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FUGITIVE ALLUSIONS IN *BOSWELL IN SEARCH OF A WIFE*, OR THE CHARMING MR. BOSWELL

Robert G. Walker

Charming: Pleasing in the highest degree.

—*Johnson's Dictionary*

In the past sixty years James Boswell has become at least twice the victim of his own success. As the author of the *Life of Johnson*, the best biography ever written in the English language, Boswell had long had a mixed reputation—had he written better than he knew?—but especially in the second half of the twentieth century he became the gratuitous target of some distinguished Johnsonians. These scholars were properly interested in correcting mistaken beliefs about Samuel Johnson that had originated in or were popularized by Boswell's *Life*; moreover, they desired to focus

attention on what Johnson had written rather than on what Boswell had written about him. Johnson is, after all, far the superior writer. As a result Boswell was occasionally (and, I would say, unfortunately and unnecessarily) denigrated. Had Boswell's biography of Johnson been less well known or less influential he would have been a far less conspicuous target.

Overlapping this criticism was the reaction to the publication, beginning with Boswell's *London Journal* in 1950, of Boswell's private papers in the form of trade editions, designed for the general reading public but prepared in a scholarly manner by the Yale editors. The *London Journal* was a true best-seller: the *New York Times* nonfiction list for 14 January 1951 had it at number two, ahead of works by Lowell Thomas, Jr., Winston Churchill, and Will Cuppy (*The Decline and Fall of Practically Everybody*). Although eleven additional volumes of the private papers have appeared subsequently, the *London Journal* remains the best known by far. That notoriety may owe something to the fact that the volume contains a description of the first meeting between Boswell and Johnson, but it owes more, I suspect, to Boswell's frank depiction of his sexual exploits in London. Therein lies the rub. Boswell's self-revelations have established the commonplace of his misogyny, and that commonplace may have caused some students of eighteenth-century literature to avoid reading his other personal papers and, in some cases, to act as gatekeepers, discouraging their reading by others.

Perhaps someone will eventually write an essay dooming Boswell to perpetual obscurity because he is a misogynist, or, conversely, dooming those to obscurity who have made a professional career by condemning the past with the assuredly transitory correctness of the present moment. This essay does neither, but would rather return us to an appreciation of Boswell as a skillful and more learned author than some Johnsonians and the politically correct have wanted to credit him for in recent years, laden as they are with preconceptions before they even open his text. Boswell is indeed caught in the middle of very opposite notions: on the one hand, he is measured (either biographically or aesthetically) against another version of Johnson and found lacking; or he is measured against writers, often far less accomplished, who have managed to express view coincident to our own, and again found lacking, politics replacing aesthetics as the sole basis of judgment.¹

¹ The popularity of the *London Journal* has led ironically to Boswell's personal papers and other writings being largely ignored because of his perceived misogyny. In a further irony some

Put another way, if a concept of beauty underwrites literary judgments, as I believe it does, what aspect of the beautiful can we discover in Boswell's journalistic writings that would redeem his reputation from the attacks just described? My own sense of his writing would seem to inhere in the word *charming*: his prose produces both a high degree of pleasure, especially for a reader oriented toward the world of literature, and exhibits a seductive, perhaps magical, quality that projects a personality with whom one wants familiarity (dare I say, intimacy)—a companionable person, always more than the sum of his quirks and prejudices—the person to whom Johnson took an immediate and long-standing attachment.² Is it not perfectly valid, in fact, to suggest that Johnson was *charmed* by Boswell, and that a man of Johnson's judgment would be charmed by his intellect as well as by his character? It is my contention in this essay that we need to reexamine Boswell, the reader and the writer, in order to begin his restoration to a very high place indeed in the literary pantheon. Boswell's account of Johnson may not please some Johnsonians, and his relations with women may not please some contemporary critics, but he has pleased many readers for more than two hundred years and it behooves us not to dismiss that fact in any simplistic way. The very *charm* of Boswell is the *charm* of all great literature: it asks us to put aside our prejudices and take pleasure in the talents and thoughts of another person. In a world as self-centered and solipsistic as our own (and, needless to say, this

supporters of Johnson have taken for granted Boswell's gender bias in order to defend Johnson from the same charge. When "everyone knows" Boswell was a misogynist, the view is conveyed casually and propagated without examination, but not without effect. So Will Pritchard writes recently, "Boswell has been credited with his own misogynistic views and also accused of exaggerating Johnson's" ("New Light on Crumb's Boswell," *ECS* 42 [2009]: 289–307; 304n23). See a related argument by Felicity A. Nussbaum, *The Autobiographical Subject: Gender and Ideology in Eighteenth-Century England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 125: "The powerful effect of Boswell's journals and *The Life of Johnson* . . . is to reassert a gender and class hierarchy and, in doing so, to invalidate reader positions that do not assert the obviousness of this hierarchy." Perhaps closer to the truth is the blunt assessment found in a *Life Magazine* review of *London Journal* (15 January 1951, 24): Boswell was "a rake who idealized women."

² David Daiches suggests an interesting similarity between Johnson's response to Boswell and that of the most important woman in Boswell's life: "Give me your hand. I have taken a liking to you." This famous declaration of Johnson's is only one, if the most memorable, of many instances of Boswell's capacity to attract affection. We know that his cousin Margaret loved him long before he proposed to her and that she retained that love in spite of Boswell's regular desertions to London and of his frequent bouts of drunkenness and whoring. She could have had no more illusions about him than the modern reader of his devastatingly frank journals can have" ("Boswell's Ambiguities" in *New Light on Boswell*, ed. Greg Clingham [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991], 1–8; 5–6).

was true of Boswell's world as well), it is, perhaps, the primary magic of the literary experience.

