

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: **“NO WOMAN IS THE WORSE FOR SENSE AND KNOWLEDGE” : SAMUEL JOHNSON AND WOMEN**

Julia Robertson Acker, M.A., 2007

Directed By: Laura J. Rosenthal, Professor and Associate Chair, Department of English Language and Literature

Accurate understanding of Samuel Johnson's treatment of women depends on the range of primary and secondary texts one has read. Images of Samuel Johnson have been largely misguided; stereotypes of Samuel Johnson as having a negative attitude toward women persist. A chief architect of Samuel Johnson's chauvinist image, James Boswell succeeded exceedingly well in his widely read Life of Johnson in depicting a manly portrait of his friend and mentor Samuel Johnson. Investigate Johnson's writings further, however, both professional and personal, and it becomes clear that Johnson actually supported erudition and education among women.

**“NO WOMAN IS THE WORSE FOR SENSE AND KNOWLEDGE” : SAMUEL
JOHNSON AND WOMEN**

By

Julia Robertson Acker

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
2007

Advisory Committee:

Professor Laura J. Rosenthal, Chair
Vincent Carretta, Professor
Tita Chico, Assistant Professor

© Copyright by
Julia Robertson Acker
2007

Table of Contents

Table of Contents	ii
Introduction.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 1: Biographical Accounts of Johnson.....	3
<u>Boswell's Chauvinistic Depiction.....</u>	4Error! Bookmark not defined.
<u>Finding Evidence for Johnson's Support of Women in Biographical Accounts...Error! Bookmark not defined.</u>	
Chapter 2: Gender in Johnson's Fiction.....	23
Rasselas.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
The Rambler and The Idler	39
Chapter 3: Letters, Diaries and Journals	53
Conclusion	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Bibliography	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Further Reading.....	
Notes.....	

Introduction

The name Samuel Johnson perhaps conjures myriad images: brilliant scholar, eccentric writer, erudite lexicographer, dramatist, critic, poet, chauvinist. While many perceive Johnson as chauvinist, though, in reality Johnson supported women, both personally and professionally. An accurate conclusion about Johnson's treatment of women depends on the range of literature, both primary and secondary texts, one has digested. Here and now, in the twenty-first century, images of Samuel Johnson are misguided; stereotypes of Samuel Johnson as misogynist or chauvinist persist. As the chief architect of Samuel Johnson's chauvinist image, James Boswell succeeded exceedingly well in his widely read *Life of Johnson* in painting a manly portrait of his friend and mentor Samuel Johnson. Delve further into Johnson's writings, however, both professional and personal, and into his relationships with women, and a more accurate understanding of Johnson becomes abundantly clear. I needed look no further for evidence of this tenacious misguided stereotype of Johnson than a recent trip to London; as I dined with colleagues one evening I was questioned as to the topic of my English literature thesis. When I explained that I was working on Samuel Johnson, a British colleague moaned and quipped: "Samuel Johnson – what a chauvinist *he* was."

James Boswell's colorful depiction of Johnson in Boswell's *Life of Johnson* continues to pervade the collective popular consciousness; until the past decade or two, Boswell's opinion influenced the scholarly consciousness as well. Boswell's mission to paint Johnson as formidably manly was wildly successful and convincing for lay readers and Johnsonians alike. Boswell's portrait of Johnson established a pervasive and lasting

image of him as chauvinist; however, Johnson actually supported the education of women and their intellectual pursuits. More recent eighteenth-century scholars have energetically and implausibly reversed this conception of Johnson as chauvinist to portray Johnson as an eighteenth-century writer and scholar who considered women *equal* to men and enthusiastically supported female education and erudition.¹ While crediting Johnson with a perception of women as *equal* is extreme, simply broadening the scope of textual sources is undoubtedly sufficient to influence one's perception of Johnson; biographies of acquaintances such as Hester Lynch Thrale, who was arguably as close to Johnson as Boswell, as well as epistolary evidence and journal entries, support a radically different view of Johnson's personal and professional notion of women and an "aha" revised perspective on his literary works.

Johnson's contemporaries and more dated scholarship, then, delineate Johnson as chauvinist, while many, more recent, critics view Johnson as a feminist who considered women as essentially equal to men. The truth lies somewhere between. With a more comprehensive breadth of evidence and primary texts considered, Johnson does indeed emerge as sympathetic to women; arguing that he perceives women as *equal* is pushing the envelope. This paper will examine the primary and secondary texts that tend to indicate Johnson as a chauvinist and explain the reasons this interpretation persists, but is inaccurate. I will also look at myriad textual examples in his writings that clearly indicate his support for erudition among women.

Chapter 1 - Biographical Accounts of Johnson

In 1992, Bruce Redford and Margaret Anne Doody were among the first to examine closely an alternative biography of Johnson by Hester Lynch Thrale Piozzi, and her influence not only in Johnson's personal life but also on his writing style. Up to this point, scholars focused on the prodigious influence of Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, not paying much attention to the women in Johnson's life. Indeed, Johnson's wife "Tetty" has still received very little attention by scholars of Johnson. Yet, a careful look at Johnson's relationship with women and his treatment of them is central to a study of his life and works. Redford, Doody and others were among the first critics to dispel the longstanding image of Johnson as chauvinist. Understanding Johnson's treatment and perception of women can be enigmatic and inconclusive for several reasons. Central sources upon which we must rely in ascertaining Johnson's ideas on the topic are biographical accounts of him, surviving correspondence between him and acquaintances, and his literary works. These sources present conflicting evidence of Johnson's views of women. Although throughout these sources Johnson may come across as chauvinist, a more thoughtful and careful reading suggests that Johnson is actually supportive of women. Seemingly negative remarks are explicable given the inevitable influence of Johnson's patriarchal eighteenth-century cultural environment or as Johnson's satire of undesirable female behavior, which Johnson sought to guide women to improve.

Rival and conflicting ideas of Johnson in the primary biographical accounts of him by Hester Thrale and James Boswell account for many of the differences in our perception of his attitude towards and his treatment of women.ⁱⁱ James Boswell's popular *Life of Johnson* has been the biggest influence on the pervasive stereotype of Johnson as chauvinist, and Thrale's biography is much less known or read. Because both Thrale and Boswell knew Johnson in separate social contexts, they sought to portray Johnson differently. Undoubtedly, Johnson himself likely acted differently around Boswell than he did in the presence of Ms. Thrale. While Thrale played an important role as nurturer within Johnson's life and depicted him in her *Thraliana*ⁱⁱⁱ through this bias, Boswell attempted to defend Johnson's manliness in his *Life of Johnson*. Hence his portrayal of Johnson's attitudes toward women may be somewhat distorted, although Boswell claims that he is presenting Johnson as he really was.

Boswell's Chauvinistic Depiction

As a first step to examining and explaining the persistent image of Johnson as chauvinist, let's examine the biography responsible for the creation of that persona. Undoubtedly the biased public perception of Johnson as chauvinistic or even misogynistic results from Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, a widely read sketch of Samuel Johnson published in 1791. In general, Boswell depicts Johnson as regarding most women as foolish (*I*, 414). Boswell includes Johnson's well known, notorious comment that a woman preaching is "like a dog on hind legs; it is not done well, but it is surprising that it is done at all" (309).^{iv} Indeed, William Craig, who based much of his 1895 *Dr.*

Johnson and The Fair Sex on Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, writes that “[Johnson] even denies them [women] the power of moral judgment. ‘Ladies,’ in his opinion, ‘set no value on the moral character of men who pay their addresses to them’” (27).^v

Craig catalogues myriad examples of Johnson's ill treatment of women in his personal life: when Miss Reynolds asks Johnson's opinion of a woman's translation of Horace, for example, Johnson allegedly responded: “‘They are very well for a young Miss's verses – that is to say, compared with excellence, nothing; but very well for the person who wrote them’” (Craig 17). Further, Johnson apparently called Miss Monckton a “dunce” in a conversation about Sterne's writings (*Ibid* 24). “Eager to detect a flaw in the perfection of the female character,” Craig states, “he did not hesitate to publish and avow as his firm conviction that woman was a being in many ways inferior to man” (25).^{vi} Indeed, Craig is relentless in his portrayal of Johnson as critical of women.

“[Women],” Craig explains,

very properly expect to be placed upon the same intellectual level with men, and this Johnson absolutely refused to do. He might own them to be clever, well-read, witty, and so forth; but he drew a marked and unflattering distinction between their mental capacity and that of the rougher sex. He never took them quite seriously, or affected to conceal from them his sense of their inferiority. (15-16)

Surely Craig gullibly absorbs the Johnsonian persona that Boswell so deftly attempts to portray in his *Life of Johnson* in his depiction of Johnson: “Johnson was petted and fondled and flattered by the women of his time to an extent that probably mortal man was before or since” (5-6). No doubt Craig thought himself clever by writing the first line of his book about Johnson and women thus: “‘If I had no duties, and no reference to futurity, I would spend my life driving briskly in a post-chaise with a pretty woman.’

Such was the deliberate pronouncement of a philosopher verging on seventy” (1).

Craig’s text is convincing that Johnson was chauvinist until one considers his main source, Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*, in which Boswell sets out to depict as manly a creature in Samuel Johnson as possible.

Though scholarship from the past fifteen to twenty years argues that a perception of Johnson as chauvinist is erroneous and undeserved, Boswell’s depiction of Johnson as misogynist in *The Life of Johnson* tenaciously persists into this century. In *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*, the editors, Gilbert and Gubar, cite Johnson as an example of misogyny among male writers: “ ‘Toward the end of the century, when Dr. Johnson compared a woman preacher to a dancing dog, or when he condemned portrait-painting as improper in women...’ ” he shows misogynistic tendencies (Basker 65).

