience of young writers: Liberalis is a provincial author who has come to London to make his fortune, but gaining a patron, which he assumes would be a step towards success as a writer, is actually an act of taking on an encumbrance. Entering the urban system of literary production is what kills Liberalis's enthusiasm for the writing life. Johnson writes for those who need the advice the most, young men who are new to the profession; they have been warned.

On the other hand, Leed notes that in *Rambler* 136, Johnson argues that it is sometimes good practice for writers to write dedications in their works, if they are

⁵⁰ Bate and Strauss note that the Latin lines do not appear together in Seneca; they are a combination of lines from Seneca and Virgil (5:100 fn1).

writing to the genuinely virtuous. In other words, Johnson is qualifying his argument against dedications to the great by noting that sometimes the rich and powerful deserve to be thanked. Even here, though, he warns authors to be careful. And, indeed, Johnson does not necessarily endorse the idea of patrons here: sometimes the rich and powerful deserve dedications because of virtue that is unassociated with the support of the writer. Further, Johnson treats these cases as rare exceptions to the general rule. Thus his willingness to engage in a nuanced argument against patronage is hardly evidence that he thinks it can work with any regularity or that the system is not generally corrupt and corrupting.

If we look more closely at an early pair of essays, *Ramblers* 26 and 27, we see how Johnson attacks patronage in the service of a particular warning to young writers to be wary of the system rather than as a generalized protest against an ineffective system. As these essays show, he places the burden of understanding the dangers of patronage on writers rather than on patrons or readers. *Ramblers* 26 and 27 are a pair of letters from Eubulus⁵¹, a young scholar. *Rambler* 26 opens with a direct statement of the importance of having scholars and writers learn from each other—a defense, possibly, of Johnson’s practice of writing to other authors and a clear invocation of audience. Johnson, as Eubulus, writes, “It is usual for men, engaged in the same pursuits [*sic*], to be inquisitive after the conduct and fortune of each other; and therefore, I suppose it will not be displeasing to you, to read an account of the various changes which have happened in part of a life devoted to literature” (3:141). He continues: “My narrative will not exhibit any

⁵¹ The author of *The English Theophrastus*—Johnson believed that Addison was the author—also names a sample author Eubulus, using him in a story about wits and writers.

great variety of events, or extraordinary revolutions; but may, perhaps, be not less useful, because I shall relate nothing which is not likely to happen to a thousand others” (3:141). This defense of the importance of Eubulus’s autobiography sounds quite a bit like Johnson’s argument for the importance of biography, that we can learn much about life from the narration of the small details of living. And here, with a defined audience, the life lessons are tightly focused: patrons are a threat to freedom and thus to happiness, and Eubulus’s example should warn all scholars and writers against relying on others. Eubulus details how he turned his back on the uncle who supported him because he, Eubulus, could find support from the rich young men who surrounded him. They eventually found his need for support irritating and told him so, so Eubulus begins the search for someone who can recommend him to a position. After this he writes, “I had now entered into a state of dependence, and had hopes, or fears, from almost every man I saw. If it be unhappy to have one patron, what is his misery who has many?” (3:145). Ultimately, dependence corrodes his spirit: “I found the spirit and vigour of liberty every moment sinking in me, and a servile fear of displeasing, stealing by degrees upon all my behavior, till no work, or look, or action, was my own” (3:146). Surprisingly, though Eubulus introduces himself in the first paragraph as a writer, we hear little about his professional activity. Even in the next number, a second letter from Eubulus, we hear only about his troubles with patrons with no mention of actual writing.

That omission may be part of Johnson’s point, for Eubulus seeks a position so desperately that he has no time to write. He only has time to court the favor of patrons with names like “Vagario,” men who ignite his hopes and fears without allowing him

fully to realize either one. After cycling through this process of hope and disappointment with several other patrons, Eubulus eventually does receive a position from Eutyches, in whose defense Eubulus has written. Here the cost is different, but still great: “[. . .] [T]he profits were never received by me without the pangs of remembering that they were the reward of wickedness” (3:150). In the end, Eubulus reclaims his independence only when he inherits a small estate from his uncle and resorts to a “humbler” way of living where he can warn others against the dangers of patronage and dependence (3:150). Not once in these two essays does Johnson allow Eubulus to hold out hope for an improved system of patronage; only independence can be an answer for a man of letters, a lesson supported, as we have seen, by the allegory of patronage.

Ultimately, only one paragraph in *The Rambler* provides much nuance to Johnson’s argument against patronage and even there he does not argue in favor of the *system* of patronage. Instead, he simply acknowledges that sometimes patrons deserve praise. *The Rambler* constructs a coherent argument against patronage and sternly warns young writers against becoming involved in this corrupt and corrupting system: the consequences for the writer’s conscience and psyche are too great to make the benefits worthwhile. The connection between perseverance, sociability, and independence from patronage makes for a seamless whole. The writer who works hard and can find the social balance that will allow him to return to work informed and refreshed will be able to declare his independence from patronage. He will have helped himself and be ready to make his way in the world.

* * * * *

In the next chapter I examine another segment of Johnson's audience that he feels needs independence: women. But, as we will see, the discourse of self-help encounters near limits in this case.

Chapter 4, *The Rambler* and Women

The periodical essay, like the novel, emerges in the eighteenth century as one of the central literary forms, in part because the periodical—especially in the hands of Addison and Steele—took women readers seriously, thus expanding the possible audience. Addison and Steele’s decision to consider women readers a core part of their audience—their decision to “fair-sex it,” in Swift’s unavoidable formulation⁵²—begins a tradition that all serious periodical essays have to follow, particularly if that series attempts to invoke *The Spectator* as a literary ancestor as *The Rambler* so frequently does. Though Johnson may not make women as central to his essays as Addison and Steele did in *The Spectator*, he does clearly conceive of them as an important segment of his audience; further, he usually conceives of them as a separate audience, one with interests, concerns, and needs different from those of male readers. And though Johnson attempts to create a set of self-help essays for women as he does for men, he ultimately has less to offer women readers because he knows of no way to fit them into a larger, implicitly male social context. Johnson lacks the certainty about women’s roles that Addison and Steele exhibit, so we tend to think of him as more progressive; and, certainly, compared to the rigid boundaries that those writers outline for women, Johnson looks more modern in his thinking. Ultimately, though, Johnson can only offer broad advice about the need for women to practice virtue without articulating either what constitutes this practice or how these practices might affect women’s lives.

⁵² Unavoidable because of the frequency that later scholars have emphasized the line, which comes from Letter 40 of *The Journal to Stella*: “I will not meddle with the Spectator, let him fair-sex it to the world’s end.”

Making Johnson a Modern

“Johnson and gender” has been popular subject for recent critics, spawning a new avenue for biographical inquiry,⁵³ multiple considerations of his opinions about women, and some application of feminist theory to Johnson’s works.⁵⁴ Focused study of *The Rambler* and women has in the last twenty years generated a small but important body of study.

Two lines of argument dominate criticism concerning *The Rambler* and women. The first is a move to assure readers that Johnson does indeed write about women in the essays. The most popular anthologies of Johnson’s writing in the twentieth century⁵⁵ usually omit essays that feature the letters purporting to be from women or Johnson’s discussions of women, except, sometimes, for the essays on marriage. As a result, Johnson’s interest in women’s lives and in questions of gender in *The Rambler* has largely faded from view.

⁵³ See, for example, Isobel Grundy’s “Samuel Johnson as Patron of Women” (1987), Annette Wheeler Cafarelli’s article “Johnson and Women: Demasculinizing Literary History” (1992), Roy Menninger’s “Johnson’s Psychic Turmoil and the Women in His Life” (1992), or Norma Clarke’s *Dr. Johnson’s Women* (2000).

⁵⁴ In addition to the works mentioned in the body of this chapter, see the special edition of *South Central Review* on Johnson and gender edited by Charles Hinnant from Winter 1992, Catherine Parke’s *Johnson and Biographical Thinking* and her “Johnson, Women, and Gender in the Classroom” in *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Samuel Johnson*, and Eithne Henson’s “Johnson and the Condition of Women” in the *Cambridge Companion to Samuel Johnson*.

⁵⁵ I am thinking in particular of Bertrand Bronson’s *Samuel Johnson: Rasselas, Poems, and Selected Prose* (3rd ed., 1971), Frank Brady and W. K. Wimsatt’s *Samuel Johnson: Selected Writings* (1977), and Donald Greene’s Oxford authors collection *Samuel Johnson* (1984). Bronson focuses especially on moral essays, while Brady and Wimsatt select many of the critical essays. Greene’s selections do not follow as clear a pattern, but the only essays dealing with issues of gender are essays detailing the histories of Tranquilla and Hymenaeus. Even the generous selection of *Rambler* essays from Walter Jackson Bate’s *Essays from The Rambler, Adventurer, and Idler* (1968) omits numbers about women.

Still, so many critics have assured us that Johnson is indeed interested in women that it seems odd when these assurances reappear, as they did twice in 2003, first in an article in *Age of Johnson*, where Sarah Morrison provides a summary of the history of scholarship on women and *The Rambler*, and second in Nicholas Hudson's book *Samuel Johnson and the Making of Modern England*, where Hudson refers to Johnson's "surprisingly numerous discussions of women" (45). Johnson's interest in women's roles, in issues of special concern to women, and in advancing the careers of individual women is well documented. We should not be surprised by Johnson's discussions of women any longer. We now *know* that the dancing dog comment is not a summary statement of Johnson's opinions.