A man of letters writing for a literate audience, Boswell frequently chose literary and historical allusions as a means of charming that audience. Not surprisingly, he had taken to heart Johnson's defense against John Wilkes's charge that such allusions are pedantry—"Classical quotation is the *parole* of literary men all over the world."³ Some of those references have escaped even the diligence of his Yale editors, who have nonetheless done a good job of calling attention to Boswell's rather deliberate, some may even say mechanical, selection and application of such references. For example, in a passage from his private papers he tells us, "Should have written a *Hypochondriack*. But could not. Resolved to make an old essay serve. But could not find a motto."⁴ The next day he writes, "Happily found a motto for my old essay in Holyoke's *Dictionary*, and was content" (401). His editors point out, "This passage explains the source of much of the obscure learning in the series [the *Hypochondriack*]: Boswell . . . found many of his learned mottoes in the passages quoted by dictionaries to illustrate usage" (401n3). But sometimes the mottoes served as inspiration: "I had yesterday taken a note from *The Anatomy of Melancholy* of an epigram of Seneca . . . I turned over various books in the shop, I forget what. At last I lighted on a passage in Cicero's *Tusculan Questions* which I seized and at once got into the finest frame and wrote my best *Hypochondriack* yet, introducing Seneca's epigram."⁵ Those of us who have searched for just the right epigraph will be loath to charge Boswell with being a poseur or intellectual fraud because of his quotation delving, or we might want to defer judgment until we have at least identified all the evidence against him. The identification of such evidence in one of Boswell's journals is the aim of this essay, but I depend for its acceptance, much as Boswell did in his writings, on one assumption of literary culture voiced by Johnson in the "Life of Waller": "It always gratifies curiosity to trace a sentiment."⁶

³ *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, revised L. F. Powell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934), 4:102.

⁴ *Boswell: Laird of Auchinleck, 1778–1782*, eds. Joseph W. Reed and Frederick A. Pottle (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977), 401; hereafter cited in the text.

⁵ *Boswell in Extremes, 1776–1778*, eds. Charles McC. Weis and Frederick A. Pottle (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), 298–99.

⁶ Samuel Johnson, *The Lives of the Poets*, ed. John H. Middendorf (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 1:270; vol. 21 of the Yale Johnson.

* I *

A close examination of the text of Boswell's works is a natural place to begin our appreciation, and I have deliberately chosen what might be the toughest case (outside of the *London Journal*) to argue for Boswell's charming, allusive style against those sensitive to his treatment of women, namely, *Boswell in Search of a Wife*. Based on a composite of his personal papers, this volume relates the story of his life from 1766 to 1769. In the introduction, Frank Brady, one of the editors, quotes Boswell, who defies "any man to write down anything like a perfect account of what he has been conscious of during one day of his life. . . . [T]he workings of reason and passion . . . the colourings of fancy, are too fleeting to be recorded." Brady continues, "Literally this is true, but it is amazing how evocative his own writing is in its nice mixture of description and incident, and in its apparently uncalculated selection of significant detail."⁷ Editors Brady and Pottle annotate well many of the significant, and evocative, details in their text, notwithstanding their task being complicated by the heterogeneous materials they had to assemble to create a chronological narrative. Boswell's discontinuous manuscript journal, his letters to friends and friends' letters to him, published sources like pertinent sections from the *Life of Johnson*, even notes for the *Life* that ended up on the cutting room floor, all are part of the mix. Despite this hotchpotch, Brady and Pottle treat Boswell's writings throughout as the deliberate work of a talented writer, and I shall follow their pattern in these comments about passages not yet fully explicated. The fugitive allusions in such passages, I believe, help to fix the otherwise fleeting workings of Boswell's mind, resulting in a picture of Boswell sometimes deliberately self-revealing, sometimes not, but a picture that is always interesting.

I begin with a passage from Boswell's journal that the editors imply could well have been included in the *Life of Johnson*, but was not. The journal entry for 17 October 1769 is introduced with this note: "The following conversation between Boswell and Johnson was overlooked when Boswell was writing the *Life*, and is printed here for the first time" (341n3). It seems an inadvertent omission, for the subject matter is a favorite of Boswell, namely discussion of various casuistical commonplaces with Boswell's attempts to elicit Johnson's views of each.⁸ Boswell's prose is often elliptical in his private

⁷ *Boswell in Search of a Wife, 1766–1769*, eds. Frank Brady and Frederick A. Pottle (London: William Heinemann, 1957), xxii; hereafter cited in the text.