Though much of the general perception of Johnson as chauvinist is attributable to Boswell’s presentation of him as thus, Johnson was additionally inevitably influenced by the eighteenth-century British culture in which he lived. Eighteenth-century culture, in which women had few rights and privileges and little value, had a significant, understandable influence on Johnson. Amanda Vickery, in her The Gentleman’s Daughter – Women’s Lives in Georgian England, details the typical domestic lifestyle of an eighteenth-century gentlewoman through a study of epistolary and autobiographical evidence. Though Vickery contends that women were not completely submissive and subservient, she does acknowledge that “Mrs. Average led a sheltered life drained of economic purpose and public responsibility. Cramped by custom, corset and crinoline, she was often a delicate creature, who was, at best, conspicuously in need of masculine protection, and, at worst, prey to invalidism and hysteria” (3).

Boswell is additionally not to blame for Johnson's staunch and persistent belief in subordination, a consistent theme throughout eighteenth-century culture and texts. A pervasive culture of subordination and patriarchy was one of the traditional ideas reflected throughout his writings and personal life; this entrenched eighteenth-century idea could not have failed to influence Johnson's perception of women in some manner. Johnson cannot be faulted for the understandable cultural influence; certainly feminism was far from male minds of the eighteenth-century. To Johnson, the universe consisted of a strict hierarchical structure, with God at the top and animals at the bottom. Men and women formed part of this hierarchical chain; so in a male-oriented culture, women were necessarily less important in the hierarchy. In Johnson's eighteenth-century culture, for example, parents desired male heirs, as men were traditionally perceived as more important than women (*Life of Johnson* 69). It is quite likely that, in the 1700s, before feminism or sexism were part of the lexicon, Johnson simply never thought about whether he supported women. Why would he? Why would many people think twice about traditional women's places in society and scholarship?

Boswell's well-known *Life of Johnson* provides examples of Johnson's staunch conviction in subordination, as do his fictional works. In one instance, Boswell describes an incident in which Mrs. Knowles complains to Johnson that the indulgence and liberty that men are afforded gives them undeserved superiority; in essence, she argues that women's confinement to domestic experience is unjust and limited compared to the opportunities available to men (218). Johnson smugly responds: "Madam, one or other must have the superiority" (218).^{vii} Influencing his writing and treatment of women throughout his life, then, Johnson's strong belief in subordination reflects traditional

eighteenth-century views of women and, although seemingly not so abusive as exemplified by his characters, the belief is pervasive throughout his literary works. Johnson's rigid conviction of subordination pervades his attitudes and views throughout his life and influences inevitably his treatment of women. This belief, however, doesn't indicate that Johnson is chauvinist, merely that he understandably subscribes to the traditional view of hierarchy within his culture.

Eighteenth-century women who overstepped the boundaries of propriety were generally viewed as threatening, and Johnson's writings reflect this perception. Biographical accounts of Johnson and also his writings suggest that women characterized as intelligent or assertive were perceived as threats to male autonomy or male pride. Johnson himself describes this fear to Hester Thrale: "It is a paltry Trick to deny Women the Cultivation of their mental Powers, and I think it is partly a proof that we are afraid of them if we endeavor to keep them unarmed" (*Thraliana I*, 166). Note, however, that Johnson laments the denial of education to women simultaneously as he nods to this cultural fear of intellectual women. Johnson recognizes and believes in women's capabilities and the choices they have in developing their abilities. Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, however, contains a conflicting interpretation of Johnson's attitude. Boswell describes an incident in which Johnson is with a group of male acquaintances, and Garrick speaks of Mr. Langton's "frolick t'other night" (*I*, 166). Johnson responds that "He durst not do such a thing. His wife would not let him!" (*I*, 166). In a later incident described by Boswell, Johnson's schoolteacher one day followed him home to ensure his safety: "feeling her careful attention as an insult to his manliness, he ran back to her in a rage, and beat her, as well as his strength would permit" (123). These biographical

accounts of Johnson portraying him as chauvinist, then, indicate the influence of eighteenth-century cultural views of women on Johnson as well as Boswell's biased efforts (and questionable veracity) to portray him as manly.

Johnson is additionally mistaken for a chauvinist because of his portrayal of women as coquettes, flirtatious, teasing young women who may dress and act inappropriately. Rather than simply describing coquettish women, however, Johnson's aim is, instead, to encourage more rational and intelligent behavior of which he believes females are capable. Addison and Steele are among other eighteenth-century writers who criticize such behavior in women. Again, Johnson disparaged coquettes because he strongly believed in the rational and intelligent capabilities of women. Indeed, according to Thrale's *Anecdotes*, Johnson was overtly critical of the social behavior, dress and appearance of women (*Anecdotes* 183-4); Hester Thrale reveals that "he did indeed say very contemptuous things of our sex" (*Anecdotes* 174). She includes in her *Anecdotes* Johnson's description of the irritating coquetry of his wife before their wedding by playing with her horse: "I had however soon occasion to see it was only coquetry, and that I despised, so quickening my pace a little, she mended hers." In his *Life of Johnson*, Boswell includes the identical quotation of Johnson's. Johnson's behavior in this incident even makes his future wife cry (97). Because Johnson encouraged female intellectualism and education, he naturally criticizes vacuous women; his criticism of coquetry is indicative of his support for women to exhibit the more rational and intelligent behavior of which he knew they were capable.

Thus far, then, we have seen that the stereotype of Johnson as chauvinist emanates from Boswell's prodigious efforts to portray him as such in his *Life of Johnson*,

the inevitable and understandable influence of his own eighteenth-century culture, and misunderstandings of his intent in his criticism of vacuous women, meant more to encourage intelligent and erudite behavior among women.

Johnson's portrayals of mothers sometimes appears misogynistic, too; however, Johnson's perception of motherhood simply reflects cultural values of his time period. Biographies of Johnson and his personal writings exemplify simultaneously the understandable eighteenth-century cultural influence and his disappointment in female vacuous behavior on the subject of motherhood. Cultural influence led him to cling to established ideas of ideal motherhood, characteristics of which limited women to narrow, prescribed, nurturing roles, while his belief in the capacity for erudition among women prompted his encouragement of mothers to raise thoughtful, educated, young women (and his criticism of mothers who limited the education and experience of both daughters *and sons*).

Johnson includes in his writings the image of mothers as failures, women who did not possess the qualities necessary in a mother. He criticizes most harshly women who fail in their responsibilities and duties in raising their children. According to Johnson, for example, Mrs. Thrale violates her role of motherhood and makes a bad choice when she hastens to Italy with the intent of marrying Piozzi (*Letters*). Indeed, he views her second marriage as a disappointing abandonment of her duties to her children (*Letters July '84*), and emboldens Hester Maria, Thrale's daughter, to be a guide for her sisters as her mother ought to have been (Lansdowne July 1, '84). Johnson's extreme disappointment in Hester Thrale is evident perhaps even in *The Fountains*; if Thrale's character parallels that of "Floretta" in the text, then "Floretta's" social isolation in the tale is similar to

Thrale's after her decision to marry Piozzi.^{viii} Floretta, the narrator writes, was "unwelcome wherever she went" (135); similarly, Johnson breaks off communication with Thrale when she flees to Italy to marry Piozzi.

Mothers failed in other ways as well; a woman could additionally neglect her responsibilities and duties to her children by exerting excess dominance over them. Although Johnson generally respected his mother, he resented that both his father and his mother were over-assertive in prodding Johnson as a child to display his unique wit publicly (*Anecdotes* 11). While, according to Thrale, Johnson admits to her that he did not respect his own mother (*Anecdotes* 21), Boswell makes excuses for Johnson's infrequent visits to his mother, citing, for instance, his time-consuming literary labors and his contributions to her financial support (*Life of Johnson* 226). Although Thrale and Boswell's testimony about Johnson's feelings and views conflict somewhat, both show that Johnson objected to overtly domineering mothers, and was concerned that children should not be overpowered (*Anecdotes* 17).

Importantly, Johnson additionally criticizes mothers who have failed in their duties and responsibilities by exerting extreme dominance, specifically over their *daughters*. A mother's domineering treatment of her daughter, Johnson contends, not only threatens the daughter's free will and self-reliance, but also functions to perpetuate the narrowness of her experience, mainly by over-emphasizing the importance of domestic responsibility. A domineering mother, Johnson argues, fails because she inhibits her daughter's freedom and ability to choose. Although Johnson's own mother was not particularly domineering, he often criticized Hester Thrale's mother for possessing this trait: In *The Fountains*, for example, since Thrale may represent Floretta,

Floretta's mother may symbolize Thrale's mother; both the real and the fictional mothers are domineering figures. Floretta attempts to thwart her mother's authority by "[doing] her own way" (240); even at the opening of the short story, she defies her mother by setting a hawk free against her mother's wishes (234).

Johnson's treatment of the role of wife has also led to suspicions of his being misogynistic; he addresses this role both in his personal life and his literary works. Again, however, Johnson's eighteenth-century cultural environment, in which wives were clearly subservient and subordinate to their husbands, was understandably influential in Johnson's thinking. Amanda Vickery agrees that the "majority [of gentlewomen] were consciously resigned to... the symbolic authority of fathers and husbands, the self-sacrifices of motherhood and the burdensome responsibility of domestic servants, housekeeping and family consumption" (285).