That dancing dog comment,⁵⁶ reported by Boswell, serves as a convenient starting point for a number of Johnson scholars. Johnson's reputation as a sexist relies heavily on his conversation, which is no surprise considering how much of Johnson's fame through the past 250 years has depended on his conversation. Scholars reacting against this dependence on conversation have turned especially to *The Rambler* to mine Johnson's writing for more palatable observations about women. As a result, the second, more interesting, critical trope that has developed in *Rambler* criticism centers on Johnson's sympathy for women. Johnson scholars have become Johnson partisans in the quest to defend him against charges that he is the model of old-fashioned misogyny, and

⁵⁶ The full paragraph about one day in 1763: "Next day, Sunday, July 31, I told him I had been that morning at a meeting of the people called Quakers, where I had heard a woman preach. JOHNSON. 'Sir, a woman's preaching is like a dog's walking on his hinder legs. It is not done well; but you are surprized [*sic*] to find it done at all'" (1:463).

they have leapt from claims that Johnson is not a misogynist to claims that he is actually a feminist.

This line of argument began by emphasizing Johnson's support of learned women in his lifetime, especially Charlotte Lennox, Hannah More, Anna Williams, and Elizabeth Carter. The argument also noted that feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft, who included several *Rambler* essays in her feminist anthology *The Female Reader*, and Virginia Woolf read and praised Johnson enthusiastically. These arguments seem persuasive: Johnson's support for women's education is well-established. But critics have begun to see Johnson as more radical and, in fact, as anticipating twenty-first century feminism. The claims for Johnson's feminist sympathies have grown from being a refutation of Johnson as a prime exemplar of traditional male chauvinism—fighting the powerful “myth of Johnson's misogyny,” in James Basker's memorable phrase—to more strident claims for Johnson's progressive ideas and opinions. Sarah Morrison, for example, sees Johnson as “progressive in his view of women,” citing his resistance to “the overt feminizing of certain discourses that reinforces a clear-cut and rigid demarcation between the sexes” (28). Though Morrison does not make the point too strongly, her use of “progressive” does not compare Johnson only to other eighteenth-century figures. In fact, in the last sentence of her article, Morrison suggests that Johnson “almost always remembers women's equal stake in the issues he addresses” (43). Though her “almost always” qualifies her argument, the phrase “women's equal stake” suggests an egalitarianism in Johnson's thinking that is hard to defend in light of the contents of *The Rambler*.

James Basker is perhaps the most notable critic in this near-crusade for Johnson's reputation. In the 1990 *Age of Johnson* Basker offers a measured assessment of Johnson's view on gender in "Dancing Dogs, Women Preachers and the Myth of Johnson's Misogyny" in which he notes that the enumeration of Johnson's "female fictions," or letters written from invented women correspondents, and related essays, though they can salvage Johnson's reputation from charges of misogyny, do not quite "transform Johnson into a feminist in the modern sense" (77). However, Basker's assessment of Johnson as something of a modern feminist becomes more aggressive in the 1997 article "Myth upon Myth: Johnson, Gender, and the Misogyny Question," where he designates Johnson's work as "pro-feminist" without qualification (179). A more recent article from Basker, "Multicultural Perspectives: Johnson, Race, and Gender" in the *Johnson Re-Visioned* collection (2001) proposes a relatively radical, twenty-first century Johnson, tantalizingly aligned with the concerns of modern readers on issues of gender and race. Thus Johnson is reclaimed for a new generation of readers.

Another important work claiming Johnson's essential modernity is Kathleen Kemmerer's "*A neutral being between the sexes*," a book-length study of Johnson's gender politics that embraces Basker's conclusions and even pushes them slightly further. Kemmerer argues that Johnson's great contribution to considerations of gender is that "his work produces a world in which it is possible to talk about psychological androgyny" (20). That psychological androgyny, Kemmerer argues, allows Johnson to imply modern sensibilities; she suggests, for example, that Johnson is sympathetic not only to the concerns of women but also potentially sympathetic to diversity in sexual

preference (120). I highlight this claim even though it is not central to Kemmerer's argument because it exemplifies an important tendency among Johnson scholars to make him into a figure of whom we can comfortably approve morally. The claim itself, however, depends on scant evidence. In the field of Johnson studies, the arguments against the stereotype of Johnson as misogynist have, perhaps, succeeded too well, so that there is now some reaction against them.

Nicholas Hudson has recently challenged the Johnson-as-modern-progressive thesis, and his book *Samuel Johnson and the Making of Modern England* contains valuable studies of how critics have transformed Johnson into a projection of their opinions. Though Hudson's treatment of Johnson and gender in his chapter "Constructing the middle-class woman" is the most nuanced and balanced study of Johnson's views on gender, even Hudson wants to make sure that Johnson is somewhat heroic—a major figure in the creation of middle-class femininity, unusually ahead of his time in his thinking about women. Sarah Morrison, quoted above as claiming Johnson to be a progressive, concedes that some essays in *The Rambler* might reflect misogyny on Johnson's part, but she largely exempts Johnson from charges of misogyny, with the exception of two essays, *Ramblers* 199 and 128 (41).⁵⁷ Morrison's primary argument suggests that Johnson's linguistic choices exhibit a consciousness of a female audience, and a goal of making sure that his own language reflects that women share "universal human nature" with men. Morrison's valuable essay focuses on stylistic issues, and she makes little of the content of *The Rambler*; indeed, her conclusion suggests that

⁵⁷ I discuss these essays later in the chapter.

appreciation of Johnson's use of non-sexist language drives Johnson's popularity with readers like Jane Austen, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Virginia Woolf. Style has trumped sexist or exclusionary content for women readers. But in this essay too we see a critic reading Johnson with an eye toward establishing his feminist credibility. Among Johnsonians, there seems to be a consensus, or at least a near consensus, that Johnson belongs on the side of the moderns. Johnson, in the arguments of these critics, did far more than just support women writers—he anticipated ideals of gender equality.

While I do not want to argue for Johnson's misogyny, I do want to attack the clarity with which some scholars have approached Johnson's ideas about women and gender. To help bring back the sense of muddle surrounding Johnson's attitudes towards women, let us look more closely at the two essays Morrison describes as misogynist, *Ramblers* 12 and 199, and one that scholars have largely ignored, 85. Neither Basker nor Kemmerer mentions *Rambler* 199, which takes up a topic that Johnson hardly mentions otherwise: women's chastity. This essay receives relatively little criticism because of its strangeness. Hermeticus writes Mr. Rambler to tell him how he uses the lodestone to measure women's faithfulness. He can provide several strengths: lodestones that do not react the first two times a woman cheats or one so sensitive it can detect thoughts of unfaithfulness. Morrison suggests that Johnson is mocking Hermeticus, who details a long personal history of his experiments, many of which resulted in personal injury. She suggests that he resembles the scholars who chase curiosities, that he is wasting his time on idle pursuits. Perhaps the essay does condemn the nature of Hermeticus's curiosity, which is focused on proving the bad behavior of others. But Hermeticus is writing about

success, which differentiates him from the rest of the figures in *The Rambler* who have strange pursuits. It is not at all clear that the joke is on Hermeticus; rather, Johnson seems to be having a joke at the expense of women, all of whom are accused of being inclined to unfaithfulness. Still, let us also note something amazing about Johnson's treatment of women's chastity in *The Rambler*: this essay represents his only discussion of it. Johnson simply does not obsess over the control of women's bodies in the way that so many conduct books of the era do. The topic does not arise in any other essay, so the tone and the subject matter both suggest that this attack represents something of an aberration. In *The Rambler*, misogyny focused on women's bodily chastity, though present, is simply not Johnson's normal disposition.

Another complicating essay, *Rambler* 85, on the importance of activity and industry,⁵⁸ offers traditional sexism from Johnson. Two paragraphs near the end of the essay comment on the importance of teaching women manual skills that will help keep them occupied. The essay seems important enough to quote at length since Johnson's words do not align with a thesis that describes him as feminist. "I have always admired the wisdom of those by whom our female education was instituted," writes Johnson, "for having contrived, that every woman of whatever condition should be taught some arts of manufacture, by which the vacuities of recluse and domestick leisure may be filled up. These arts are more necessary as the weakness of their sex and the general system of life debar ladies from many employments which by diversifying the circumstances of men,

⁵⁸ For a fuller discussion of this essay, one that focuses on the treatment of idleness, see Chapter 2.

preserve them from being cankered by the rust of their own thoughts” (4:85-6). Further, in the next paragraph he continues,

For my part, whenever chance brings within my observation a knot of misses busy at their needles, I consider myself as in the school of virtue; and though I have no extraordinary skill in plain work or embroidery, look upon their operations with as much satisfaction as their governess, because I regard them as providing a security against the most dangerous ensnarers of the soul, by enabling themselves to exclude idleness from their solitary moments, and with idleness her attendant train of passions, fancies, and chimeras, fears, sorrows and desires.

(4:86)

I am tempted to read such a paragraph as not Johnsonian: “a knot of misses busy at their needles” lacks the gravity of Samuel Johnson as many of us (including me) want to read him. Yet there are no stylistic flags that allow us to dismiss this passage as “un-Johnsonian,” and, in truth, this passage does not suggest that women fall victim to idleness any more than men do. As discussed in chapter 2, Johnson fears idleness for men as well as for women. But, of course, when Johnson assigns women to needlework as an antidote to idleness, he conjures up a limiting domestic stereotype.