⁸ For an extensive discussion of the role of casuistry in Johnson's thought, see Robert G. Walker, "Johnson and Moral Argument: 'We talked of the casuistical question . . .,'" in

papers and never more so than here; since this passage was not expanded for the published *Life*, we are faced with a section puzzling in several ways. I quote the first part of the passage in its entirety:

Called Mr. Johnson. Talked of suicide, if a crime. He said, "Yes. Thought so by all Christians. Saul forsaken of God. Cut off leg to preserve life." BOSWELL. "But may it not be done to save many lives, if you can't bear torture and would discover?" JOHNSON. "Why, Sir, there's no end of arguing on improbable suppositions. And after all, you do not make out that what you allow is not vicious. Only this, that, in a supposable case, a smaller vice is to be chosen rather than a greater." I instanced Turenne. (341)

While the Hebraic and Classical moral traditions were ambivalent regarding suicide, the Christian tradition, as defined by Augustine and Aquinas, was much less so. Johnson cites the Old Testament king Saul, a common exemplum of the despairing self-murderer, who was typically paired in this regard with Judas from the New Testament. Although using Saul as an exemplum was not without its problems—the second narrative of his death in 2 Samuel 1 would seem to make him an "attempted" suicide compared with the version in 1 Samuel 31—he was less problematic, for example, than Samson, whose death required a defense based upon that of a soldier in war to exempt it from blame, or even than Judas, who is not explicitly described as a self-murderer in one of the two biblical narratives of his death (see Acts 1:18–19). Saul fit the bill of a sinful suicide relatively well for Johnson here, and Boswell himself employs Saul the same way twelve years later in a periodical essay, before twisting the allusion to a more particular purpose. After commenting that there is no specific prohibition against suicide in Jewish law, he notes that in Jewish history, on the other hand, "Saul is the *first self-slayer* of whom we read, which I more particularly notice because he is also the *first Hypochondriack*."⁹ (From October 1777 to August 1783 Boswell published periodic essays entitled *The Hypochondriack* monthly and anonymously in the *London Magazine*.)

More finely drawn, I believe, is Johnson's use of the expression "forsaken of God" to describe Saul. The phrase does not appear in the KJV in

Swiftly Sterneward: Essays on Laurence Sterne and His Times in Honor of Melvyn New (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2011), 47–71.

⁹ ["On Suicide"], No. 51 (Dec. 1781), in James Boswell, *The Hypochondriack*, ed. Margery Bailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1928), 2:135.

descriptions of Saul; rather he is said to be one from whom God has “departed” (see 1 Samuel 18:12 and 1 Samuel 28:15). But a search of Eighteenth Century Collections Online reveals that the phrase in this specific context is found frequently in popular secular and religious writings of the long eighteenth century, with roots extending backward at least to the early part of the seventeenth century. Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) uses the phrase repeatedly in a discussion of “Religious Melancholy,” although not singularly with Saul. The phrase occurs four times in short order as Burton describes a specific type: “these kind of persons make away themselves, some are mad, blaspheme, curse, deny God, but most offer violence to their own persons. . . . [A]s Cain, Saul, Ahitophel, Judas, blasphemed and died.”¹⁰ Slightly before Burton wrote, Archbishop John Whitgift reputedly used Saul and the tag we are tracing in a particularly harsh criticism of Henry VIII to his daughter Queen Elizabeth. The anecdote was first printed, to my knowledge, in Izaak Walton’s *Life of Hooker* (1662):

*And, though I shall forbear to speak reproachfully of your Father, yet I beg you to take Notice, that a Part of the Churches Rights, added to the vast Treasure left him by his Father, hath been conceived to bring an unavoidable Consumption upon both, notwithstanding all his Diligence to preserve them. And consider, that after the Violation of those Laws, to which he hath sworn in Magna Charta, God did so far deny him his Restraining Grace, that as King Saul, after he was forsaken of God, fell from one Sin to another; so he, till at last he fell into greater Sins than I am willing to mention.*¹¹

Here it seems the phrase sticks to Saul without the necessity of an explicit link to suicide, although suicide is undoubtedly among the unmentionable sins Whitgift passes over.

But the explicit link is the one we typically find in the later literature. For example, in John Bunyan’s *Life and Death of Mr. Badman* (1680), Wiseman says, “This is almost like *Saul*, who being forsaken of God, went to the Witch of *Endor*, and so to the Devil for help. . . . They [*Saul* and others]

¹⁰ Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, eds. Floyd Dell and Paul Jordan-Smith (New York: Tudor, 1927), 949 (3.4.2.6). For “forsaken of God” see 948, 949, 951, and 960.

¹¹ Walton’s *Life of Hooker*, cited from Jeremy Collier, *An Ecclesiastical History of Great Britain* (London, 1708–1714), 2:685.

are their own Murderers . . .” Similarly, Isaac Watts, in “A Defense Against the Temptation to Self-Murder” (1726), includes Saul, with his signature phrase, in a list of biblical suicides: “Consider *what sort of Men they have been who are recorded in Scripture as Self-Murderers. Achitophel*, a false Traytor, who counselled *Absalom* to rebel against his Father *David*. *Saul* a bloody Man, who forsook God and was forsaken of God. *Zimri* a most wicked King of *Israel*, and *Judas* who betray’d our blessed *Saviour*, etc.”¹² The association Boswell records Johnson making between Saul and the phrase “forsaken of God” is much more specific, then, than it may at first seem.

The following phrase—“Cut off leg to preserve life”—brings up a different issue. Were it presented as part of Boswell’s position (and we are all aware that Boswell was often the devil’s advocate vis-à-vis Johnson), it would be very tempting indeed to find an influence from the clever view presented in Rousseau’s *Julie, or the New Heloise* (1761) by one letter writer defending suicide:

He who has not resolution to deliver himself from a miserable being by a speedy death, is like one who would rather suffer a wound to mortify, than trust to the surgeon’s knife for his cure. Come, thou worthy ———, cut off this leg, which endangers my life. I will see it done without shrinking, and will give that hero leave to call me coward, who suffers his leg to mortify, because he does not dare undergo the same operation.¹³

But the phrase seems to be given as part of Johnson’s anti-suicide position. Assuming that the manuscript reflects accurately the conversation and that Boswell did not slip, the phrase probably suggests, quite simply, an over-arching value afforded to the preservation of life, even at the expense of immediate pain and permanent impairment.