Cultural expectations of wives in Johnson's eighteenth-century culture regarded them as unequal and without legal status in marriage, and as responsible largely for their husbands' happiness. As such, women were often blamed for any discord in the relationship. These traditional images are reflected in Johnson's writings and in biographical accounts of Johnson's attitude. William Henry Craig, whose *Dr. Johnson and The Fair Sex* was published in 1895, rather unprofessionally quotes Johnson (from Boswell's *Life of Johnson*) as stating that marriage is not natural to humans, and that men gain far more out of marriage than women: "'Marriage, Sir, is much more necessary to a man than to a woman; for he is much less able to supply himself with domestick comforts...I had often wondered why young women should marry, as they have so much more freedom...while unmarried'" (Craig 211). According to Hester Thrale, if disputes

arose between Johnson's married acquaintances, he always sided with the husband (*Anecdotes* 98-99). As the following passage illustrates, he believed women generally caused marital dissatisfaction:

Women (says Doctor Johnson) give great offence by a contemptuous spirit of non-compliance on petty occasions. The man calls his wife to walk with him in the shade, and she feels a strange desire just at that moment to sit in the sun: he offers to read her a play, or sing her a song, and she calls the children in to disturb them...
Twenty such tricks will the faithullest wife in the world not refuse to play, and then look astonished when the fellow fetches in a mistress. (*Anecdotes* 98-99)

These ideas of Johnson's reflect both cultural, societal images of wives as unequal and responsible for discord and Johnson's consistent and strong belief in subordination. He tells Mrs. Thrale that "no man will be fond of what forces him daily to feel himself inferior" (*Anecdotes* 104). Boswell's *Life of Johnson* contains the same idea. Johnson, Boswell writes, always spoke of Mr. Thrale as "master of his wife" (330). Furthermore, when he speaks of infidelity in both the husband and the wife, Johnson leaves no doubt as to which is worse. By placing importance on the continuation of lineage as most of his contemporaries do, a wife's adultery is far more unacceptable. "Confusion of progeny," Johnson asserts, "constitutes the essence of the crime; and therefore a woman who breaks her marriage vows is much more criminal than a man who does it" (*Life of Johnson* 372). Similarly, a wife shouldn't resent a husband's fling with a chambermaid from "mere wantonness of appetite" (372); yet, if a woman is unchaste, "she has given up every

notion of female honour and virtue” (372). “A husband’s infidelity,” Johnson argues, “is nothing... Wise married women don’t trouble themselves about the infidelity in their husbands”; men, after all, “impose no bastards” upon their wives (305).

Another cultural view of women’s roles in marriages by which Johnson is influenced suggested that a wife had a *duty* to please her husband; women in marriage were responsible for whether their husbands were happy and satisfied. Indeed, because women were perceived as so vital to men’s happiness within marriage, Johnson places much emphasis in his writing and in his personal documents on the care with which men must select their wives; a good wife, for example, should perfectly complement her husband, but not vice-versa. In *The Life of Johnson*, for example, Johnson explains to Boswell that Boswell’s wife provides him with direction, a distinct point of view, and a place in society (184). He additionally asserts that women must focus their efforts on pleasing their husbands, as men will be less likely to leave their wives if they are satisfied (*Life of Johnson* 372, 384). Johnson also declares that a man compliments his first wife by remarrying, as this act indicates that his first wife made him happy (384).

Hester Thrale’s *Anecdotes*, too, provide examples of this cultural expectation of wives to be responsible for their husbands’ happiness. Criticizing “sleepy-souled” women who bore their husbands, Johnson charges wives as specifically responsible for their husbands’ “particular and immediate” happiness (160). Even the quality of a wife’s cooking is apparently important in satisfying her husband. Thrale describes an instance when Johnson is critical of Tetty’s cooking; one evening before grace Tetty interrupts: “Hold, Mr. Johnson, and do not make a farce of thanking God for a dinner which in a few minutes you will protest not eatable” (*Anecdotes* 98).

Johnson additionally enumerates traits to avoid in potential wives: “I have... seen some prudent fellows who forbore to connect themselves with beauty lest coquetry should be near” (*Anecdotes* 160); similarly, pride is a potential danger in women of high social classes (*Thraliana* 181). Stephen Lynn, in “Sexual Differences and Johnson’s Brain,” summarizes Johnson’s view by commenting: “To be sure, [in an unhappy marriage] the emphasis is often on the error of choosing this or that particular woman: the woman’s fault is in her character; the man’s fault is in the choice to marry her” (129).

Of course, then, Johnson’s eighteenth-century culture influenced his perspective of women as humans, wives, and mothers; however, the inevitable influence of his own cultural expectations of women in these roles should not be interpreted as Johnson’s own misogyny or chauvinism. On the contrary, Johnson thought highly of women’s intellectualism and capabilities and encouraged these traits in females. Though Johnson supported education for women, he in no way wanted women to sacrifice femininity for increased education, nor did he think they were required to do so; Hester Thrale supports this idea from her personal relations with Johnson, explaining that he argued for the preservation of the delicacy of females (*Thraliana I*, 172). Jean Hagstrum, in “Johnson and the Concordia Discors of Human Relationships,” suggests that “Johnson wanted women to overcome their ignorance so that they would be fully capable of the friendship he regarded as absolutely requisite to successful marriage; but he certainly never wanted them to desert their softness” (Hagstrum 48).

This chauvinism must be understood in context; Johnson’s criticism of women is understandable through Boswell’s bias or his cultural environment. We can do more, however, than explain why a perception of Johnson as misogynistic is inaccurate; indeed,

as I will make clear, Johnson was not only *not* chauvinist, he was actually quite progressively supportive of women, especially given the backdrop and context of his eighteenth-century culture.

Finding evidence for Johnson's Support of Women in biographical accounts

More recent Johnsonian scholars recognize the prejudice that Boswell effected and have sought to reverse the widespread perceptions of Johnson as misogynistic. Felicity Nussbaum supports the theory of Boswell's bias: "A crucial part of Boswell's version of Johnson's 'real' character must lie in his unequivocal manliness in the face of the assault on it by Hester Thrale, a writing woman who dares to print her intimate knowledge regarding the truth of Johnson's character in her *Anecdotes*" (122). Of course, neither Thrale nor Nussbaum is exempt from bias herself. One must therefore weigh carefully the ideas and attitudes of Johnson, which his biographers each present. Jaclyn Geller writes that

Boswell's stylized portrait of a clubbish male world continues to fuel our image of a gender-stratified eighteenth-century writing culture whose social conditions produced a schism in literary consciousness. A brief glance at Johnson's *unnarrated* life complicates the picture considerably, demonstrating a far more integrated, mutually supportive, and cooperative community of male and female authors than many contemporary scholars have imagined. (81)

Boswell's widely read and disseminated depiction of Johnson, Geller concurs, skews our understanding of his culture and "paved the way for a purely gendered reading of Johnson's career which pits masculine, intellectual rigor against feminine nicety" (87); it created a lasting bias which influences Johnsonian scholarship.^{ix} Boswell's omissions

are significant. Although he is sure to include Johnson's alleged "women preaching like a dog" statement, he neglects to mention that Johnson threw a big party, during which he publicly lauded her, for Charlotte Lennox when her first novel, *Harriet Stuart* was published (Geller 83). He omits mention that Johnson wrote five dedications for Lennox, or that he shared intellectual pursuits with Hester Thrale, such as joint translations of *Boethius*, chemistry experiments, epistolary writing, and educating her daughters (84).

Even William Craig admits that Johnson's offhanded rude remarks were not indicative of his opinion and treatment of women: "That it does not express his real estimate of women is tolerably apparent from our finding him every now and then marking the most unqualified exceptions from it," Craig owns (29). Again, Craig cites examples: Johnson did not discriminate between genders, Craig illustrates, when he declared that Mrs. Fitzgerald had "the best understanding that he ever met with in any human being" (29). Johnson additionally remarked that Elizabeth Carter understood Greek better than male scholars (29). Though Craig regarded Johnson's perspectives as inconsistent, he notes that "in other respects he was not unjust to women: he admitted their superior refinement and gentility, and he deplored the injustice of their seclusion from so many avenues to advancement" (30). Craig admits that Johnson thought women capable of advancement, but qualifies this thought by quoting Johnson as stating: "'when it comes to *dry understanding*, man has the better'" (30).

Boswell's depictions of Johnson's conversations is not as accurate a measure of Johnson's views as his own writings are; Kathleen Kemmerer, who has written extensively on the subject of Johnson's relationship with and perception of women, agrees that his sympathy with the female plight is evident if one looks past pre-conceived

notions. She reminds the reader, however, that there was still a strong belief in the intellectual inferiority of women during the eighteenth-century (13-14).

Despite Johnson's widespread reputation for chauvinism, notable feminist female writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Virginia Woolf have read Johnson as sympathetic to women; Wollstonecraft even cites Johnson in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* to support her complaint that the pressure to live a 'fashionable life' for middle and upper class women is detrimental to their well being (Basker 64). She also defends Johnson from what she considered Boswell's lack of appreciation and respect for him (Basker Multi 67-8). In fact, Wollstonecraft and Johnson had begun a close friendship at the time he died (Basker 64). In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf writes: ““Are [women] capable of education incapable? Napoleon thought them incapable. Dr. Johnson thought the opposite”” (Basker Multi 68). “An array of major women writers,” James Basker notes in “Dancing Dogs, Women Preachers and the Myth of Johnson’s Misogyny,” “found Johnson, in his life and works, not intimidating but supportive and encouraging” (64).

Johnson's own writings frequently depict women in traditional roles of narrow experience; however, his intent is not to imply that women are naturally incapable of any situation but a limited existence, but rather to utilize depictions of women's narrow existences as a persuasive argument for encouraging education and intelligent choices among women. He is, rather than portraying women as he thinks they should be, discouraging societally imposed limitations to women's experience and intellectualism. During the eighteenth-century, while lower-class women were afforded no secondary education whatsoever, middle- and upper-class women were not taught more, “only

better”; reading, in fact, was as important as needlework for young women (Wellington 49). Girls were supposed to study only what was practically useful. “Generally,” Charlotte Wellington explains, “the cultivation of a woman’s reason and genius was left to the indulgences of a doting father oblivious of social custom or the daring of a devoted brother” (49). To be erudite was indeed discouraged; young Fanny Burney hid her books (Wellington 55).