No essay quite captures the ambiguity of Johnson’s attitude towards women quite as well as *Rambler* 128, an essay that Basker leaves off his list of essays concerning women. In this essay, ultimately an argument against envy, Johnson first argues for how little we understand the lives of those in different situations; he then considers how a “solitary philosopher” might think about women’s lives: he would believe that women

must have the good life because “the sailor travels to adorn, the soldier bleeds to defend, and the poet wears out life to celebrate” women (4:319). But the theory that women should have perfect lives because of men’s fascination with them fails in the face of experience. Johnson the empiricist notes that this philosopher “will soon see to how many dangers power is exposed which has no other guard than youth and beauty, and how easily that tranquility is molested which can only be soothed with the songs of flattery” (4:319). For about three paragraphs, Johnson seems sympathetic to the difficulties and problems that women face, emphasizing the powerlessness that comes from being valued for a limited set of traits and the circumscribed opportunities that result from being “worshipped.” How, then, to account for the sarcastic tone of this paragraph:

There are indeed some strokes which the envy of fate aims immediately at the fair. The mistress of Catullus wept for her sparrow many centuries ago, and lapdogs will be sometimes sick in the present age. The most fashionable brocade is subject to stains; a pinner, the pride of Brussels, may be torn by a careless washer; a picture may drop from a watch; or the triumph of a new suit may be interrupted on the first day of its enjoyment, and all distinctions of dress unexpectedly obliterated by a general mourning. (4:320).

The allusions to Pope⁵⁹ only twist the dagger: the whole list insults women as shallow and preoccupied with trivia. Perhaps Johnson simply cannot resist the opportunity for

⁵⁹ Both from *Rape of the Lock*: “Not louder Shrieks to pitying Heav’n are cast, / When Husbands or when Lap-dogs breathe their last” (Canto III, lines 157-8). “Or stain her Honour, or her new Brocade” (Canto II, line 107).

making the easy joke? Also, I should note that Johnson opens this discussion of women's state of being by noting that the things that disturb female happiness are "more remote from common conceptions" than is one man's understanding of what disturbs other men (3:319). In this moment, then, I think we can see Johnson assuming a male audience and actively excluding women—the sort of moment for which Morrison's study of grammar in *The Rambler* does not account.

These last few paragraphs challenging the notion of Johnson as progressive ultimately hold little reward in terms of coming to some conclusion about Johnson's attitudes towards women—thus the essential problem with the fight over Johnson's "true" take on gender. Instead, like Hudson, I want to situate Johnson more carefully in the eighteenth century, to show how his writing on gender in *The Rambler* reflects an array of attitudes, some of them surprising, but most of them at least relatively predictable, as they reflected prevailing cultural trends. For example, Johnson writes frequently about the importance of female education, but by the mid-eighteenth century, his position was not uncommon. Defoe, for example, had proposed an Academy for Women in his 1702 *Essay upon Projects*.⁶⁰ My goal here is not to indict Johnson on charges of sexism, though I do have an eye towards tempering the celebration of Johnson as feminist. As Annette Wheeler Cafarelli has noted, "We cannot expect to find in Johnson everything we might hope for in modern feminist ideology—nor are we going to locate it even in Wollstonecraft, Macauley, or Hays" (66-7). In other words, we will not

⁶⁰ Defoe supported women's education so that women would be more suitable partners in conversation: "[T]he chief thing in general is to cultivate the understandings of the Sex, that they may be capable of all sorts of Conversation; that their Parts and Judgments being improv'd, they may be as Profitable in their Conversation as they are Pleasant" (293). Johnson is not quite so self-interested, but he is not entirely free of this sentiment either.

find a truly feminist Johnson, but that is not cause for embarrassment among Johnsonians, for we will not find a modern feminist among *any* eighteenth-century thinkers. In particular, Johnson never embraces an egalitarian vision, and he does not imagine, or ask his readers to imagine, a world where women have opportunities identical to men's opportunities.

Most of all what we find in Johnson is an advice giver who does not know what advice to give and who cannot equate female virtue with the profession of writing or with perseverance and endeavor. We cannot pin Johnson down as progressive or traditionalist because what characterizes Johnson's approach to issues of women and gender most of all is uncertainty. Not that Johnson is unsure about everything: he has clear ideas on the importance of gender differences, for example. And he has clear ideas on the dangers that maternal authority can present, as I will discuss below. But one of the reasons that Johnson takes so long to imitate Addison and Steele's decision to "fair sex" *The Spectator* seems to be that he does not know how to advise women. He recognizes the limitations that women face, and though he can advise how to overcome or ignore some of those limitations, he has few ideas about positive advice. Ultimately Johnson treats female readers much as he treats male readers, as people who should learn to think for themselves and cultivate habits of self-help, but he fails to provide adequate advice on how women ultimately should behave. Because of these silences about what constitutes real opportunities for women, Johnson does not quite fulfill the model of self-help. He leaves women to figure out much more than he can explain.

Johnson after Addison and Steele: Marriage as Test Case

Since Johnson himself includes references to *The Spectator* as a predecessor, a full consideration of Johnson's treatment of women demands a comparison to Addison and Steele. One of the most fruitful comparisons involves the treatment of the issue of marriage, a traditional "women's issue" for eighteenth-century conduct books and periodical essays and one that reveals a special connection between Johnson and his forerunners.

Kathryn Shevelow's article "Fathers and Daughters: Women as Readers of *The Tatler*" provides an excellent model for examining an eighteenth-century periodical essay in comparison to conduct books, and her work on *The Tatler* can help us make sense of the differences between Addison and Steele and Johnson on gender issues. Shevelow builds her argument around the idea that in constructing the character of Isaac Bickerstaff, Steele adopts a paternal tone that mimics the tone of contemporary conduct literature. Steele encourages female readers to identify with Jenny and thus to accept the paternal advice of Bickerstaff. This essay offers an especially rich comparison to *The Rambler* when we consider that Jenny Bickerstaff marries Tranquillus. Johnson alludes to these *Tatler* essays in *The Rambler* when he feminizes that name and presents his own ideas on marriage through the examples of Hymenaeus and Tranquilla. But other than using similar names, Johnson does not follow the model of discussing marriage set out by Steele. Most importantly, Johnson rarely adopts the paternal tone when speaking to women or, for that matter, in the essay series as a whole. Johnson instead claims status as a "neutral being between the sexes" and turns the writing over to the characters, so

that they detail their experiences rather than having Mr. Rambler instruct them on what experiences they should have.

Because marriage advice commands a hefty portion of conduct-book pages for both men and women, Addison and Steele as well as Johnson had some obligation to satisfy audience expectations that they would address these issues; that is, they were consciously participating in the conduct-book tradition. And even though their marriage essays do not address only an audience of women, the marriage essays do center on the concerns of women and how men should relate to women more than other numbers do. Discussing marriage in a chapter on *The Rambler* and women is to engage in the same kind of limiting categorization that eighteenth-century writers do. It is to re-create, to a degree, the domestic sphere to which women were limited. But that helps us understand something of Johnson's views.

In the first marriage essay, No. 18, Johnson develops his *eidolon* more thoroughly than in almost any other essay, but, more importantly, we learn that marriage will be a topic of great importance in *The Rambler* because it has long been a great concern of those who “employ themselves in surveying the conduct of mankind” (3:97). Also, Johnson uses this essay, as noted above, to claim that he is a neutral being, but in practice that means that he becomes something of an advocate of women, since so many texts on marriage have blamed women for the problems of the institution. He does, however, briefly introduce the common reason for the failure to obtain happiness in these marriages: “for want of considering that marriage is the strictest tye of perpetual friendship” (3:103). In this moment Johnson suggests a kinship with conduct books of

the period, the description of companionate marriage as the ideal relationship for couples. Though this model might be frequently professed by conduct-book authors, Johnson seems to take the idea more seriously than most. In particular, Johnson does not undermine the idea by actually presenting ideal marriages based on the subordination of women.

What we might think of as the marriage series extends across seven essays. Four of these essays are letters from Hymenaeus and Tranquilla, so their connections are especially obvious. In *Rambler* 35 Johnson has his unnamed letter writer complain that Mr. Rambler has failed to follow up on the topic of marriage as promised in No. 18, where, after he briefly describes a number of failed marriages without extensive comment, he writes, “I intend to treat in more papers on this important article of life” (3:103). And in *Rambler* 45, a letter from an unnamed correspondent, the first sentence recalls “the dissertations which you have given us on marriage,” asking readers to recall a thread from earlier essays (3:243). In other words, internal evidence suggests that Johnson strives for the intertextuality of these essays: he wants readers to work through the process of thinking thoroughly about marriage.

Four essays, 113, 115, 119, and 167, form a mini-series that details the courtship failures of Hymenaeus and Tranquilla, who report their marriage to each other in 167. *Rambler* 113 and 115 are from Hymenaeus, detailing his up-to-now disastrous search for a wife. Hymenaeus has a world-weary tone, having been on the verge of marriage numerous times but having had to break off these engagements repeatedly. Mr. Rambler’s claim to be a neutral being between the sexes applies best when Johnson

writes the letters of Hymenaeus and Tranquilla, as he doles out criticism of types of both genders easily. Still, the criticism of women dominates this series.