Boswell next attempts to argue from a “hard case.” What if taking one’s own life saves many lives? Johnson’s response reminds Boswell what the initial question was— is suicide a crime—and suggests that Boswell is admitting so when he argues that “a smaller vice is to be chosen rather than a greater.” The

¹² John Bunyan, *The Life and Death of Mr. Badman* (London, 1680), 328–29; and I[saac] Watts, *A Defense Against the Temptation to Self-Murder* (London, 1726), 19.

¹³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Eloisa: Or, a Series of Original Letters . . . Translated from the French*, 2nd ed. (London, 1761), 2:261; Letter 114. Scholars have noted the equivocal position Rousseau himself took on the question of suicide, especially in these letters.

Yale editors understandably plead partial ignorance over Boswell's next words: "I instanced Turenne." They write, "The person instanced is undoubtedly the great seventeenth-century French general, the Vicomte de Turenne, but just what he is brought in to illustrate is not clear" (341n4). Two reasonable possibilities might be suggested.

Boswell may be referring to Turenne's famous rejection of a duel. William Temple recounts it:

In *Germany* the Prince-Electors *Palatine*, *Mentz*, and *Triers*, had entered into league with the Emperor for the defence of the *German* liberty against all strangers. *France* was so enraged against the Elector *Palatine* upon these measures he had taken, that Mons. *De Turenne*, at the head of a *French* army, marched into their country, and made such cruel ravages of it, and so unusual to that General's common procedures, that the Elector sent him a challenge; which Monsieur *De Turenne* answered he could not accept without his master's leave, but was ready to meet him in the field at the head of his army, against any that he and his new allies would bring together.¹⁴

This happened in 1674 and Turenne was killed in battle the following year. The story comes up in many anti-dueling treatises—and there were literally hundreds of them—as well as in Samuel Richardson's novel *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753).¹⁵ In this anecdote, of course, the smaller vice is to refuse a duel; the larger vice is to accept the challenge without authority from King (and God). The possibility that Boswell had this in mind is enhanced by the fact that the morality of dueling and the related concept of self-defense were set-piece discussions in casuistical arguments of the period.¹⁶ The passage in Boswell continues with another such set-piece, must one honor a promise elicited by force—"If you promise to a highwayman £100, should you keep it?"—and concludes with Johnson pointing out concisely both the weakness and the strength of casuistry in general: "But, Sir, that kind of casuistical

¹⁴ *Memoirs of What Passed in Christendom, from 1672 to 1679* [1683], in *The Works of Sir William Temple* (Edinburgh, 1754), 1:201.

¹⁵ Samuel Richardson, *The History of Sir Charles Grandison*, ed. Jocelyn Harris (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 1:264.

¹⁶ See Walker, "Johnson and Moral Argument," and Albert R. Jonsen and Stephen Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry: A History of Moral Reasoning* (1988; 1st paperback ed., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 216–27.

reasoning is very pernicious. Rules cannot be given for improbable cases. One must judge when they happen" (342). Casuistry traditionally was the examination of specific cases, where circumstances, rather than general rules, were often determinative.

But it is even more likely, I think, that Boswell refers to the story of Turenne's death itself, with its accompanying anecdote. Here is Voltaire's version:

Turenne, in going to choose a place whereon to erect a battery, was killed by a cannon-shot. No one is ignorant of the circumstances of his death; but we cannot here refrain a review of the principal of them, for the same reason that they are still talked of every day. It seems as if one could not too often repeat, that the same bullet which killed him, having shot off the arm of Saint Hilaire, Lieutenant General of the artillery, his son came and bewailed his misfortune with many tears: but the father, looking towards Turenne, said; It is not I, but that great man, who should be lamented.¹⁷

Since Boswell's manuscript is in his shorthand, any answer is speculative, but it is reasonable to look to the nearest answer: the immediately preceding clause, "a smaller vice to be chosen rather than a greater," is being illustrated by the reference to Turenne, meant to recall Hilaire's statement in which he compares the loss of his limb to the death of his commander. In addition, we have Voltaire's repeated insistence that the anecdote is well known. (There were several English translations of Voltaire's work almost immediately after it was published in 1751, so he himself may have contributed to the anecdote's continuing popularity.)

Fortunately for his readers today, Boswell usually wrote more expansively in his journal than in his notes for the *Life*, but even in the journal questions about provocative details occasionally arise. There are two such occasions in the entry for 3 September 1769. He begins, "I employed a Scots barber called Gall. I called him the *perfidious Gaul*, a term very proper to denote him when he does not come at the time he promises" (289). Brady and Pottle do not annotate here, despite Boswell's use of italics, perhaps because

¹⁷ Voltaire, *The Age of Lewis XIV* (London, 1753), 1:157. The anecdote was well-known enough to become the object of parody later in the century: see [Richard Griffith], *The Posthumous Works of a Late Celebrated Genius, Deceased* (London, 1770), 68–70.

they felt the phrase was a commonplace for schoolboys reared on Caesar's *Gallic Wars*. The pun on the barber's name works well, as *perfidious* connotes treachery involving the breaking of faith or promises, and the barber's failure to keep his appointment has a consequence: Boswell writes in the very next sentence, "I went to St. Paul's, but was too late." (He did manage to catch a service at the Temple Church.)