Johnson’s appreciation of good mothers exemplifies his understanding of the undesirable, culturally imposed position of women. Although Johnson’s feelings toward his own mother appear ambiguous from conflicting biographical accounts of Thrale and Boswell, in general Johnson seems to have found good qualities in his own mother, qualities which Johnson clearly valued in mothers: loving and nurturing capabilities. In his letters to his mother, for example, Johnson writes with a discernible tone of honor and respect (Chapman # 120). Additionally, Johnson is said to be describing his mother with these words in *Vanity of Human Wishes* as “the general fav’rite as the general Friend...” (*Thraliana* 160). Boswell elaborates on Johnson’s “reverential affection” for his mother (*Life of Johnson* 226), characterizing her as a “woman of distinguished understanding,” and whose consent Johnson wished to ask before his marriage (65). Johnson encourages Boswell to show the same veneration for his “new mother” when Boswell’s father remarries, although largely only to “secure” his father’s appreciation (Chapman # 505).

Additionally, Hester Thrale, in her *Anecdotes*, recalls Johnson’s tenderness and gratitude toward his mother, especially as a teacher (she taught him to read) (13); Boswell also relates that Johnson’s mother taught Johnson about religion (*Life of Johnson* 26). Johnson emphasizes his view of mothers as teachers in a consoling letter to James

Elphinston, whose deceased mother, Johnson wrote, still taught him virtues (*Life of Johnson* 143).

Johnson's sensitivity to women is reflected, too, in his lifelong marked love and devotion to his wife. Boswell felt the need to defend Johnson's relationship with his wife by citing examples in Johnson's own *Prayers and Meditations*, in which Johnson expresses his "ardent love" for Tetty (*Life of Johnson* 158). Johnson asserts that men should treat their wives with esteem when he counsels Boswell to reciprocate his wife's respect for him: "I need not tell you what regard you owe to Mrs. Boswell's entreaties; or how much you ought to study the happiness of her who studies yours..., and of whose kindness you enjoy such good effects" (531).^x Mrs. Thrale, too, reports a good relationship between Johnson and his wife. Although Johnson complained that Tetty consistently displayed the couple's faults publicly, Thrale "knew he adored her" (*Thraliana* 177). Defending Johnson against stereotypically negative and indifferent notions of females, William Shaw, in his own *Anecdotes of Johnson*, affirms that Johnson did not have "sarcasms on matrimony... and contempt... [for] ... all expressions of the tender passions" (Kinsley 33); rather, Johnson, well-aware of Mrs. Johnson's wit and intelligence, apparently consulted with her in revising many of his writings, and her death affected him deeply (*Ibid* 34). Johnson, then, recognized the unequal status of women in marriage during the eighteenth-century, and advocated that women should be treated with respect and affection.

Johnson expresses the importance of friendship within marriage in his personal life as well. Hester Thrale and Johnson, for instance, both agree that "marriage is more a league at last of friendship than of love" (*Thraliana* 224). In recognizing that women are

treated unfairly and unequally in marriage and believing that men and women in marriage are capable of meaningful friendship, Johnson removes the burden of blame from wives within marriage and exhibits rather enlightened views for eighteenth-century culture, especially in light of the contrasting opinions of his contemporaries.

Johnson's respect for and support of women, however, extends beyond wives. Indeed, one of his most enlightened and transgressive views of women is his treatment of and perspective on women in the role of friend even outside of marriage. Foy interestingly argues that Johnson's ambivalent feelings about his mother perhaps left a hole to be fulfilled, and that, although he ardently loved and respected his mother, "he nevertheless longed for the kind of female companionship which would satisfy his needs for blending love with intelligence" (41).^{xi} Johnson thought that genuine friendship is not merely possible between a husband and wife, but also in more casual relations between men and women: "That Johnson appreciated and understood the potential of women is evident in his female friendships and in his emphasis on their intellectual capabilities" (Foy 41).^{xii} Hansen agrees that Johnson regards "happiness [as arising] from friendship, that is, from equal and affectionate relationships, ... which may break down the barriers of ... gender differences" (513). Indeed, Johnson, unlike his contemporaries, derives substantial satisfaction from his personal friendships with women.

Despite the consistent influence of traditional eighteenth-century views of women, which his writing certainly and reasonably reflects, Johnson strongly encourages the education of women within his society, another of his enlightened treatments of women that stood opposed to the dominant views of his male contemporaries. "Nowhere

is Johnson more vigorously a supporter of women and their aspirations,” supports James Basker, “than on the issue of education” (73). He was active in encouraging women with potential and ability all of his life, though “not free from the prejudices and preconditions of his age about women” (Grundy 59). Hester Thrale elaborates this idea in *Thraliana*, quoting Johnson’s critical opinion: “That girl [Miss Lawrence] knows Greek surprisingly, but she knows nothing else” (*I*, 169).

Despite recent scholars’ efforts to redeem Johnson and his perception and treatment of women, however, a revised perception of Johnson’s views seems still limited to the relatively small circle of eighteenth-century scholars (*Ibid* 66). Stereotypes of Johnson as chauvinist persist.

Chapter 2: Gender in Johnson's fiction

A study of Johnson's fiction without the benefit of having read his personal correspondence, journal entries, or *Thraliana*, among other texts, leaves one confused about Johnson's perception of women. *Rasselas*, entries from *The Rambler* or *The Idler*, and *The Life of Savage* all give clues about Johnson's treatment of women; however, none is sufficient alone to reach a reasonable conclusion, as most of Johnson's fictional texts present conflicting evidence as to whether he supports or scorns women. Johnson's texts, though, are clearly consistent with his respect and support for women; this is abundantly clear once one has sufficient background from Johnson's personal writings and relationships. Each of Johnson's fictional texts contains material that could be interpreted to support him as a chauvinist but more clearly indicates his support for women. What appears chauvinist is explicable as cultural influence or satire in an effort to help improve women or their situations.

Rasselas

The conclusion of *Rasselas* hints strongly at Johnson's belief in subordination, a system in which women are decidedly *not* considered equal. In describing the final situations of each character, Johnson begins with the most learned men and methodically progresses

toward the character at the bottom of the hierarchy, a female servant. Indeed, men are at the top of the hierarchy of wisdom and power throughout the tale. Imlac, the wise and learned poet who influences and accompanies Rasselas the prince, endorses the idea: “subordination supposes power on one part and subjection on the other; and in the hands of men it will sometimes be abused” (85); indeed, Imlac is condescending toward women and doubts their rational abilities (145). With a patronizing tone, Imlac expresses his concern at Nekayah’s and Pekuah’s wish to visit the astronomer, who had never received visits from women before; he tells Pekuah that the astronomer will likely tire of her company quickly because she is not intelligent enough to converse with him (145). Again, this perception of a subordinated hierarchy is understandable given the context of Johnson’s eighteenth-century culture.

Women are portrayed as irritatingly fearful in *Rasselas*; women experience fear throughout their adventures, and their timorous nature is markedly contrasted to the more courageous behavior of the men in the text. Leaving the Happy Valley for the first time, the characters experience different emotions. While Nekayah and Pekuah “considered themselves as in danger of being lost in a dreary vacuity, … the prince felt nearly the same emotions, though he thought it more manly to conceal them” (98). Later, in their tour of the Pyramids, Pekuah is reluctant to enter the mysterious structures, fearing she might not emerge alive. Ironically in the supposed safety, she stays behind while the rest of the party explores the pyramids, and she is kidnapped by a troop of Arabs. Again, Johnson underscores here the importance of choice and satirizes timidity in women^{xiii}. By remaining alone and fearful, Pekuah makes the wrong choice and her situation worsens. Both Nekayah and Pekuah, however, evolve drastically from the timid behavior

they exhibit at the beginning of their adventure. Hence Johnson makes clear his disdain for both timidity and coquetry among women and his encouragement for improved behavior.

A wife's responsibility for her husband's happiness is illustrated in *Rasselas*; while it is true that Johnson doesn't challenge the idea that wives were responsible for their husbands' happiness, it was a widespread attitude criticized by few. There can be no mystery surrounding Johnson's focus on the prudent and deliberate rationality with which men select their wives. Rasselas himself exhibits this trait: "Whenever I shall seek a wife, it shall be my first question whether she be willing to be led by reason" (119). Johnson's view of women in marriage is highly influenced by his insistence on reason in all aspects of one's life; rational choices were, to Johnson, not only important in the choice of a spouse.

In essence, men should carefully choose women who perfectly complement them because, in eighteenth-century culture, women are responsible for men's happiness. Rasselas, for example, while listening to Nekayah's description of the discord within marriage, muses that "if such be the general effect of marriage, I shall, for the future, think it dangerous to connect my interest with that of another, lest I should be unhappy by my partner's fault" (113).

Christopher Brooks, in his study of *Rasselas* and its depiction of educated intellectual women, points out that "the function of this maiden-in-distress typecasting," which was the subject of Rasselas' daydream at the beginning of the text, "initiates *Rasselas* as a tale that examines, among other ideas, the *relationship* between men and women and the fashion in which experience and education can alter (and improve) that

relationship [my emphasis]" (55). As we have seen, Johnson and others thought that educated women made more nurturing mothers, more companionable wives, *and contributed more to the moral fabric of society.*

Brooks reminds us that, before the evolution of Rasselas' thinking toward women in the beginning of the tale, Rasselas declares that he would choose his friends from the wise and his wife from among the *virtuous*, implying that wisdom is not an innate female element and that women were largely valued for their virtue (56). Men did not encourage women to become stronger intellectually so that females might go out and contribute to the political and commercial elements in society, but rather to contribute to the moral fabric of society and improve relationships between men and women largely for male benefit. Again, this is not necessarily so much chauvinistic as simply reflective of eighteenth-century cultural influence.

Johnson's fictional writings reflect the staunchly engrained role of women as men's nurturers as well; cultural views of women as nurturers were an inevitable influence on Johnson, (and this cultural influence goes a long way to explain why it is far-fetched to argue that he thought of women as completely equal to men). In *Rasselas*, for example, Pekuah returns the astronomer to reality and eases his unrest through her intelligence and nurturing (147).