In *Rambler* 115 Hymenaeus rejects Nitella, “an easy friend, with whom I might loiter away the day without disturbance or altercation,” because she lacks the proper “cleanliness” and is a “slattern,” which in this context means that Nitella spends too little time dressed properly, so that when she is dressed for presentation, she is frequently uncomfortable in her clothes (4:250-1). This strange example, combined with Johnson’s choice to showcase the shortcomings of women in two essays (Tranquilla gets only one) suggests that he saw several ways for women to go wrong as potential partners.

Rambler 167, in which Hymenaeus and Tranquilla announce their marriage, might seriously contend for the title of least romantic marriage announcement ever, as Johnson has his two letter writers detail a rational marriage based on “virtue,” broadly understood. The essay contains not a hint of irony as the newly married couple details the experience of their courtship and marriage.

In particular, consider the complaints that Hymenaeus makes about Camilla’s tendency to be too masculine. After describing how Camilla dismisses women, Hymenaeus complains, “I had no inclination to a wife who had the ruggedness of man without his force, and the ignorance of woman without her softness” (4:250). The core problem is that Camilla has made “generous advances to the borders of virility,” and “nothing out of the common order of nature can be long borne” (4:250). Tranquilla makes the opposite complaint about Venustulus, a suitor who has “the cowardice as well elegance of a female” after having been educated in the “softness of effeminacy” and

who would have “flown to [Tranquilla] for that succour which it was his duty to have given” (4:272-3). The *his* in that sentence is essential, as Johnson views gender difference as part of what makes marriage companions compatible: they thrive on gender difference because it creates so many other differences.⁶¹

Johnson never quite adopts the patriarchal persona that characterizes *The Spectator*'s essays on women. Still, the comparison of Addison and Steele's and Johnson's attitudes towards women is not a simple dichotomy of conservative versus (relative) progressive. Many of the ideas that Johnson's champions celebrate have at least some anticipation in Addison and Steele. Steele, for instance, in *Spectator* 66 offers advice on women's education and argues forcefully that in “managing” a daughter “the Erudition of her Mind is much more to be regarded”; Steele sees the great shortcoming in women's education to be the result of too much attention to women's bodies and not enough to their minds. So intellectual—that is, moral—instruction is just what *The Spectator* will offer.

The Fair Sex as Audience

The Spectator's frequent invocations of a female audience seems to be a response to, or a creation of, what Paul Hunter describes as a great hunger for being told what to do (*Before Novels* 227). Hester Mulso, writing in *Rambler* 10, describes (or works to create) a similar hunger for instruction when she complains that Mr. Rambler needs to turn his attention “to the weakness of minds softened by perpetual amusements, and now

⁶¹ Jean Hagstrum, in his essay “Johnson and the *Concordia Discors*,” also notes these passages in a discussion of the importance of sexual difference (47).

and then throw in, like his predecessor, some papers of a gay and humorous turn” (3:52). That reference to a singular predecessor reminds us that Johnson and his proxies want us to align Mr. Rambler with Mr. Spectator, but there are important differences between the two. As many scholars have emphasized, Addison and Steele frequently work to reinforce the idea of separate spheres for men and women; their notion that women need to occupy the domestic sphere shows that Addison and Steele defined women’s roles narrowly. Mulso’s letter also hints at some of the contemporary anxiety about Johnson’s lack of attention to women, anxiety that probably derives from Johnson’s refusal to delineate separate spheres for men and women.

Johnson’s moves to include women in “universal human nature” and his attacks on women overly concerned with domestic life—to be discussed later in this chapter—might have confused some members of his audience. That letter typifies the place of women readers for many an eighteenth-century writer: women occupy a separate, feminine sphere that preoccupies itself with feminine concerns. Johnson sometimes implies such a split. In *Rambler* 107, when he offers an essay to respond to those who complain that he does not do enough to vary his tone, Johnson includes two letters, one each on “gay and solemn subjects,” to provide some relief for the reader (4:205). The first letter is from Properantia, a girl of fifteen who writes in support of the move to the Gregorian calendar because she has heard a friend say that it will result in “a year of confusion,” which she takes to mean a year of parties, balls, and social events. Her frivolous tone and comic misunderstanding indeed mark a change from most of *The Rambler*. Significantly, when Johnson wants to offer something that is “gay” or

represents “merriment” or “drollery,” he turns to a letter from a confused young girl. The “solemn” letter is, of course, from a man, implying the separation of spheres that existed in Addison and Steele’s essay.

But that separation of spheres is not quite what Johnson presents in *The Rambler*. Instead, *The Rambler* negotiates these different spheres, a move that, at least to some degree, characterizes the later eighteenth-century idea of the role of the essay. Consider, for example, that David Hume characterizes himself as merging the masculine world of learning with the feminine world of conversation in his 1742 piece “Of Essay-Writing” (*Essays* 534-7). Johnson seems to imagine himself performing a similar negotiation. Still, the world of learning remains a masculine world throughout *The Rambler*, even if Johnson argues that women can and should partake of knowledge as a way of improving their characters. But let us look more closely at a particular number of *The Rambler* to see this negotiation of women’s roles in action.

Following up on the admonitions to pay more attention to women readers from *Rambler* 10, in No. 34 Johnson writes, “I have been censured for having hitherto dedicated so few of my speculations to the ladies” (3:184). Johnson here argues that moralists spend more time writing advice for men because men need more advice: their activities are “less uniform, and connected with things more subject to vicissitude and accident” (3:184). But excluding half the people in the world from Mr. Rambler’s good advice creates a problem: so much of the world’s domestic happiness (and especially “the earliest years” of childhood) depend on women that the conduct of women cannot be “left to the direction of chance” (3:185). Johnson claims he is writing to those “whose

chief ambition is to please,” thus explicitly invoking a female audience. The contents of the letter from a young man tell the story of a woman who “mistakes cowardice for elegance, and imagines all delicacy to consist in refusing to be pleased” (3:189). Anthea, the subject of the story, annoys even a modern reader (who otherwise might be more inclined to see her as a victim than Johnson’s original readers were) with her demands to be served different foods, to stay off narrow bridges, and to avoid seeing frogs. This lesson for women ties Johnson’s outlook to some of the most sexist conduct literature; it is much like that of traditional conduct-book authors who see women as fickle and demanding in every situation. No one is going to confuse the author of this essay, even an author under the cover of a letter writer, with a feminist. Basker and Kemmerer exclude extensive discussion of *Rambler* 34 in their analyses of gender in *The Rambler*, choosing only to focus on Johnson’s comment that women’s advice for women has occupied the moralist in “perhaps generally too small” a way (3:185). That comment has allowed critics to argue that Johnson is a feminist because he talks about women being ignored even as he trades in an easy, misogynist stereotype.

But note how essential gender differences and gender roles are: women have “virtues and faults peculiar” to their sex, and human happiness depends on women because of how much time is passed in domestic life and because women raise small children, and “the universal interest of the world requires them to be well instructed in their province” (3:185). Eithne Henson has argued that the domestic sphere is, according to Johnson, where all of us—including men—have the fullest opportunity to develop our moral selves—but the pronoun *their* before the word *province* in the above quotation is a

reminder that the domestic sphere, however important, belongs primarily to women (76).⁶² One could fairly argue that Johnson's portraits of women generally grow more sympathetic as the series continues, just as one could argue that this essay does not do the ideological work of confining women to the domestic sphere since it is so limited. But *Rambler* 34 certainly employs some of the very stereotypes that Basker and others claim Johnson works against. We can see a similar conflict of traditional and more feminist ideas if we examine a number of *Rambler* essays where young women writers include portraits of maternal figures.

Savage Mothers: Creating Conditions for Self-Help

The celebration of Johnson's feminist attitudes has focused on the creation of subjectivities for the young girls who write in. Women of all ages, say Johnson's celebrants, and all social classes are allowed to have a voice in *The Rambler*. These critics, though, tend to ignore how these girls define their independence in opposition to others, usually a mother, sometimes an aunt. Indeed, if we look closely at many of the "female fictions" in *The Rambler*, we find behind the letter writer a controlling, sometimes near-monstrous mother who fails in her maternal role. So we have in many of these letters something of a paradox in terms of Johnson's presentation of women: on the one hand, Johnson supports the education of these young girls and suggests the

⁶² Henson's argument becomes problematic when she quotes and then paraphrases *Rambler* 60 as arguing, "the biographer should deal with 'domestick privacies,' and 'the minute details of daily life, where exterior appendages are cast aside, and men excel each other only by prudence and by virtue' (III, 321), that is, *where the demands on men and women are identical*" (76; emphasis added). The leap to men's and women's lives having identical demands in the domestic sphere does not make sense to me either in the context of the passage or the context of history.

importance of their reading. On the other hand, mothers, aunts, and other females of authority work to keep girls from realizing themselves as moral beings. Though the letters from Misella and Proserpina show Johnson's sympathy for the degradation women endure from patriarchy, the presentation of mothers in *The Rambler* suggests an abiding distrust of maternal authority and a taxonomy of ways that mothers fail their children, particularly their daughters. More strikingly, the party most frequently responsible in *The Rambler* for denying a young woman's education is a mother figure.

Scholars have taken up the question of Johnson and motherhood in discussions of the *Life of Savage*, where Johnson joins Savage in blaming Lady Macclesfield, whom Savage claimed was his mother, for all manner of maternal transgressions.⁶³ In a brief discussion of Johnson and maternity, Nicholas Hudson mentions that Johnson "seems not to have considered even that most quintessentially 'female' instinct, maternal love, as especially powerful" (*SJ and the Making* 56). I think we might go even further: in *The Rambler* Johnson seems to view mothers and mother figures as particularly malignant forces in the lives of their children, especially the lives of their daughters.