But in addition to Caesar's Gauls, Boswell is probably also referring to Gauls much closer in time. The phrase *perfidious Gaul* appears frequently in texts of all genres in the middle of the century in reference to Britain's continental rival, France. Boswell may have this general association in mind (despite the barber's being a Scot); here is a specific example from the pen of his friend John Wilkes that appeared earlier in the decade: "Mr. Pitt has been concerned only in one negotiation, with the perfidious *Gaul*, whom he brought to sue for peace in *our capital*."¹⁸ Associating his barber with Britain's archenemies, or Rome's, or both, Boswell adds a mock heroic quality to the passage which subtly undercuts his irritation at a quotidian inconvenience.

Later the same day Boswell dines at the home of Sir John Pringle with Sir John Mitchell, with whom he disputes the attractiveness of the old town of Edinburgh. Mitchell, an advocate of the recently initiated urban renewal, cites the inconveniency of the old town, to which Boswell responds, "I told him I would never leave it, for I preferred our good old house in the Parliament Close to all the elegance of the new buildings." He punctuates his point with a classical allusion, albeit a somewhat confused one: "I finished the dispute with a droll application of a passage in Cicero, where he says that Ulysses preferred his old wife to immortality. 'Ay, ay,' said I, 'I love my old house, *Vetulam suam praetulit immortalitati*'" (290). The Yale editors point out that "Boswell's Latin is really from Bacon's *Advancement of Learning* . . . or the essay, 'Of Marriage and Single Life,'" that a comparable passage in Cicero is different in language and detail, and that, they speculate, "Boswell had probably read an edition of Bacon's *Essays* in which the editor had pointed to the parallel in Cicero" (290n2). Although I have not been able to locate such an edition, I have discovered that Boswell's mistake is not uniquely his. In Thomas Francklin's short-lived periodical, *The Centinel*, we find, "Homer tells us a remarkable story, not easily reconcilable to modern gallantry, of his hero Ulysses, who refused immortality and a goddess, for death and a wife: *vetulum suam* (says Tully) *immortalitati*."¹⁹ Francklin was known by Johnson

¹⁸ [John Wilkes], *The North Briton* (London, 1763), 2:81; No. 31 (Sat., 1 January 1763).

¹⁹ *The Centinel*, 2nd ed. (Dublin, 1758) 1:290; No. 7 (Thurs., 17 February 1757).

and Boswell in London's small literary world,²⁰ but I am not arguing for a definitive source for Boswell's confusion, merely that it may have been common. Perhaps it originated in the practice illustrated in *The Spectator*, No. 607, Friday, 15 October 1714, where the Latin is given exactly as in Boswell and imprecisely credited to "the best of Pagan Authors," a description more applicable in the eighteenth century to Cicero than to Homer.²¹

Boswell's inexact or slightly off base allusions challenge editors, who may silently ignore an allusion or speculate in a way that shows how uncomfortable they are with their speculation. When Boswell is describing his infatuation with "the gardener's daughter" in a letter of 28 April 1766 to his close friend William Johnson Temple, he writes that in order to spend more time with her, "I pretend great earnestness to have the library in good order and assist her to dust it." He continues later in the same letter, "When dusting the rooms with my charmer, am I not like Agamemnon amongst the Thracian girls? All this may do for a summer. But is it possible that I could imagine the dear delirium would last for life? I will rouse my philosophic spirit, and fly from this fascination" (4–5). Brady and Pottle ignore the classical reference, but forty years later in the research edition of Boswell and Temple's correspondence, Thomas Crawford ventures the following: "Perhaps JB, who did not know Greek well, confused Agamemnon with Achilles, and Thrace with Scyros, the island in the Aegean off the coast of Sicily where Thetis, knowing her son would die at Troy, disguised him as a girl. Yet Achilles' principal affair was not with a handmaiden, but with Deidamia, the king's daughter."²² But Boswell need not have known Greek at all, nor have confused Thrace with Scyros, to have intended Achilles rather than Agamemnon here. Knowledge of a passage from Matthew Prior's *Alma* (1718) would have done the trick nicely. Arguing that diet makes the man and working from the commonplace that Thracian girls were all young and sexually appealing, Prior writes,

²⁰ Brian Hanley notes, "Precisely when Johnson and Franklin met is not known, though they were certainly on friendly terms by the mid-1770s. Perhaps the two were introduced to each other at David Garrick's wedding (London, 22 June 1749), which Reverend Franklin presided over" (*Samuel Johnson as Book Reviewer* [Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2001], 254n110).

²¹ *The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 5:75. Bond cites Bacon's "Of Marriage and Single Life" as the source of the Latin and two passages from Cicero for the same sentiment. He adds, "The 'best of pagan authors' is apparently Cicero" (75n1).

²² *The Correspondence of James Boswell and William Johnson Temple 1756–1795*, ed. Thomas Crawford (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 1:147n8; hereafter cited in the text.