I am not convinced that women are the social and intellectual equals of men throughout the texts as some scholars argue^{xiv}; there were many chauvinistic attitudes that Johnson didn't question. There are gender inequalities in the text explicable by the inevitable eighteenth-century cultural view of women which influenced Johnson's perception; these inequalities are definitely incongruous with an alleged perception of

women as equal to men. After their encounter with the hermit, for example, Rasselas finds himself “discussing more frequently and freely” with his sister; it has, in fact, only occurred to him recently that she is worthy of discourse with him (Brady 110). In addition, even at this stage, Nekayah only *assists* Rasselas in his thinking; she “always assisted him to give him some reason why...he might succeed at last” (Ibid 110). The two decide to separate to observe the different facets of private life. Nekayah suggests that she acquaint herself with “the shades of humbler life,” while Rasselas is to observe “the splendor of the courts” (110); the simple choice of the environments in which they will immerse themselves is indicative of inequality between the sexes, even in this fictional utopia (although it is perhaps equally significant that he trusts her to make her own intellectual observations). Further, in their discussions of their findings, Rasselas is condescending toward his learned sister: “Dear princess,” says Rasselas, “you fall into the common errors of exaggerated declamation by producing, in a familiar disquisition, examples of national calamities and scenes of extensive misery which are found in books rather than in the world” (Ibid 115). Let us not forget, either, the irrational emotionality that both Nekayah and Pekuah exhibit: Pekuah upon her refusal to enter the pyramids out of fear, and Nekayah’s exaggerated sorrow at the loss of Pekuah. The women additionally exhibit a disapproved frivolity as the astronomer is dramatically describing his philosophic affliction:

The prince heard this narration with very serious regard, but the princess smiled, and Pekuah convulsed herself with laughter. ‘Ladies,’ said Imlac, ‘to mock the heaviest of human afflictions is neither charitable nor wise. Few can attain this man’s knowledge and few practice his virtues; but

all may suffer his calamity...’ The princess was recollected, and the favorite was abashed. (140-41)

Marlene Hansen argues that female weakness in *Rasselas* is presented as stemming from cultural influences rather than intrinsic to female nature (Foy 43). Though Kemmerer asserts that the “women’s roles as equal partners is neither questioned nor discussed,” the scene in which Imlac tells Pekuah that the astronomer will not be interested in talking to a woman and that, even if he were, she is not likely to understand him contradicts her idea. “‘I am afraid,’ said Imlac, ‘that he [the astronomer] will soon weary of your company: men advanced far in knowledge do not love to repeat the elements of their art, and I am not certain that even of the elements, as he will deliver them connected with inferences and mingled with reflections, you are a very capable auditress’” (Brady 145). Though of course the women grow to become respected by the astronomer, who does indeed value their company, this and other examples make it reasonable to dispute Kemmerer’s position that “the text tacitly assumes that this revolution [equality in men and women] has already been accomplished” (94), or Brooks’ assertion that men and women are complete intellectual equals in this text. It is quite reasonable to state, however, as Kemmerer does, that “Johnson modeled for his society a new ideal of companionship between men and women,” one in which equality was “not only acceptable but desirable” (96). As Foy suggests, Johnson is indeed modeling an ideal which “explore[s] a more advanced world—one where women play an integral role in ‘the stream of life’” (40). *Rasselas* may be viewed, she argues, “if not as a feminist tract, at least as an equitable portrayal of the potentialities of human beings without making distinctions between the sexes” (43).

While the women in *Rasselas* evolve into intellectual beings, Rasselas evolves into viewing them as such; while in the beginning he surmises that he will choose a wife from among the virtuous, toward the end he decides he will need to choose a wife who is “‘led by reason’” (60); after all, Brooks reminds us, Rasselas was not even going to invite his sister on this intellectual and philosophical journey at the beginning. It is Nekayah, Brooks writes, who helps Rasselas to view women as “purveyors of wisdom, courage, and sense”; similarly, Pekuah helps the astronomer to see the world more “openly and optimistically” (70). Indeed, Pekuah serves as the learned astronomer’s *instructor*; his “social rehabilitation,” says Brooks, is significantly assigned to Pekuah and not Rasselas (70). While I remain unconvinced that Johnson considers women as complete equals, even in the text of *Rasselas*, Sarah Morrison offers a new perspective when she articulates, in her study of Johnson’s view of women in *The Rambler* essays, that although Johnson likely does not see women as equals, he “almost always remembers women’s equal stake in the issues he addresses” (43).

Is Johnson’s *Rasselas*, though, such a unique and transgressive text in its depiction of a male/female utopian intellectual equality? Compare it to Mary Astell’s *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies for the Advancement of Their True and Greatest Interests* (1694). Like Johnson’s perception of women both in his personal relationships and in his texts, Astell argues that women’s foolish speech and behavior are not innate, but result from a lack of education (Schnorrenberg 264); Astell recommends in her text, eerily similar to *Rasselas*, that “a Retreat from the World for those who desire that advantage:... a utopia, a ‘Happy Retreat! which will be the introducing you into such a Paradise as your mother Eve forfeited” (264-5). Could this text have influenced

Johnson's *Rasselas*? Could *Rasselas* simply reflect the changing undertones in eighteenth-century culture? Kathleen Kemmerer has studied the parallels as well between *Rasselas* and Fontenelle's *Entretiens*, a lengthy dialogue between a philosopher and noblewomen – a text in which men and women are on equal intellectual footing (94-5). Again, could Johnson have been imitating such a text? Are his ideas not unique enough to be transgressive? Sarah Robinson Scott, in her novel *Millenium Hall* (1762), also envisions a utopian environment for women; her novel is set at an estate in Western England which is owned, organized, and managed by five women: "These women, after separately suffering a series of misadventures in worldly society, 'were brought to seclude themselves from it, and make as it were a new one for themselves, constituted on such very different principles from that...hitherto lived in'" (Schnorrenberg 265). Schnorrenberg points out that these women writers were not advocating changing society as a whole, but rather simply establishing an environment where they could individually develop for *themselves* (266) – not for society as a whole, not to raise their children more virtuously, and not to function as better wives: "There was no suggestion of allowing women into professions," reminds Schnorrenberg,

no assumption that there was some other role a woman can
usefully play in society besides being wife and mother. There
was no thought that there might be a better answer to the problems
of women than pious thoughts and good deeds or retirement from
the world...The eighteenth-century feminists offered only a
modest utopian beginning for a movement not even yet
fully realized. (271)

Though Johnson likely would have read these women's texts and was perhaps even influenced by them or stirrings of change in eighteenth-century views on women, the significance of *Rasselas*' incorporating some of these important themes is immense. The idea that a powerful, white, male literary figure such as Samuel Johnson wrote a text that depicts women as intellectual equals and that ends with one of the female protagonists' intending to open a school for female education in the text's utopian-like setting for no other reason than intellectual stimulation is quite noteworthy. For although Scott, Astell, and a few others were venturing into the territory of intellectual development for females for the sake of development itself, there appears to be little evidence, with the exception of Johnson, that males are dipping their toes into this brave new world of thought. Again, evidence from the text contradicts perceptions of Johnson as misogynist. What appears chauvinist is easily explicable as inevitable cultural influence. Additionally, though, *Rasselas* is obviously not only about women. Johnson is equally critical of men, and his satirical views of human flaws extend to both genders.

Utilizing *Rasselas* as an example of Johnson's support for women is easier still than defending what seems to be chauvinism. Recent scholars have discussed *Rasselas* widely as an example of a text in which Johnson shows support for the education of women and even depicts women as males' equals. The text of *Rasselas* is integral in understanding Johnson's view of women. Both Pekuah and Nekayah are self-reliant, intelligent women whom the narrator, some critics suggest, depicts as man's intellectual equals. Rasselas himself, for example, trusts his sister's judgments and respects her opinions; he "discourses ... frequently and freely" with her (110). "Nekayah represents," posits Christopher Brooks, "the epitome of the Johnsonian woman and symbolizes his

homage to her as a type. She is well instructed, intelligent, moral, and of course virtuous" (62). In addition, the visits of Nekayah and Pekuah to the learned and isolated astronomer, who is initially reluctant to engage in conversation with women, delineates Pekuah and Nekayah as capable of learning and intelligent conversation; it is they, in fact, who return the astronomer to reality. Amazingly, both the astronomer and Pekuah's kidnapper are reluctant to part with Nekayah or Pekuah, as the men value of the conversation of which the women are capable. Further, Pekuah is assertive in defending herself against Imlac's insults: "My knowledge is perhaps more than you imagine it... [and] by concurring always with his [the astronomer's] opinions I shall make him think it greater than it is" (Johnson 145). Indeed, the astronomer is impressed by and delighted with Pekuah; the narrator relates that: "She told her tale with ease and elegance, and her conversation took possession of his heart ... He looked upon her as a prodigy of genius" (146) and earnestly anticipates her visits. Placing even greater importance on their company than regulation of the seasons, the astronomer "grieved when he was left at their departure to his old employment of regulating the seasons" (146). Livingston's conclusion that *Rasselas* "reflects Johnson's most enlightened characterization of the female" (3041-A) is difficult to contend; though Pekuah and Nekayah are indeed portrayed as bright, reasonable, and adept at conversation, they still reflect Johnson's traditional view of females as nurturers and teachers.