Rambler 51 has become a celebrated essay for its embrace of women's education. In this number, Cornelia writes Mr. Rambler to describe her own experience in the country in the house of Lady Bustle. Lady Bustle concerns herself exclusively with the domestic arts, and she trains her daughters to do the same; her husband, "a mere sportsman," is mentioned only once in Cornelia's letter and dismissed quickly so that we

⁶³ See especially Toni O'Shaughnessy Bowers's "Critical Complicities: *Savage* Mothers, Johnson's Mother, and the Containment of Maternal Difference" (1992) and Felicity Nussbaum's "'Savage' Mothers: Narratives of Maternity in the Mid-Eighteenth Century" (1991-2).

can focus on the folly of Lady Bustle (3:276). Cornelia implores Mr. Rambler to tell her if she should consider “these ladies as the great patterns of our sex, and to consider conserves and pickles as the business of my life” (3:279). Johnson does not give Mr. Rambler the opportunity to respond. Instead, we walk away knowing that Lady Bustle is not Johnson’s ideal of womanly behavior. That message comes through especially clearly when Cornelia sounds like someone who has studied the philosophy of Mr. Rambler for the past fifty numbers. She writes of Lady Bustle, “. . .like all the rest of mankind, she is every day mortified with the defeat of her schemes, and the disappointment of her hopes” (3:278).

We know, therefore, to doubt the worth of the question when Cornelia wonders if she should “throw away the books which I have hitherto thought it my duty to read, for the *Lady’s closet opened*, the *Compleat servant-maid*, and the *Court cook*, and resign all curiosity after right and wrong, for the art of scalding damascenes without bursting them” (3:278). As Bate and Strauss’s footnote suggests, Johnson refers to real domestic handbooks such as *The Ladies Cabinet Enlarged and Opened* (1654), *The Compleat Servant Maid* (1677), and cookbooks such as *The Court and Country Cook* (1702) and *Royal Cookery, or the Complete Court-Cook*. Johnson addresses the question of what women ought to read by setting *The Rambler* in opposition to a number of contemporary conduct books. *The Ladies Cabinet Enlarged and Opened*, for instance, covers three primary areas: “Preserving, Conserving, Candying, &c”; “Physick and Chirurgery”; and “Cookery and Houswifery.” Though the *Compleat Servant-maid* assures the reader of the importance of religious behavior in the preface (“ . . .[Y]ou must in the first place, be

mindful of your duty to your Creator”), the bulk of the book concerns precisely the same topics as the *Ladies Cabinet*.

These books, even the cookbooks, are fairly typical of conduct literature for women. *The Whole Duty of Woman* (1737), a book designed to capitalize on the generations of success of *The Whole Duty of Man*, is largely a cookbook with some moral exhortations in the opening of the book. Cornelia contrasts these books with those she has “hitherto thought it [her] duty to read” and wonders if she should “resign all curiosity after right and wrong, for the art of scalding damascenes without bursting them” (3: 278). Johnson means for the question to be ridiculous: Lady Bustle and her “busy” daughters are so consumed with what the epigraph assures us are “trifling cares” that they are rude hosts, asking Cornelia to sleep in a room stuffed with drying flowers (whose scent, Cornelia complains, “hindered me from rest”) (3:275). Johnson emphasizes Lady Bustle’s rudeness as a consequence of her obsession with her domestic work, suggesting a class difference between the urban Cornelia and her provincial hostess, and perhaps suggesting a connection between domestic work and vulgarity.⁶⁴

Johnson is as dismissive of Lady Bustle as he is of any character in *The Rambler*, and he leaves little room for a charitable reading of her. I find this a notable lack when compared to his defense of men who collect curiosities in *Rambler* 177.⁶⁵ Labor is central to the self-help ethic, and the curiosity collectors can be pardoned because they are at least doing *something*. But women’s labor is dismissed as “bustle,” not business,

⁶⁴ As Bridget Hill has argued, “Housework as women’s work is also closely related to the recruitment of domestic servants in the second half of the century to do the household tasks dictated by a newly acquired affluence of some households, and with it, a new gentility that found such tasks both distasteful and demeaning” (124).

⁶⁵ See Chapter 3.

thus denying women the opportunity to participate in the ethic of self-help. Further, when he condemns Lady Bustle's obsession with domestic practices (and her intellectual capabilities: he includes an accusation of stupidity when Cornelia looks into a recipe book but cannot understand what is written because "this treasure of hereditary knowledge was so well concealed by the manner of spelling used by her grandmother, her mother, and herself"), he includes nothing to redeem her character. Johnson has Cornelia imply that Lady Bustle is ruining her daughters, who "having never seen any house but their own, believe their mother's excellence on her own word" (3:276). If we emphasize the importance of Cornelia's role in No. 51, as most critics have, we see Johnson's concern and encouragement for the intellectual life of women. Readers interested in finding a feminist Johnson applaud him for his sense that there is more to a woman's life than domestic work, but his condemnation of domestic interests is so thorough as to complicate the notion that this anti-domesticity can be construed as praise.

Johnson, writing as *Bucolus* in *Rambler* 138, presents a similar portrait of Mrs. Busy, a widow who turns her manor into a farm and tends to all the details of the estate. Mrs. Busy has seen London because she was taken there by her husband, but she was not moved to change her life by the experience; indeed, she "wondered that when women had once seen the world, they could not be content to stay at home" (4:367). The letter suggests that this shortcoming, this lack of an imaginative response to the charms of London, might be the result of Mrs. Busy's education. She attended a boarding school where "she had passed her time like other young ladies in needle-work, with a few intervals of dancing and reading" (4:367). Now, though, she concentrates exclusively on

her farm: “When respect or curiosity brings visitants to her house, she entertains them with prognosticks of a scarcity of wheat, or a rot among the sheep [. . .]” (4:369). So we may add, as we did with Lady Bustle, impoliteness to the list of the woman’s faults.

Having declared herself a woman who will never be hungry again and who will not allow the fortunes of her children to decline, Mrs. Busy lives up to her (husband’s) name because “she thought a widow might employ herself better than in nursing grief” (4:368). This busy-ness, which leads Mrs. Busy to adopt a lower order of clothing and turn “a large manor into a farm,” earns this condemnation from Bucolous:

I could not but look with pity on this young family doomed by the absurd prudence of their mother to ignorance and meanness; but when I recommended a more elegant education, was answered, that she never saw bookish or finical people grow rich, and that she was good for nothing herself till she had forgotten the nicety of the boarding-school” (4:369).

Once again, the essay could easily be read as an argument for female education: for a better, more intellectual education than Mrs. Busy received at her boarding school. But the thrust of the essay is the condemnation of Mrs. Busy for staying too busy. Any student of Johnson might be surprised by this number. After all, among Johnson’s most famous personal letters are those that advise others to assuage grief by staying active—by staying *busy*. But staying busy is the fault of this widow, and her concern for the material well-being of her children comes at the expense of an affective relationship with the children, and perhaps with anyone. When the “hunterman” who lived on the estate dies, “Mrs. Busy was too much an economist to feel either joy or sorrow at his

death” (4:368). Twice, then, a busy mother is the focus of Johnson’s scorn; preoccupation with domestic duties makes them coarse, uncaring, and socially impolite. These women fail their children, and they also fail to fulfill their social role; they do not smooth social relations with others. It is worth noting that Johnson seems to view that as a significant fault in a woman; indeed, as I explain later in the chapter, the place of learning in a woman’s social life seems to present a vexing question for Johnson.

Mothers fail their daughters in other ways besides being too concerned with home economics. In *Rambler 55*, Johnson produces a letter from an unnamed correspondent whose mother refuses to acknowledge that she, the mother, is aging. Once again the husband is absent, having passed away when the letter writer was ten years old. The daughter describes her mother as “a woman of birth and education, whose prudence and virtue he [the father] had no reason to distrust” (3:295). Upon her husband’s death the mother mourned appropriately for one year, her grief “subsided into tenderness” for her children, her time “spent in caresses, consolations, and instruction, in celebration of my father’s virtues [. . .]” (3:295). After one year, though, the mother listened to the friends who told her that “it was time to live like the rest of the world,” which the daughter claims is “a powerful argument which is seldom used to a woman without effect” (3:295). Johnson hints several times in the series that this tendency to follow the crowd into folly is a particularly dangerous tendency for women, and in this case it is an unfortunate choice, for the mother begins to believe herself a woman about town. Reports the daughter: “In a short time she began to feel the happiness of acting without controul, of being unaccountable for her hours, her expences, and her company; and

learned, by degrees, to drop an expression of contempt, or pity, at the mention of ladies whose husbands were suspected of restraining their pleasures, or their play, and confessed that she loved to go and come as she pleased” (3:296).