That great ACHILLES might imploy
 The strength, design'd to ruin Troy;
 He Din'd on Lion's Marrow, spread
 On Toasts of Ammunition-Bread:
 But by His Mother sent away,
 Amongst the THRACIAN Girls to play,
 Effeminate He sat, and quiet:
 Strange Product of a Cheese-cake Diet!²³

A slip of the pen—Agamemnon for Achilles—blurred an allusion to Prior's well-known poem that Boswell probably intended Temple to recognize. Of course, the comparison of himself to the Greek hero, both destined to do great things and both temporarily enervated, is only partially tongue-in-cheek. That Boswell's charm (there is really no better word to describe his style in writing) manages to employ such grandiose comparisons without putting off his reader is a large part of the journal's appeal.

Another of Boswell's letters to Temple, one written less than a month after the one just mentioned, provides an especially complicated challenge to modern editors. Boswell is in the process of striking up a relationship with William Pitt the Elder, ostensibly to promote the cause of the Corsican leader General Paoli with the British government. He tells Temple of "a most polite ministerial letter" he has received from Pitt in answer to his, and continues, quoting Pitt's letter,

Mr. Pitt is a great admirer of the Corsican Chief: "It may be said of General Paoli what Cardinal de Retz said of the great Duke of Montrose, 'C'est un de ces homes qu'on ne trouve plus que dans les *Vies* de Plutarque [He is one of those men who are no longer to be found but in the *Lives* of Plutarch].'" Thus did Demosthenes talk of Epaminondas. (11)

Brady and Pottle usefully point out that Boswell employed the English translation of Pitt's French sentence as the final sentence in his *Corsica*, but they are silent about Demosthenes / Epaminondas. Thomas Crawford misidentifies Epaminondas as an Athenian rather than a Theban, and continues, "JB's comparison is an imaginative flight, for Epaminondas is not mentioned in

²³ "Alma: Or, the Progress of the Mind" in [Matthew Prior], *Poems on Several Occasions* (London, 1718), 366–67.

any of Demosthenes' orations" (152n33). For this second point Crawford acknowledges reliance on an 1827 index of Demosthenes' works, and the contemporary search engines I have used are just as unsuccessful in identifying Boswell's statement. Assuming Boswell was in error, the question remains as to what he might have had in mind.

Although Epaminondas is not mentioned in Demosthenes' orations and although, as we shall see in a moment, Plutarch's *Life of Epaminondas* is no longer extant, Plutarch's *Life of Demosthenes* contains a brief passage in which the Athenian orator encourages the Greek forces to ignore unfavorable prophecies before battle with Philip of Macedonia by reminding them of heroes of their particular city-states: "The *Thebans* he put in Mind of *Epaminondas*, the *Athenians* of *Pericles*, who always took their own Measures and govern'd their Actions by Reason, looking upon such Fopperies [oracular pronouncements] as a Pretence only for Cowardise."²⁴ But this is a mere mention, albeit a complimentary one, of Epaminondas in the course of an episode much more memorable for Demosthenes' subsequently fleeing the field disgracefully before the victorious Philip.

An essay by Montaigne, "Of Three Most Excellent Men," provides a more compelling context to Boswell's text, I believe. After discussing the characters of Homer and Alexander, Montaigne concludes by arguing that "the third *Great Man*, and, in my Opinion, the most Excellent of all, is EPAMINONDAS. . . . The *Greeks* have done him the Honour, without Contradiction, to pronounce him the *greatest Man of their Nation*; and to be the first Man of *Greece* is easily to be the first of the World."²⁵ Now this Theban general was certainly better known in Boswell's day than in our own, and his fame had been durable (Montaigne's "first Man of *Greece*" is an echo of Cicero). But foremost among Epaminondas' advocates in the early modern period may well have been Montaigne, who was both selective and inventive in his depiction of Epaminondas. As a contemporary Montaigne scholar puts it, "In 'Of the most outstanding men' Montaigne goes so far as to rank Epaminondas as the greatest of all the men he has ever known, placing him above Alexander, Cato, and even Socrates. Yet it seems that the character of Epaminondas is largely his own invention."²⁶ There is more than a coincidental

²⁴ "Life of Demosthenes" in *Plutarch's Lives. Translated from the Greek, by Several Hands* (London, 1703), 5:170.

²⁵ *The Essays of Michael Seigneur de Montaigne, Translated in English*, 7th ed. (London, 1759), 2:569; hereafter cited in the text.

²⁶ Ann Hartle, *Michel de Montaigne: Accidental Philosopher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 81.

parallel, it seems to me, between the two military leaders, Epaminondas and Paoli, credited by their advocates, Montaigne and Boswell, for virtues extending far beyond the battlefield.

Boswell certainly did not have Montaigne's essay open before him as he wrote Temple, but there are two additional aspects of the essay that suggest it lay at the back of Boswell's mind during this period of his life. First, Montaigne includes in his adulation of Epaminondas this remark: "As to his Knowledge and Capacity, we have this ancient Judgment of him, *That never any Man knew so much, and spake so little as he*: For he was of the Pythagorean Sect" (569). The "ancient Judgment" was given by Spintharus, as twice related by Plutarch, but it is the mention of the Pythagoreans that is of immediate interest. The following year in yet another letter to Temple, Boswell vows to become more dignified upon the publication of his account of Corsica: "I shall then have a character which I must support. I will swear like an ancient disciple of Pythagoras to observe silence" (112). Boswell certainly could have come upon this commonplace elsewhere, including *Tooke's Pantheon*, which he owned and mentions reading twenty months later.²⁷