Viewing *Rasselas*, published in 1759, as a text far ahead of its time in depicting what some scholars posit are unequivocally intellectually equal female characters, is tempting. Nekayah's desire to start a college for women at the end of the tale is a telling hint of pre-feminism (153). In essence, Johnson provides a fictional setting, an isolated,

utopian land, where women are the intellectual equals of men. Christopher Brooks posits that the Eastern setting of *Rasselas* is a neutral place where characters are ostensibly unaware of pre-established cultural gender expectations (52). Kathleen Kemmerer agrees that in Abyssinia^{xv} power is so equal between men and women that sexual politics don't exist there: "Johnson presents his little community of travelers as though it were the norm, although equality between the sexes as a proposition that would have met with resistance among both women and men in eighteenth-century English society" (94). By using such an isolated and neutral setting in *Rasselas*, Brooks argues, "Johnson not only 'protects' women from unfair ...satire but also empowers them to achieve intellectual equality" (Brooks 53). Indeed, Brooks goes so far as to advocate that Johnson "participates in an early form of feminism" by thus empowering Nekayah and Pekuah (53). By avoiding sexuality and romance between men and women in the text, Johnson is better able to depict women as potentially equal to men (Foy 45). *Rasselas*, Brooks argues, is about the evolution of women from helpless damsels in need of rescue by men (as we see in Rasselas' fantasy at the beginning of the tale) into intellectual beings capable of reason and intellectual conversation; Johnson's portrayal of women as equals, Brooks posits, is unmistakable. How could Johnson, Brooks wonders, a writer who "prized clarity of language and accuracy of expression," not have been "inscrib[ing] equality" with the language he used in *Rasselas*; Nekayah wants to accompany Rasselas because she is "'equally' weary" and "'not less desirous'" of seeing the world: "These are not English travelers on a grand tour;" Brooks insists, "they are fictive creations composed of Johnsonian ideologies, among which is the recurrent theme of intellectual equality" (59). Roslyn Foy focuses on the equal significance of the characters on the

journey: “Johnson transcends patriarchal notions,” she explains, “of male superiority and infuses his story with powerful, rational, and intelligent females who are equally important on the journey (39).

Kathleen Kemmerer agrees. In her detailed study of *Rasselas*, Kemmerer finds compelling evidence that:

The point of *Rasselas* is that men and women need one another on a level more basic than that of romantic love or sexual fulfillment. Ultimately, the choice of life most conducive for happiness is for men and women to live and inquire after knowledge together in the dignity of equality in education, status, and regard (115).

Indeed, Kemmerer boldly states: “Johnson creates female characters who are the intellectual equals of his male characters” (105).^{xvi} She asserts that Rasselas the prince and Nekayah, his sister, are “equal in social rank, in intelligence, and in their desire to make a thoughtful choice of life” (93). “The women’s role as equal partners,” she argues, “is neither questioned nor discussed. The text tacitly assumes that this revolution has already been accomplished” (94). Though the learned astronomer is condescending to women and the scenes involving him reflect Johnson’s notion of subordination, Imlac’s views are generally in stark contrast to those of Rasselas, the protagonist. Additionally, the reader is well aware of the intelligence of Nekayah and Pekuah; hence, Imlac’s extreme condescension toward women does not seem parallel with the views of Johnson.

In *Rasselas* as in other texts, we do find explicit evidence of contrast between women of narrow experience and those who have chosen to broaden their scope of experience through education and/or travel. Throughout *Rasselas* Johnson purposely

contrasts Nekayah and Pekuah, two intelligent and educated women who choose to explore life outside of the narrow Happy Valley, with women of limited experience. Clearly Johnson intends to encourage education and a broadening of experience for women. Indeed, after traveling for awhile, the attitudes of Nekayah and Pekuah are significantly different from those with which they began their adventures, surely resulting from their increased amount of experience. Far different from the fearful and timid female she was in the beginning of the tale, Nekayah visits various villages to investigate the realm of the family. When she later discusses her findings with Rasselas, her observations of the narrow experience of other women she encounters illustrate the stark contrast between them and herself.

She found their thoughts narrow, their wishes low, and their merriment often artificial. Their pleasures...were embittered by petty competitions and worthless emulation. They were always jealous of the beauty of each other; ...and many fancied that they were in love when in truth they were only idle. Their affection was seldom fixed on sense or virtue, ...their grief, however, like their joy, was transient; everything floated unconnected with the past or future, so that one desire easily gave way to another. (111)

Pekuah's experience as a hostage when she is kidnapped by a troop of Arabs additionally educates her about the narrow experiences of other women. Indeed, she spends substantial time with other women after she is kidnapped and finds no fulfillment in their company. Further, the chief of the troop of Arabs ironically respects Pekuah and prefers her company over that of other women. Johnson here implies that as women broaden their experience through intelligent choices, they are better able to communicate and more skilled at conversation, and therefore better company; Pekuah's situation reflects

this view of Johnson's. Pekuah's description of the other women, then, parallels that of Nekayah:

The diversions of the women were only childish play...Their business was only needlework, ...nor was much satisfaction to be hoped from their conversation: for of what could they be expected to talk? They had seen nothing; for they had lived from early youth in that narrow spot... They had no ideas but of the few things that were within their view. (135)

Johnson does not treat the mother image specifically in *Rasselas*; however, he wrote the tale to pay for his mother's funeral. Stephen Lynn suggests that Johnson wrote *Rasselas* not merely to cover expenses of his mother's funeral, but additionally to escape the painful reality of her death (124). Perhaps there is a connection between the guilt Johnson felt upon his mother's death, as he had not visited her in twenty years, and the enlightened treatment of women by Johnson in *Rasselas*. Within this narrative, Nekayah and Pekuah play prominent roles as virtuous, strong, and intelligent women. In addition, at the end of their travels they both desire to teach, supporting Johnson's concept of the importance of the mother as teacher.

In *Rasselas*, Johnson's text that incorporates the *choice* of life as an integral theme, Nekayah discusses her choice of whether to marry; Johnson's illustration of a situation in which a woman can *decide* whether to marry is significant:

I know not whether marriage be more than one of the innumerable modes of human misery. When I see and reckon the various forms of connubial infelicity, the unexpected causes of lasting discord, the diversities of temper, the oppositions of opinion, the rude collisions of contrary desire...,

I am sometimes disposed to think...that marriage is rather permitted than approved. (116)

Johnson further removes blame from women in some of his texts by his assessment that men and women are equally at fault in unhappy marriages. In *Rasselas*, for example, Nekayah observes such equal faults: "Some husbands are imperious, and some wives perverse: And, as it is always more easy to do evil than good, though the wisdom or virtue of one can rarely make many happy, the folly or vice of one may often make many miserable" (113). Marlene Hansen, in her essay "Sex and Love, Marriage and Friendship: A Feminist Reading of the Quest for Happiness in *Rasselas*," observes that *Rasselas* "is constructed around an ideal of freedom and equality which is surprisingly advanced" (517). Nekayah significantly challenges Rasselas' views on marriage with three organized arguments: that the basis of marriage is power and not affection, that marriage is not necessary for the continuation of the species, and that maturity does not improve marriage (Geller 90); indeed, Nekayah herself strives at the end of the tale to open a college for women, not get married. Further, Nekayah is "one of the only young, female protagonists of eighteenth-century fiction whose life is not plotted along the trajectory of wedlock" (*Ibid* 90).^{xvii}

In a related idea, Johnson was a strong advocate that husbands and wives are capable of meaningful friendship. Indeed, close friendship between a man and woman in marriage is, according to Johnson, one of the most important components of a successful marriage. Nekayah discerns in *Rasselas*, for example, that discord exists when friendship in marriage does not (116). Indeed, "everywhere in the book [*Rasselas*]," Hansen asserts,

“there is a quiet insistence that people need objects of affection to give their endeavors meaning” (517).

Johnson’s portrayal of significant friendships between men and women as a central theme in *Rasselas* illustrates his support of and sensitivity toward women. Rasselas, himself, for example, enjoys a genuine affection and respect for his sister; the friendship the two share is important to the prince, and because he values her as a friend he takes her ideas seriously and enjoys her conversation. Indeed, Rasselas does not exhibit a condescending attitude toward any women throughout the tale, perhaps a prerequisite for developing friendships. Exemplifying another component of friendship, the prince values his sister’s opinions and advice.

The concept of friendship in *Rasselas*, then, seemingly entails both intelligent and caring interaction between men and women. Strongly influenced by the erudite ideas of Nekayah and Pekuah, the astronomer develops an endearing friendship with the two women that encompasses both respect for intelligent interaction with them and an appreciation for their company. After he has had opportunity to spend time with the women, he laments: “I have missed the endearing elegance of female friendship” (146). As Johnson considers the general concept of friendship significant throughout his life, he extends the importance of friendship as genuinely possible between men and women. Johnson’s enlightened view of the woman cast in the role of friend, then, was not only contrary to the general ideas of eighteenth-century society, but moreover it was a genuine view, which Johnson’s numerous friendships with strong women reveal.

Rasselas, too, reflects Johnson's focus on the importance of education. Through the portrayal of Nekayah and Pekuah as intelligent and educated women, Johnson depicts their roles within the story as appealing when compared with women in *Rasselas* who are less educated with narrow experience. In addition, both of the women desire to teach at the end of the tale.

The Rambler and The Idler

Johnson's *Rambler* and *Idler* exhibit much the same pattern as *Rasselas*. Although Johnson is chauvinistic at times, the chauvinistic passages are reflective of Johnson's not fully seeing beyond his culture. These essays are additionally highly satirical, and their goal was to elucidate flaws in both men and women with the presumption that human improvement is desirable, necessary, and possible. While Johnson makes his point in *Rasselas* via a fictional, utopian setting, the *Rambler* and the *Idler* are genres more suited to criticism. In the eighteenth-century, the periodical emerged as critique of manners, and Johnson's periodical writings follow that model.

Numerous *Rambler* essays, for example, depict women as coquettes, incapable of intellectual pursuits; coquetry was sufficiently irritating to Johnson for him to include it as the topic of *Ramblers* 34, 191, 115, and 113. Timidity of females, also a traditional view in eighteenth-century culture, is an additional characteristic of females that annoyed Johnson. In *Rambler* # 75, for example, women experience "terror and aversion" (28) in the presence of male scholars; similarly, the narrator in *Rambler* # 34 emphasizes the cowardice and fickle nature of women. In a story a young gentleman

relates, a young woman of his acquaintance refuses to enter a coach because its color reminds her of a coach in her aunt's funeral three years ago. In addition, she constantly fears the coach will overturn and, with Johnson's familiar humorous tone, she "alarmed many an honest man by begging him to spare her life as he passed by the coach" (189). In *Rambler* # 113, Mr. Rambler implies that women naturally have weak and timid minds, making courage and learning "unnatural" (Henson 71). Again, these satirical sketches of weak women serve to encourage improvement rather than simply to criticize.