The failure of another mother-figure, in this case an aunt, is the central theme of *Rambler* 84, though the satire of the young letter writer sometimes seem to overtake the condemnation of her guardian. On the one hand, the letter writer, Myrtylla, sounds silly and frivolous, arguing for her independence from her aunt’s authority because she, Myrtylla, is sixteen, a fact to which she calls Mr. Rambler’s attention three times, including in a postscript that heightens the absurdity of her argument (“Remember I am past sixteen,” she admonishes Mr. Rambler at the very end) (4:81). On the other hand, the much-abused aunt, whom Myrtylla accuses of tyranny and unreasonable limitations, does sound like an unbearable guardian, and her obsession with the problems that arise when a woman spends her time reading and writing recalls Lady Bustle of *Rambler* 51. Indeed, this aunt actively fights Myrtylla’s educational endeavors; Myrtylla reports that “she snatches my book out of my hand, tears my paper if she finds me writing, [. . .] and threatens to lock me up” (4:80). Further, the epigraph to the essay, translated in part as “But now, dear sir, my beard is grown, / Still I’m a child to thee alone,” leads us to sympathize with Myrtylla and to understand her aunt as the tyrant that Myrtylla believes her to be (3:76). At least one critic, Robert Olson, certainly thinks that we logically side with Myrtylla, arguing that Johnson’s “application of a male’s complaint to a female’s dilemma is indicative of his belief in their [women’s] intellectual potential, demonstrated repeatedly elsewhere” (R-84-3). On the other hand, Myrtylla receives no answer from

Mr. Rambler unless *Rambler* 85 is meant to serve as that answer, in which case Johnson is suggesting that Myrtylla would benefit from spending more time at her needle and less time daydreaming and reading.

Myrtylla's aunt has taught the girl the domestic arts, but when the London sophisticate Flavia arrives to visit some nearby neighbors, she teaches Myrtylla that there is more to life than keeping house—specifically, there are books. Myrtylla writes of her cousin: “Flavia had read much, and used so often to converse on subjects of learning, that she put all the men in the county to flight, except the old parson, who declared himself much delighted with her company, because she gave him opportunity to recollect the studies of his younger years, and by some mention of ancient story, had made him rub the dust off his Homer, which had lain unregarded in his closet” (4:79). That strikes me as a fairly typical comment on female education in *The Rambler*: Johnson consistently mentions that men may be intimidated by learned women. Still, he consistently values women's education, so we are not surprised when Myrtylla follows the example and instruction of Flavia and begins “to repine at my education, and wish that I had not been so long confined to the company of those from whom nothing but housewifery was to be learned” (4:79). Once again, the mother-figure who teaches her daughter only domestic duties serves as Johnson's villain. But the description of Myrtylla's reading creates some doubts about women's reading; she writes: “I saw new worlds hourly bursting upon my mind, and was enraptured at the prospect of diversifying life with endless entertainment” (4:79). That sentence seems to be able to cut two ways: the first half, which sounds quite modern in the particular way that it celebrates the

pleasures of reading, might lead us to conclude that Johnson is celebrating Myrtylla's reading. But the second half might raise some doubts about reading. Is "endless entertainment" in line with Johnson's idea of what reading should be? Does the choice of the word "enraptured" signal a dangerous giving in to texts? After all, Myrtylla tells us later that her aunt thought that Flavia was "seducing" her (4:79). The ambiguity of Myrtylla's letter perhaps reflects the ambiguity of Johnson's thoughts on women's education and perhaps that Johnson shares some of the contemporary anxiety about women's reading habits.

The letters that have the strongest claim to establishing Johnson's feminism come in *Ramblers* 130 and 133, the letters from Victoria. As many critics have reminded us, Mary Wollstonecraft chooses to include these letters in *The Female Reader* because of their feminist argument.⁶⁶ Victoria, raised by a beautiful mother to fill the role of a beautiful woman, contracts smallpox shortly before her nineteenth birthday. The first letter focuses primarily on Victoria's mother, a woman living through her daughter's achievements; the mother's vanity culminates in hard-heartedness when, Victoria tells us, she "grieved that I had not lost my life together with my beauty" (4:330). The letter might serve several purposes. In terms of the narrative, the moment of the mother's wish for a dead daughter allows Victoria to break with her mother and her mother's valuation of beauty above all else, so that one of the shifts between the letters is an increase in Victoria's self-confidence. It also allows the audience—particularly mothers—to assess their own hopes for their daughters; as a companion to *Rambler* 55, the letter serves as a

⁶⁶ Basker refers to Wollstonecraft as "the radical feminist" to underscore the point ("Dancing Dogs" 72); Hudson reminds us of Wollstonecraft's admiration for Johnson as well (*SJ and the Making* 56);

warning of the danger of not allowing daughters to maintain their own identity. But any mother reading this essay might have great difficulty identifying with Victoria's mother since Johnson paints her as a maternal monster.

The second letter focuses on Victoria's social suffering after she recovers from her smallpox. Without her beauty, Victoria feels that she has nothing, and she plunges into feelings of emptiness, despair, and depression; she has lost her social power, and, worse, others enjoy reminding her that she has lost this power. Interestingly, women are especially cruel to Victoria, "comforting" her with words designed to remind her of how much she has lost. The biggest problem for Victoria, though, is indolence: she explains, "None had any care to find amusement for me, and I had no power of amusing myself" (4:344). In the last paragraph of *Rambler* 133 Victoria tells Euphemia ("the only friend who had never pained me with comfort or with pity") about her unhappiness, and Euphemia advises her to remember that her beauty was temporary and that most of her pain is caused by "the corrosion of idle discontent" (4:344). Further, Euphemia advises Victoria to remember that she is "a being born to know, to reason, and to act" (4:345). Johnson's choice of the name "Victoria" and the testimony of these two letters suggest that she has taken Euphemia's advice and has learned to value her intellectual and moral lives. Critics who write about Johnson and gender have argued that this is evidence of Johnson's appreciation for women, but I think we have to note that Victoria's story offers relatively little comfort. Once again, Johnson suggests that the cultivation of a woman's intellectual life will make her a better and more interesting person—but not that it will make life any easier or even necessarily more enjoyable. Nor does Johnson hint that the

cultivation of her intellect will offer Victoria any opportunities to participate in the public sphere. Women's education seems only to enhance the woman's private life in *The Rambler*, and even small amounts of learning may compromise one's social life.

Other mothers appear as less dangerous but still incompetent. In *Rambler* 62 Rhodoclia writes to Mr. Rambler with her dreams of going to London. Now sixteen, she has heard high praise of London society from her parents; her father decided to escape the pressures of trying to succeed in the city and so married an older woman and retired to rural life. The real reward to the couple of retiring to the provinces, however, is not rural virtue but their enhanced social status as former urban sophisticates. They celebrate the social scene of London and fill their daughter with expectations of what the city might hold, but give her no education. Similarly, the mother in *Ramblers* 132, 194, and 195, though a minor figure, consistently undermines Eumathes, the scholar trying to tutor her son; she makes repeated requests that her son be excused from the difficulty of learning so that he might pursue his social obligations; she may not work actively against his education, but she does facilitate his neglect of learning, ultimately firing Eumathes in favor of "a French governor" (5:257). The mother becomes a facilitator for the son's immoral behavior.

Potentially related to the theme of the failed mother are the women who treat servants indecently in *Rambler* 12. In this number Johnson includes a letter from Zosima, a young woman who comes to London after her family's estate suffers from a devastating lawsuit. Treated coldly by a relation in London, she attempts to find a place as a servant. As James Basker notes, this essay is another "female fiction" in which

Johnson “finds the central truth of the female condition to be a sense of powerlessness and victimization” (72). But the sense of powerlessness and victimization in this essay results less from an overall structure of patriarchy than it does from the particular cruelty of the women interviewing Zosima. Mr. Courtly is the only male who appears in Zosima’s story, and though it is strongly suggested that he is a sexual predator, Mrs. Courtly is the one to attack Zosima’s character and reject her application for employment. Zosima’s victimization helps make her the most compelling character in this number, but she is not presented as a model for readers to emulate or learn from. The didacticism of this essay is meant for those who have servants, as Zosima suggests early in her letter when she hopes that the exposure of the problem of cruelty to servants will help make that cruelty less common. And Euphemia is a model of kindness in the end of this essay, providing a counterexample for the positive treatment of servants by taking in Zosima in her time of need (even though Euphemia had already hired someone else). In this first essay about women’s concerns, we see that those concerns are anchored in domesticity because Johnson sees domestic life as the proper province for women. And we see a woman who should be responsible for the care of her servants as treating a young woman almost barbarously.

The Rambler chronicles two types of failures among mothers, then: over-involved mothers and mostly absent mothers. Neither kind does the right thing for her children; neither contributes to a good life for her children. In some cases, mothers are the active causes of misery for their children. On the one hand, the creation of independent subjectivities of young women only happens in the shadow of maternal

failure. On the other hand, this recurring theme allows Johnson to speak to a younger audience, creating models of self-reliance, teaching the young that they are not limited by the mistakes of the parents. Instead, these young women have *The Rambler* to step into the void and provide them with guidance. Like scholars, whom Johnson warned away from dependence on patrons, women need to assert their independence and individuality. But the discourse of self-help does not and cannot go as far for women as it could for scholars. Johnson can assure scholars that hard work will bring them success unless they happen to be the victims of bad luck. In the case of women, Johnson recognizes the limited rewards of independence: the women who do not conform to the guidance of their mothers lack social prospects, and Johnson offers no hope for professional prospects. For many women, self-help may provide them with little help at all.