A second passage from Montaigne's encomium for Epaminondas brings us back to Boswell's reference in an even more teasing way. The only other historical figure, Montaigne tells us, "fit to be put into the other Scale of the Balance" with Epaminondas is Scipio Africanus. He continues, "Oh! what a Mortification has Time given us, to deprive us of the Sight of two of the most noble Lives, which, by the common Consent of all the World, one the greatest of the *Greeks*, and the other of the *Romans*, were in all *Plutarch*! What a Subject! What a Workman!" (570). Scipio's and Epaminondas' are the first—and most famously "lost"—of the paired biographies of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*. Boswell did not recall Montaigne's essay well; otherwise he would not have dragged in Demosthenes from who knows where. Pitt's mention of Plutarch's *Lives* may certainly have called up to Boswell's mind Montaigne's aggrandizement of Epaminondas, a process Boswell himself was attempting for Paoli. But Boswell's recollection of Montaigne did not extend to the French essayist's lament of the loss of Plutarch's *Life of Epaminondas*;

²⁷ See the entry for 5 July 1769 (236). For Boswell's ownership of *Tooke's Pantheon*, see *Boswell in Holland, 1763–1764*, ed. Frederick A. Pottle (London: William Heinemann, 1952), 352. The passage in Tooke reads in part, "Silence was observed in a most peculiar Manner in the Sacrifices of *Bona Dea*, as it was in a less Degree in all other Sacrifices, according to the Doctrine of the *Pythagoreans* and *Egyptians*, who taught that God was to be worshipped in Silence," François Pomey, *The Pantheon . . . The Twentieth Edition . . . by Andrew Tooke* (London, 1761), 174. Tooke's translation of Pomey's work (1659) first appeared in 1698.

otherwise he would not have so closely linked Epaminondas with “men who are no longer to be found but in the *Lives* of Plutarch.”

Occasionally a single word in a quotation can suggest the direction of Boswell's reading. That may happen when Boswell is commenting to Temple upon Belle de Zuylen, his Zélide, the young woman he had sometimes wooed in Holland. Having learned from her father that her courtship by another man is progressing, Boswell accepts his father's assessment that Zélide would have been a spirit too free for Auchinleck (both the manor and the Lord). Boswell, of course, may be making a virtue of necessity here, but in view of two of the overarching subjects of this selection of his private papers, his attempts at marriage and his attitude toward his father's potential remarriage, his deference to Lord Auchinleck at this point is especially interesting. Boswell quotes his father's rationale for disapproving of Zélide—“I love . . . one who has been accustomed to play in concert . . . [f]or such a person will make harmony in any country. But one who has played in discord with those around her will hardly play in tune at all”—and follows his father's words with a Latin tag: “*Cum fueris Romae, Romano vivito more* is sound sense” (8). Brady and Pottle's note—“When in Rome, live as the Romans' (St. Ambrose, *cum* for *si*)” (8n3)—is echoed exactly by Crawford (151n15), but more should be said about the quotation.

The source for what had become proverbial even before Boswell's time is St. Augustine's Letter 36, “To Casulanus,” where Augustine quotes Ambrose giving him this advice in response to his question about what fasting custom one should follow. But the Latin there is far different, as Ambrose supposedly says, “Quando hic sum, non jejano Sabbato. Quando Romae sum, jejano Sabbate [When I am here (i.e., Milan), I do not fast on Saturday. When I am at Rome, I do].”²⁸ There is no evidence that Boswell knew this text, but he might well have picked up the expression—in the exact Latin he uses—from Jeremy Taylor's famous casuistical tract, *Ductor Dubitantium*. Emphasizing the role that circumstances, as well as conscience, may play in establishing proper behavior (“*All Consciences are to walk by the same Rule, and that which is just to one, is so to all, in the like circumstances*”), Taylor omits mention of his obvious source, Ambrose via Augustine, as he writes,

He that fasted upon a *Saturday* in *Ionia* or *Smyrna* was a Schismatick; and so was he who did not fast at *Milan* or *Rome*

²⁸ Epistola 36, caput 14; cited from www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu, accessed 23 August 2009.

upon the same day, both upon the same reason; *Cum fueris Romae, Romano vivito more, Cum fueris alibi, vivito sicut ibi*. because he was to conform to the custom of *Smyrna*, as well as to that of *Milan*, in the respective Diocesses.²⁹

Note that Boswell mirrors Taylor's use of the conjunctive adverb *cum*, not *quando* (as in Augustine) nor *si* (equally common with *cum* as the expression was used proverbially in the long eighteenth century, which is perhaps why the modern editors mention it). Boswell's interest in casuistry, noted above, is another reason to favor his possible familiarity with Taylor here. Boswell's decision about whom to marry, moreover, carries complex familial circumstances worthy of a casuist's examination, as we shall see.