In *The Rambler*, too, Johnson portrays domineering mothers as illustrative of undesirable behavior to avoid; Johnson felt strongly that mothers should not inhibit their daughters' abilities to choose. Most of the mother images he depicts in these *Rambler* essays reflect and satirize additionally the cultural tradition of women's focus on domestic experience, and mothers in *The Rambler* are chiefly domineering in their insistence that their daughters adhere to eighteenth-century cultural mores. In *Rambler* # 84, for example, a girl's domineering mother insists that her daughter recognize the importance of household duties. When a female outsider encourages the girl to expand her experience beyond domesticity, the girl tells her mother of her desire to study and expand her education. Her mother responds by complaining that the "consequence of female study [is that] girls grow too wise to be advised, and too stubborn to be commanded" (80). Daughters whose dominating mothers shelter them remain trapped in a narrow domestic experience, learning only what their mothers deem necessary, and are unable to choose to improve the quality of their education and experiences. In *Rambler* # 51, Johnson describes a woman whose daughters, "having never seen any house but their own, believe their mother's excellence on her own word" (276). In essence, because her

daughters, in their narrow perspective, are never exposed to female roles outside of domestic duties, they never question what different choices could yield.

Cultural influence again naturally comes into play when women are depicted in *The Rambler* as responsible for whether a marriage is happy. *Rambler* # 113 emphasizes the faults of women in courtship; the narrator systematically describes each woman, and why she is unsuited for marriage. The success of the marriage seemingly depends on the woman's suitability, and not the man's role in it or their relations together.

In his writings, Johnson provides suggestions to men, outlining what characteristics to look for in wives. For example, it seems that “suitable disagreement” between a man and his wife is necessary in order to enjoy intellectual harmony. Johnson emphasizes this point in *Rambler* # 167: “There may be a total diversity of ideas which admits no participation of the same delight, and there may likewise be such conformity of notions, as leaves neither anything to add to the decisions of the other” (124).

A woman in *Rambler* # 115 “very frequently expressed her wonder, that men of learning or experience could submit to trifle away life, with beings incapable of solid thought” (249). Only weak men, Johnson asserts, marry for love (*Thraliana* 2); however, Johnson does urge that marriage should be based on the “strictest tie of perpetual friendship” (*Rambler* #18; 182).

Rambler # 34 additionally emphasizes the cultural view of mothers and wives as nurturers: “So much of our domestic happiness is in their hands, and their influence is so great upon our earliest years, that the universal interest of the world requires them to be well instructed in their province” (185). Women, in Johnson’s mind, must walk a fine

line between an assertive intellectuality and a soft femininity; Johnson and other men seemingly desired a feminine woman who could also be skilled in intelligent conversation.

Johnson's view that women should never sacrifice their femininity for education is evident in *Rambler* essays. In *Rambler* # 115, for example, Hymeneus rejects Camilla for having “ ‘the ruggedness of man without his force, and the ignorance of woman without her softness’” (Henson 69). Indeed, Johnson is quoted directly as proclaiming that “ ‘a man is in general better pleased when he has a good dinner upon his table, than when his wife talks Greek!’” (Clarke 27) Johnson's view of women as nurturers, though, was simply culturally traditional and consistent, yet does not contradict his enlightened perspectives on women.

Even if Johnson's *Rasselas* is ideologically imitative of other contemporary texts' support for education and intellectual development in females, his *Rambler* is imitative of Addison and Steele's *Idler* and *Spectator*, which are not particularly bolstering of women in general. Johnson was one of few males publicly supporting women's abilities. Because writing about the lives of women was generally restricted to private media such as letters and diaries^{xviii}, Kemmerer additionally argues that the *Rambler* essays in which Johnson published letters from female personae was transgressive given the background of eighteenth-century society's “strictures against writing women's lives.” In this safe medium, she asserts, he was able to circumvent societal restrictions by publicly discussing women's lives without victimizing them as unchaste or unvirtuous (78).

Indeed, Johnson truly and importantly pays much heed in *The Rambler* to women and their marginalized situation; though Johnson does not see beyond much of the accepted chauvinistic attitude toward women, he does show a surprising amount of sympathy toward women. In “Samuel Johnson, Mr. Rambler, and Women,” Sarah Morrison presents a convincing case not that Johnson necessarily sees women as equals, but that he pays careful attention to their importance as readers of the *Rambler* and that he is decidedly not misogynistic, as privileging Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* as a reference would certainly indicate. Indeed, Morrison contends that the *Rambler* essays, though they perhaps “most illumine his view of women,” are largely neglected; many of the female-focused *Rambler* essays are, in fact, not canonized for wider public consumption (23)^{xix}. She suggests that “Johnson’s attempt at a universally appealing voice not strongly marked by gender” contrasts markedly with the *Tatler*’s “explicitly masculine” voice (28); Kathleen Kemmerer points out that, in *Rambler* #18, Mr. Rambler explicitly posits himself as a “neutral being between the sexes” (21). When writing from a woman’s perspective, Johnson used his same “distinctively weighty prose style” rather than simplifying the text as many male writers did when assuming a female persona (Kemmerer 79). While many critics view this as a defect in Johnson’s *Rambler* essays, Kemmerer posits that it is quite purposeful to lend equal weight to male and female perspectives (79). Indeed, Morrison suggests that “Johnson may be seen as progressive in his view of women precisely because he resists the overt feminizing of certain discourses” (28).^{xx} By using first-person pronouns and non-gendered references, Johnson encourages a woman to “read in her own voice,” avoiding the “dissonance that

occurs when a female reader must identify with what the author assumes to be a male reader” (Kemmerer 70).

Not only did Johnson ostensibly not discriminate between male and female writing styles, he also did not discriminate among social classes in his advocacy for women. “Particularly the essays written in the first person from a female perspective,” asserts Kemmerer, “show Johnson’s androgyny in his ability to sympathetically imagine the lives of women of varied circumstances and ages” (79).

Morrison feels that not only is Johnson more conscious of women readers in the *Rambler* than is generally acknowledged, but that in his “remembering them as auditors” he is “implicitly recognizing that they partake equally of universal human nature with men” (24). Why is this important? While Addison and Steele emphasized the differences between men and women in the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*, Johnson focuses on their similarities; “significantly, when he notes a consistent gender difference, Johnson seeks an explanation in the culture itself...rather than to Nature...Unlike Addison and Steele, Johnson does not offer distinct masculine and feminine types. Rather, he offers masculine and feminine manifestations of the same human tendency or characteristic” (Morrison 26).

Kemmerer takes the idea a step further, suggesting that, in the *Rambler* essays, not only is Johnson trying to give women equal voice and perceive women as valid readers, he is, rather, truly an advocate for females. Many female personae in the *Rambler*, she points out, are not submissive and inferior, but rather brave and even confrontational, such as Euphelia’s character in numbers 42 and 46 (80). In addition,

Johnson often presents disenfranchised women, who are chastised for their lack of education, loss of fortune, loss of beauty, or loss of virtue, in order to advocate a change in societal perspective of these women (82): “Johnson’s female personae model the voices of women claiming rights and registering complaints without apologizing for doing so” (92). The female personae he creates, in fact,

model the behavior and speech of women who are empowered by a sense of their own worth. Johnson creates credible, competent female personae whom he allows to speak for themselves rather than making them the subjects or receivers of discourse. These characters model women’s ability to take charge of their own lives and to speak to men as equals. (Kemmerer 79)

Indeed, Johnson is their advocate. In *Rambler* # 170, for example, Misella, a woman who has been raped, discarded, and mistreated, elicits passionate anger from Mr. Rambler, who calls male predators “reptiles whom their own servants would have despised” (139). Johnson similarly presents the perspective of a marginalized woman in *Rambler* # 126, as a female character laments: “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” (72).

Johnson was conscious and critical of the culturally imposed, narrow domestic experience of women; indeed, he dedicates few *Rambler* essays to women because women’s unfortunately limited experience affords nothing of interest for the Rambler to

discuss. In *Rambler* # 34 Johnson explains that: “masculine duties afford more room for counsels and observations.” Sarah Morrison suggests, in “Samuel Johnson, Mr. Rambler, and Women,” that although Johnson portrays women as very narrowly experienced, he emphasizes society’s influence on the narrow experience: parents who don’t let their daughters read, mothers who raise their daughters only to “understand a house,” or prostitutes who are forced into that lifestyle by society (27). His *Rambler* essays are rich with images and depictions of the narrowness of experience of women, mainly attributed to the confines of domesticity. A gentleman relates the narrow behavior of an old woman in *Rambler* # 51:

It is, indeed, the great business of her life, to watch the skillet on the fire, to see it simmer with the due degree of heat, and to snatch it off at the moment of projection; and the employments to which she has bred her daughters, are to turn rose-leaves in the shade, to pick out the seeds of currants with a quill,... For her part she never loved to see young women give their minds to such follies [as books]... She bred her daughters to understand a house. (276)

Through satire and humor, Johnson criticizes narrow domestic experience, illustrating its silly absurdity: “She has no crime but luxury, nor any virtue but chastity; she has no desire to be praised but for her cookery, nor wishes any ill to the rest of mankind, but that whenever they aspire to a feast, their custards may be wheyish, and their pye-crusts tough” (*Rambler* #51). Johnson suggests that the cultural expectation of women’s roles as domestic, mainly enforced by mothers, is responsible for limited experience and ignorance among females, and that women must rise above the traditional cultural expectations to improve themselves and expand their experience. Further evidence of this notion is found in *Rambler* # 112; a gentleman describes the narrow viewpoint of a woman in a letter to the publication: “Of three amiable nieces she has declared herself

an irreconcilable enemy to one, because she broke off a tulip with her hoop..." (235). A passage in *The Idler* (#13) additionally serves to exemplify how traditional stereotypes of women as domestic contribute to narrow experience: "the girls grow up in total ignorance of every thing... Molly asked me..., whether Ireland was in France, and was ordered by her mother to mend her hem" (45).