The Importance of Gender Differences

Kathleen Kemmerer has argued for Johnson's androgynous voice, highlighting Mr. Rambler's statement in *Rambler* 18 that he can act as a "neutral being between the sexes" in discussing marriage (3:98). Of course, that androgynous voice still must bridge the gap between two genders; the necessity of an intervening voice reminds us of the chasm between the two. Gender difference is important in the marriage essays, as I will argue later, and important in many of the other essays as well, and gender difference frequently inspires a special condemnation for women. For example, at the end of *Rambler* 24 Johnson does tack on a statement about how women fail to know themselves, an idea which suggests that women are part of universal human nature, for

not knowing oneself is the fault from which most everyone suffers. Women, though, fail to know themselves in ways peculiar to women. Johnson writes:

There is one instance in which the ladies are particularly unwilling to observe the rule of Chilo. They are desirous to hide from themselves the advances of age, and endeavour too frequently to supply the sprightliness and bloom of youth by artificial beauty, and forced vivacity. They hope to inflame the heart by glances which have lost their fire, or melt it by langour which is no longer delicate; they play over the airs which pleased at a time when they were expected only to please, and forget that airs ought in time to give place to virtues. They continue to trifle, because they could once trifle agreeably, till those who shared their early pleasures are withdrawn to more serious engagements; and are scarcely awakened from their dream of perpetual youth, but by the scorn of those whom they endeavour to rival. (3:135)

We will later have essays suggesting that women have a duty to read seriously, to engage in moral conduct—but here women’s failure to know themselves consists entirely in vanity about appearance. In other words, when women fail to know themselves, they do it in different ways from men. In Johnson, that belief in essential differences between genders usually emphasizes differences that mark shortcomings in women, shortcomings that Johnson condemns relatively harshly.

Rambler 189 uses the example of Turpicula to showcase the problems of flattery. This essay aims to show that all people are subject to the charms of flattery, and to teach readers to reject it. One could, in fact, argue that this essay helps substantiate Sarah

Morrison's point that Johnson includes women in the idea of universal human nature. But Johnson here treats flattery as a particularly gendered idea, and claims that "[n]one are so little acquainted with the heart, as not to know that women's first wish is to be handsome" (5:228). Again, Johnson draws on traditional stereotypes of gender to explain the behavior of these students.

In one of the most provocative articles on *The Rambler*, Lisa Berglund explores the letters of Johnson's invented correspondents through reader-response criticism. Berglund argues that Johnson offers "exemplary autobiographies" as a tool to encourage readers to become writers and so learn about their lives and themselves. Autobiography, especially for women, presents an opportunity for self-understanding as each of Johnson's correspondents takes on the role of "self-critical authority" ("Writing" 246). She continues, "By confining Mr. Rambler to expository essays, Johnson preserves the integrity of his imaginary correspondents as independent voices and valorizes their life stories" (246). However, Johnson also simply leaves many of these stories as stories. He generally declines the opportunity to help the reader (or the correspondent) make sense of the stories, and some of the requests for help therefore meet only silence. In a number of letters from the invented female correspondents, Johnson creates a character with the same real problem: how to fit into a society that refuses to value women's intellects. And in each of these essays, Johnson declines to provide a solution for the problem, or even to offer ameliorating words of comfort. Johnson's choices may valorize the life stories of these women, but he fails to work out solutions to these problems.

Rambler 75, for example, asks that the reader look on the example of Melissa and learn to emulate her self-sufficiency. Melissa writes this letter to Mr. Rambler to describe her experience as a woman “born to a large fortune, and bred to the knowledge of those arts which are supposed to accomplish the mind, and adorn the person of a woman” (4:28). Melissa goes beyond these expected accomplishments, though, by engaging in frequent conversations with scholars from whose talk “something may be gained, which embellished with elegance, and softened with modesty, will always add dignity and value to female conversation” (4:29).⁶⁷ But when, at age 27, she loses her fortune, society turns on Melissa, who had so long believed that the wonderful treatment the world accorded her was due to her merits. Suddenly, her visits are treated only as occasions for talking about her misfortunes with expressions of sympathy that barely mask gleeful insults, and her long line of suitors disappears. Most painful, she writes, “is the loss of that influence which I have had always exerted on the side of virtue” (4:32). Melissa offers specific advice on social behavior, advice that could apply to both men and women: “[N]o one ought to remind another of misfortunes of which the sufferer does not complain, and which there are no means proposed of alleviating. You have no right to excite thoughts which necessarily give pain whenever they return, and which perhaps might not have revived but by absurd and unseasonable compassion” (4:31). In laying out a rule regarding social behavior, Melissa mimics the traditional conduct

⁶⁷ Johnson inserts a corrective moment for the socially inept man of learning in this essay when Melissa refers to “the conversation of that species of men whom the ladies generally mention with terror and aversion under the name of scholars, but whom I have found a harmless and inoffensive order of beings, not so much wiser than ourselves, but that they may receive as well as communicate knowledge, and more inclined to degrade their own character by cowardly submission, than to overbear or oppress us with their learning or their wit” (4:28). As sensible as Johnson shows Melissa to be in this letter, he must mean for that insult to provide some sting.

book's method of direct instruction. But the overall letter, built around Melissa's empirical observation of social experience, presents a model of how a woman comes to terms with the deceit that society offers those who are rich and powerful. As a result, the lessons of this letter could apply to both men and women, but Johnson seems especially attuned to the challenges women face, since their status—social, economic, and otherwise—depends heavily on the opinions of others. With few professional opportunities, women must depend on fortune—and men—when faced with the challenges that young men can handle by depending on themselves. Johnson argues, though, that fortune can be remedied only by the principle of self-help and the assertion of self in the face of attacks from others. What I find most interesting in this essay—and what separates his unique formulation of self-help from the later incarnations—is Johnson's refusal to offer the reader much comfort. Melissa's learning and moral sense makes her more aware of machinations of society, but they do not obviously make her happier, or win her friends, or help her find a marriage partner; they only help her understand her situation. Perhaps that is reward enough, but understanding falls well short of the promises that Johnson can make to men.

In *Rambler* 126, for example, Johnson includes a complaint from Generosa about men who condescend to women's intelligence. First Generosa echoes the complaint that Johnson first mentions in *Rambler* 10, that he does not pay as much attention to female readers as *The Spectator* did (which gives Johnson another opportunity to mention *The Spectator* as a singular predecessor), but Johnson also has her praise him, however mildly, for not discouraging women “from any laudable pursuit” and for the work he has

done to “excite our [women’s] curiosity” (4:310). The problem for Generosa is not Mr. Rambler, but a society that does not take women’s intellectual curiosity or accomplishment seriously. Johnson writes, as Generosa, “The world seems to have formed an universal conspiracy against our understandings; our questions are supposed not to expect answers, our arguments are confuted with a jest, and we are treated like beings who transgress the limits of our nature whenever we aspire to seriousness or improvement” (4:310). As James Basker notes, it is “clear that while the topic may be female experience, the intended readership is primarily male and the moral objective is reform of a male-dominated society” (“Dancing Dogs” 73). Basker’s formulation—the “reform of a male-dominated society”—is somewhat grandiose in this instance, as it suggests a larger scale critique of society than the text justifies. Generosa explains that she asks a question about astronomy of an astronomer as “a kind introduction of the only subject on which I believed him able to speak with propriety” and because she wanted to give him “an opportunity of mingling on equal terms with a polite assembly from which, however, uneasy, he could not then escape” (4:311). What strikes me about those lines is that Johnson perhaps also suggests in this letter that men should not condescend to women because women add something of value with their learning: improved social smoothness. Generosa does not complain about the astronomer’s treatment because she has something to contribute to a debate on astronomy. Though she clearly is no dummy, her contribution depends on her ability to add refinement to learning—to make social life more endurable for this astronomer. Even her name, Generosa, hints more at social good will than at intellectual capability.

Still, this letter from Generosa anticipates the complaints of Bellaria in 191. Bellaria is silly, and Johnson means for us to find her silly. Though her mother and aunts have brought her a packet of *Rambler* papers to read while she is sick, Bellaria cannot find the time to read because of too many social obligations. The list of activities that would fill Bellaria's days were she not sick in bed—auctions, dances, plays, card games—clearly is meant to meet with the reader's scorn. And the epigraph to the letter—"The youth----- / Yielding like wax, th' impressive folly bears; / rough to reproof, and slow to future cares"—obviously indicates that Bellaria is in the wrong. But one paragraph in this essay reminds us that though Bellaria might be silly to be obsessed with the rewards that her attractiveness brings, experience has taught her that her beauty matters most. She once "frighted" Mr. Trip, her latest paramour, "into another box, by retailing some of Dryden's remarks upon a tragedy" (5:236). She tried to talk "among ladies about principles and ideas, but they put their fans before their faces, and told me, I was too wise for them" (5:236). Surely Johnson would argue that the difficulty of virtue provides no excuse for not practicing it, but these moments of social difficulty for an intelligent woman do remind us of what gets rewarded in Johnson's society. In some ways, Bellaria's response to the world around her represents a perfectly logical decision: because women are rewarded for their beauty, she will use her beauty. But her youth also prevents her from seeing the threats that men present, the idleness that her long list of activities represents, and, ultimately, from making real sense of the empirical evidence of her life. When men let her win at cards, she fails to see that they do so only to court her favor; or, as Victoria and Melissa learned in earlier *Rambler* numbers, when fortune

turns, society will reject her. Bellaria's essential failure lies in her inability to become self-sufficient. When she rejects Mr. Rambler and his papers, she rejects the power of self-control that the text can teach.

In both of these essays Johnson carefully accounts for the motive of each woman: their attempts to engage others in intellectual conversation do not stem from attempts to showcase themselves or outdo others; they are not driven to talk for victory. Generosa is simply being socially generous while Bellaria is acting on the advice of her mother and aunts and following the example of Mr. Rambler.