I spoke earlier of the appeal that this particular selection of Boswell's personal papers has, as we follow the writer's sometimes subtle, sometimes blunt, but usually charming pursuit of women. That pursuit functions almost as a dominant theme would in a work of fiction, tying it together as different aspects are variously emphasized. The volume's title tells more than half the story, as during these years Boswell brings to a climax a major concern of his personal writings, his relationship with women, by choosing and then winning the hand in marriage of Margaret Montgomerie. Two additional subjects conspicuous in Boswell's life and writings at this time serve to reinforce the implications of this theme. The first is Boswell's strenuous opposition to, succeeded at last by a grudging acceptance of, his father's decision to remarry. The second is Boswell's role in the Douglas cause, the major issue of which, according to Boswell, was "that great principle of law—*filiation*—on which we all depend" (xvi). Frank Brady puts all these subjects in exactly the right context:

Modern readers are likely to forget that eighteenth-century society, though like our own in its stress on property and money, differed from ours in one important respect: it was a "lineal" society. A man thought of himself and was judged by others in terms of his family, its position and traditions, a good deal more than in terms of what he was or made of himself as an individual. (xii).

Brady's insight can help us identify the final fugitive allusion we will discuss.

²⁹ Jeremy Taylor, *Ductor Dubitantium, or, the Rule of Conscience* (1660; London, 1696), 25 (1.1.5.5).

When Boswell makes a brief jaunt from Edinburgh to London in late August 1769, his sole companion in the chaise turns out to be “Mr. Farquhar Kinloch, merchant in London.” Although Boswell does a bit of brain-picking and “learn[s] a good deal from him as to some mercantile causes in which I am concerned,” his special interest soon comes to the fore:

I was entertained and pleased to find Mr. Kinloch fond of ancient families. Though he was but the son of James Farquhar, *merchant* (as we say in Scotland, but truly just *hardwareman*) at the sign of the Red Lion, he seemed to love noble blood as if he had been a true *lion's whelp*, as the poets talk. I gave him a history of our family. I was quite in my element. (281)

The twenty-first-century reader is tempted to focus here on the passage's social irony, of which the writer is unaware. Boswell describes Kinloch somewhat condescendingly: he is “but the son” of a father who is not really a merchant “but truly just [a] *hardwareman*.” Boswell's obliviousness to the intersection of the economically ascending merchant class (Farquhar Kinloch) with the economically descending landed aristocracy (his own) is enough to bring sociological critics to their feet, but it is hardly fair, or fruitful, to fault Boswell for not anticipating Marx.

The surface of the text, moreover, is rich enough to encourage analysis emphasizing Boswell's lineal concerns. The two men are, after all, sharing a coach, and most pleasantly it seems. Boswell uses Farquhar Kinloch's two Gaelic family names when referring to his companion, as indeed Kinloch probably did, ignoring his forename, the English-derived “George.” Kinloch's interest in genealogy is sincere enough to prompt Boswell to relate his family history (although one suspects he did not require much encouragement), and Boswell assumes this interest is, like his, aristocratically oriented (“he seemed to love noble blood”). The allusion that completes Boswell's back-handed compliment (“as if he had been a true *lion's whelp*, as the poets talk”) is ignored by the Yale editors, despite the italics and the teasingly vague source, “poets.” Boswell is patently punning on “Red Lion,” where Kinloch's father worked, but the phrase *lion's whelp*, while it appears in many different places in secular and religious literature, seems most likely in this context to refer specifically to a passage in *Cymbeline*.

Shakespeare's play, like his other late romances, is filled with problematic parentages and marriages. In the final act the imprisoned Posthumus dreams of a family he never knew: “Sleep, thou hast been a grandsire, and

begot / A father to me; and thou hast created / A mother and two brothers."³⁰
 He then finds a tablet, left by Jupiter and foretelling his fortune. He reads,

When as a lion's whelp shall, to himself unknown, without seeking find, and be embrac'd by a piece of tender air; and when from a stately cedar shall be lopp'd branches, which, being dead many years, shall after revive, be jointed to the old stock, and freshly grow; then shall Posthumus end his miseries. (5.4.138–43).

Not until the very end of the play, when a soothsayer interprets the tablet's message, does Posthumus (and everyone else) understand its two puns and its reference to Cymbeline's missing heirs. For our purposes here, and for Boswell's, the general tenor of the passages, plus the first pun from the name of Posthumus's father—a name given to the father posthumously I might add—are most important. The soothsayer explains to Posthumus, "Thou, Leonatus, art the lion's whelp; / The fit and apt construction of thy name, / Being Leo-natus, doth import so much" (5.5.445–47). Boswell's belief in the importance of "lineal" society makes this appearance of the phrase, with its concomitant pun, the most likely source of his allusion in a work concerned in ways great and small with lineage.

Most of the items discussed above fall into the category of "learned allusions." I realize that readers of this essay may be convinced of the validity of the identifications while at the same time not agreeing that Boswell's use of them is somehow charming or pleasing. In the "Life of Congreve" Johnson observed, "*de gustibus non est disputandum*; men may be convinced, but they cannot be pleased, against their will."³¹

Many times Boswell seems in his personal writings to be striving for intellectual validation by the use of learned allusions, and it is left to his readers to decide whether this is pathetic insecurity or something more appealing, and appealing perhaps because such an impulse is found generally in human nature. The right allusion, or, as is sometimes the case with Boswell, the nearly right allusion, works, I believe, to give readers a sense of pleasure as both reader and writer share knowledge of culture assumptions, even when they no longer share belief in the validity of those assumptions themselves.

³⁰ *Cymbeline* in David Bevington, ed., *Complete Works of Shakespeare*, 3rd ed. (Glenview: Scott, Foresman, 1980), 5.4.123–25. References to act, scene, and line are hereafter in the text.

³¹ Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the Poets*, 2:740. I wish to thank Professor Melvyn New for helpful criticism of an earlier version of this essay.