Writing Women, Teaching Men

In *Ramblers* 170 and 171 Johnson presents letters from Misella that detail the life of a young woman of good family who is forced into prostitution by poverty and the reckless selfishness of men who use her for their own pleasure. James Basker reads these two numbers as “[t]he most powerful of all Johnson’s female fictions” (74). Basker argues that Johnson presents a “radical critique” that derives partly from Johnson’s conversations with London prostitutes and as a corrective to what Basker calls “the happily-ever-after prostitute-rake myth, in which rakes and prostitutes arrive, after the vicissitudes of their careers, at a happy, healthy, and unusually prosperous life” (75). Basker argues that Johnson specifically means to take on the novels of Cleland (*Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*), Fielding (*Tom Jones*), and Smollett (*Roderick Random*) (75). It seems to me that Basker misleads us with this analysis. For one thing, conflating prostitutes and rakes as part of a similar myth of redemption ignores the important gender

differences that made prostitutes social pariahs, a fate that rakes have never known in quite the same way. Further, Johnson invokes a set of beliefs for his audience to work against when he has Misella write of herself, “I am one of those beings, from whom many, that melt at the sight of all other misery, think it meritorious to withhold relief; one whom the rigour of virtuous indignation dooms to suffer without complaint, and perish without regard; and whom I myself have formerly insulted in the pride of reputation and the security of innocence” (5:135). We know, then, what kind of reader Johnson wants to oppose: those who cannot muster sympathy for the prostitute. He wants his audience to separate themselves from those who would hold, as many of the reform societies of the early eighteenth century did, that prostitutes are lewd women who entice men into vice and sin. Instead, Johnson takes the more modern approach of presenting the prostitute as a victim to whom we owe our sympathy. As Tony Henderson has argued, the idea of prostitute as victim was relatively new in the mid-eighteenth century, and it represented a stark change to the tradition of seeing prostitutes as corrupting sources of evil who could not control their lust. As Henderson writes, “The poverty-stricken, pitiable, above all *powerless* and hence *forgivable* character of the prostitute was counterposed to the salacious, threatening, wilful sexuality of the ‘promiscuous’ woman” (185-6; *sic*). In the coming years London would see the construction of the Magdalen Hospital, a charity dedicated to freeing women from the material circumstances that forced them into prostitution, and one that became a fashionable cause to support (Henderson 186). Johnson’s moving letters from Misella may constitute a “radical critique,” but they are not evidence of Johnsonian exceptionalism so much as evidence that he is part of an

intellectual trend, as the evidence of Joseph Simpson's letter on the need for a prostitute hospital in *Rambler* 107 suggests.⁶⁸ Finally, the letters do not necessarily imagine women as fully in possession of their subjectivity; sympathy in these essays seems to depend less on Misella's fullness as a (fictional) person than on her utter helplessness.

Similarly, in *Rambler* 66 Johnson addresses how men limit women, and he seems to do it once again with an eye toward persuading men to change their behavior. The essay presents an argument against women's vanity, which Johnson defines as largely limited to vanity about appearance. We *know* that worrying about beauty is not the proper way for women to spend their time, Johnson writes, "But when was it known that female goodness or knowledge was able to attract that officiousness, or inspire that ardour which beauty produces whenever it appears?" (3:353). If women concern themselves with "trifles" and non-accomplishments, it is largely because men reward them for doing so. One important thing to note in this essay is that Johnson obviously presumes an audience of men. Women, though, are similar to men in that a shortcoming—in this essay, avarice in men and vanity in women—is encouraged by external, social pressure and not endemic to their nature. Still, women are a kind of Other in this essay, an object for inquiry and study, and not part of the readership. No stack of gender-neutral pronouns can hide that fact.

⁶⁸ See the discussion of *The Rambler* as an urban document in Chapter 2.

Concluding Remarks on Johnson and Women

If we hope to determine larger trends in Johnson's thinking, it seems hard to me to overlook the number of young women—almost all around the age of sixteen—who appear in *The Rambler* as vain, shallow, and silly. They dream of balls and dances and suitors and card games. Properantia, in *Rambler* 107, longs for the confusion that might come from the adoption of the New Style calendar because she thinks that “confusion” refers to an active social life. These are the letters that go largely unanalyzed in treatments of Johnson's ideas on gender; the closest anyone comes to explaining them is to suggest that perhaps Johnson is setting these women up as examples of the sort of girls who become victims. This explanation makes sense in a number like *Rambler* 107, where the first letter is from a naïve girl and the second discusses how women can become trapped in prostitution by the thoughtlessness or scheming of men. But frequently these essays are left to stand largely on their own, without commentary, inviting a negative or comic view of the girls without any reclamation of their character.

The point here is that Johnson frequently imagines women as entirely powerless, or in control of themselves only so far as to become willing dupes to the machinations of men. And even in portraits where women take charge of their moral and intellectual lives, the new life is limited. In the instance of Victoria, for example, wise Euphemia counsels her not to regret her loss of beauty but to embrace wisdom and virtue. Critics have acted as though this in some way represents a feminist sensibility, but when Johnson gives advice of this sort, he is counseling women to give up on the idea of being full participants in society, for when she surrenders this vanity, her reward is a private

life of virtue, a life of preparing for a good death. In his life Johnson encouraged women to pursue writing and to become fuller participants in society; in *The Rambler*, the intellectual woman surrenders her place in society by choosing not to value the vanity that society emphasizes. That might be overstated, but not by much. Johnson does suggest that women can benefit from the conversation of learned men, though in these instances the advice seems directed again and again to the men, whom Johnson recommends take these conversations more seriously for the sake of the women. Little is said of the importance of women taking part in these conversations. That stands in stark contrast to Johnson's call for male scholars to engage more fully in social life.

Conclusion

James Boswell, with whom I began this dissertation, may have done as much as Johnson himself to secure Johnson's long-term reputation. And yet even Boswell seems to have preferred *The Spectator* to *The Rambler*; in the *London Journal* he mentions the *The Spectator* more frequently than he mentions Johnson's essay series. Addison and Steele provide more frequent touchstones for Boswell's understanding of his new life in London. However, the differences in how Boswell thinks of the works are revealing. The first mention of *The Spectator* in the *London Journal* highlights how in London "a person of imagination and feeling, as described by the Spectator, can have the most lively enjoyment from the sight of external objects" (68). This moment is typical in that most of Boswell's references to *The Spectator* suggest a reliance on Addison and Steele for help in navigating the social scene in town: he is writing about external objects and experiences. In other words, Addison and Steele teach Boswell the arts of civility and of living a public life. He grows especially happy about visiting Child's Coffee House because Mr. Spectator mentions "his being seen" there (76). That passive verb is telling, indicating that Addison and Steele teach Boswell how to fit himself into an ongoing social scene. Johnson—Boswell's "mental physician," remember—teaches him how to create and care for a self through the techniques of self-help.

In employing the term "self-help," I have employed an anachronistic term to describe Johnson's *Rambler*. However, by understanding Johnson's *Rambler* as an early description of the ethic of self-help that will become so important to the Victorian mindset and to British history and culture, we can understand part of the significance of

Johnson's place in the history of English literature. Johnson's *Rambler* was dismissed for centuries as lesser than *The Spectator* as though Johnson sought only to recreate Addison and Steele's periodical rather than to do something new with the form. But Johnson consciously, intentionally, and happily separates himself from his most important predecessors to argue for a new strategy for negotiating one's world. In the process, he helps create a new literary form that focuses on encouraging mental discipline, the primacy of work, and the creation of an autonomous self that defines itself according to a middle class, trade-oriented ethic. The self-help ethic applies to all readers, as Johnson suggests that all lives can be imagined as a writer's life, lived project to project. The ideals of self-help come through especially clearly in Johnson's creation of an advice book for scholars and writers, perhaps Johnson's most important audience in *The Rambler*. That same code, though, fails to serve as an adequate guide for the lives of women; self-help ultimately assumes a male audience with the freedom and opportunity to create an autonomous self.

This description of Johnson's *Rambler* as an early self-help book offers one of the fullest accounts yet of the contents of Johnson's *Rambler*, a text that has been more often studied for its style and strategies. Yet the history of self-help literature is a larger project that deserves to be written. Self-help books have had a cultural influence that far surpasses most other literary genres, but the genre has suffered from scholarly neglect for numerous reasons, including its formulaic approaches, its focus on acquisitiveness, and its overall air of hucksterism. My hope is that further study might help us see self-help as a coherent, if sometimes (even frequently) objectionable, response to negotiating social

life. As a genre, early self-help literature embodied new strategies for addressing an audience—most notably the replacement of behavioral correctives with a new emphasis on positive achievement—and new assumptions about who constitutes an audience. The primacy of work and the possibilities for non-noble readers in particular mark self-help as a separate genre from other advice literature. Still, much remains to be discovered about the history of this genre and of Johnson's role in the founding of these ideas and practices.

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VITA

John Steven Kinkade was born July 30, 1973 in Bowling Green, Kentucky, the youngest son of H. Wayne and Nona Kinkade. After graduating from Greenwood High School, he entered Centre College in Danville, Kentucky, graduating with a B.A. in English and Government in 1995. After graduation, he moved to San Antonio, Texas, and worked as an English teacher at Texas Military Institute. In the fall of 1997 he entered the Graduate School at the University of Texas. He is currently employed as an English teacher at the Community School of Naples.

Permanent address: 3115 La Costa Circle, #101, Naples, FL 34105

This dissertation was typed by the author.