Johnson further suggests that women's confinement to domestic experiences reflects a wrong organization of their priorities, with household concerns too high on the list. Johnson characterizes one such woman in *Rambler* # 112, describing her indulgence in "spiteful superintendence of domestic trifles... She lives for no other purpose but to preserve the neatness of a house and gardens, and feels neither inclination to pleasure, nor aspiration after virtue... She has broken off her intercourse of visits, because company makes a house dirty" (235). 'Mrs. Busy' in *Rambler* # 138 experiences similar disorganized priorities as a result of her overzealous concern with household duties; according to the narrator, she occupies herself so extremely with domestic trifles that she felt neither joy nor sorrow at her husband's death (360). 'Lady Bustle' is an additional exemplar of a woman whose narrow concentration on domesticity adversely affects her priorities; she "has... contracted her cares into a narrow space, and set herself free from many perplexities with which other minds are disturbed" (*Rambler* # 51). In essence, she has become indifferent to significant world events and realities of humanity. In *Rambler* # 115, Johnson foreshadows his treatment of women in *Rasselas*. In that essay, we observe experienced women denouncing females of limited experience: "Camilla professed a boundless contempt for the folly, levity, ignorance, and impertinence of her own sex; ...She avoided all compliance with the fashion" (249). In each of these

examples of women's narrow experience from the *Rambler*, Johnson suggests that women have the *choice* in creating their experiences; although society dictated that women should be domestic, Johnson implies that the women described in the *Rambler* made bad choices in confining themselves to domestic existences rather than broadening their experiences.

Throughout the periodical essays, Johnson shows immense support for the improvement of women's experience. In his "Dancing Dogs" article, James Basker focuses on the *Rambler* and *Tatler* essays, carefully crafting an argument for the supportive and sympathetic attitude toward women exemplified within the essays. Of thirty-five *Rambler* essays in which Johnson creates illustrative sketches of female experience, most are "pseudo-autobiographical" letters to the editor, so that Johnson significantly creates a connection between women and the epistolary genre (Basker 65, 68). Rather uncoincidentally, the *Rambler*, published by a man who advocates education for women, serves as a didactic text for its women readers; women are emboldened to write to Mr. Rambler as they read about other women in the periodical, and the *Rambler* gives women a rare public voice (Basker 68-9). Importantly, this public female voice is sometimes the voice of reason and at times even satirizes *men*; Deborah Ginger, in *Idler* # 47, for example, is frustrated with her husband's not being realistic (70). Though Johnson himself gravitates in his personal life toward intellectual, erudite women, his *Rambler* essays depict a wide socioeconomic range of females, illustrating his perspective of and concern with the female plight in general. Surely Johnson aims to be a women's advocate throughout many of the *Rambler* essays, as, while many topics concern female experience, the intended readership is almost certainly mostly male;

Basker goes so far as to suggest that *Rambler*'s "moral objective is reform of a male-dominated society" (73).

Though Johnson disparages timidity among females, the narrator in *Rambler* # 70 attributes these traits of timidity and coquetry in women to their awareness of cultural stereotypes of females, suggesting that females are not naturally timid and coquettish, but rather they conform to traditional views of them as such:

It may be particularly observed of women, ... that neither education nor reason gives them much security against the influence of example: Whether it be that they have less courage to stand against opposition, or that the desire of admiration makes them sacrifice their principles to the poor pleasure of worthless praises, it is certain, ... that female goodness seldom keeps its ground against laughter, flattery, or fashion. (6)

Despite the strong influence of cultural views of women's roles, Johnson still depicts women in *The Rambler* with a very enlightened view. Indeed, Johnson recognizes that women are consistently blamed for a lack of harmony within marriage, explaining: "As the faculty of writing has been chiefly a masculine endowment, the reproach of making the world miserable has been always thrown upon the women" (*Rambler* # 18). "The custom of the world," Mr. Rambler readily admits in *Rambler* # 39, "seems to have been formed in a kind of conspiracy against [women], though it does not appear but they had themselves an equal share in its establishment" (197). Additionally, in *Rambler* # 39, Johnson acknowledges that women, unfortunately, "whether they embrace marriage, or determine upon a single life, are exposed, in consequence of their choice, to sickness, misery, and death" (211). Johnson significantly introduces the concept of women's ability to choose whether to marry, which further

indicates Johnson's enlightened treatment of women compared with his contemporaries. Frequently, marriage is miserable for women because husbands are "forced upon them by authority and violence" (198). Further, Johnson asserts, marriage is analogous to slavery for some women, yet old unmarried women are treated as "the refuse of the world" (*Rambler* # 39, 212) and appear "uneasy" (198).

Throughout his writings, Johnson additionally removes the burden of blame from women in marriage by acknowledging that marriage is unhappy sometimes simply because life is unhappy. In *Rambler* # 45, for example, Johnson claims that happier days "are the days not only of celibacy but of youth...; and I am afraid that whether married or unmarried, we shall find the vesture of territorial existence more heavy and cumbrous, the longer it is worn" (244). Additionally, Johnson points out that although both wives and husbands argue with each other, it is human nature (even animal nature, Johnson says), to lash out at those who are near" (176).

The idea that men and women are capable of bonding friendship is exhibited in *Rambler* # 167 when a couple explains: "We considered marriage as the most solemn league of perpetual friendship" (124).

Johnson's encouragement of education among women, an idea which he considered very important, is evident throughout his writings, including *The Rambler* essays. Dr. Johnson's interest in the education of women evidenced multiple purposes: it would relieve female ignorance and narrowness of experience; it would prevent idleness; it would serve to add value to conversations in which women engage; and it would increase their faithfulness and virtue. Evidence for each of these ideas may be found in

both his letters and his published works. Johnson's *Rambler* represents education as appealing by contrasting educated and knowledgeable women with silly, narrow-minded women. Bellaria, a young woman in *Rambler* # 191, sounds ridiculous in defending her reasons as to why she does not read:

I have so many things to do, so many orders to give....,
so many alterations to make in my cloathes, so many
visitants names to read over, so many invitations to accept
or refuse, so many cards to write, and so many fashions
to consider, ... When shall I either stop my course, or so
change as to want a book? (IV, 237).

By contrast, a woman in *Rambler* # 84 who is exposed to the intellectual world resents her confinement to learning "housewifery": "I saw new worlds hourly bursting upon my mind, and was enraptured at the prospect of diversifying life with endless entertainment" (IV, 79).

Johnson additionally portrays many less educated and otherwise disenfranchised women in the *Rambler* essays; however, no matter what their unfortunate plight, Johnson always expects women to improve their minds through education or by making rational choices (Kemmerer 91). Livingston suggests that Johnson's enlightened view of women within *The Rambler* results partly from a pressure to please his audience: "As the essayist wrestles with the necessity of and risk in accommodating self to others, an immense sympathy for the female plight emerges" (3041-A). One could easily argue with this theory; however, as Johnson's encouragement of education among women is

broader than the scope of the *Rambler*, exemplified in his other writings, both personal and professional, and in his personal relations with women.

Women, it seems, should be educated additionally to ease idle thoughts: “I have always admired the wisdom of those by whom our female education was instituted, … by which the vacuities of recluse and domestick leisure may be filled up” (*Rambler* # 85 IV, 85). Continuing the same notion, the narrator asserts that, in essence, education protects women from “the rust of their own thoughts” (86). In his letters to “Queeney,” too, Johnson advises her not to be idle (Lansdowne 28).

Further, education has as its important purpose the improvement of women’s conversational abilities; Johnson, of course, placed a prodigious emphasis upon good conversation. The narrator in *Rambler* # 375, for example, advocates that education would “add dignity and value to female conversation” (IV, 29).

The Rambler essays, then, strongly evidence Johnson’s support of women; though the influence of eighteenth-century culture is inevitably reflected in many ways, Johnson encouraged women to broaden their experience and sharpen their intellectual abilities through satirizing vacuous women and through including women as active readers of the essays and portraying females as characters in the essays.

Chapter 3: Letters, Diaries, and Journals

Johnson's audience is important in analyzing his treatment of women. Margaret Anne Doody suggests, for example, that Johnson's extreme loyalty to his friends influenced what he said about women (10); in consoling or advising friends, Johnson's views may have been wholly different from his more general statements with the reading

public as an audience.^{xxi} A look at his correspondence and other personal writings perhaps offers more clues as to what his views toward females were; even these personal texts, though, like his fictional writings, contain conflicting ideas about women.

Epistolary evidence suggests, for example, that Johnson viewed women as somewhat threatening, as eighteenth-century cultural influence would predict. In particular, a letter from Johnson to John Taylor dated August 18, 1763, contains a view of women as threatening from the power they naturally have: “Nature has given women so much power that the Law has very wisely given them little” (Redford *I*, 228). Johnson’s ideas differ depending on his audience, whether it be the general reading public or personal acquaintances.

Johnson’s personal writings also address his ideas about the narrow experience of women; according to Johnson, the furthest extreme of limited experience results in insanity, of which Johnson had a notable fear. He suggested to Hester Thrale, in fact, that by making good choices in expanding their experiences, women could avoid the dreadful plague of madness: “She who loves to be mysterious naturally, will soon provide to herself the cause of Mystery; I use the word she because...Women, are more apt to be infected with this Disease of the Mind [insanity] than Men are, which as it originates from narrowness...” is dangerous (*Thraliana* 198).

One important role women play, of course, is that of mother. Both in his writings and in his personal life, Johnson vacillates between viewing the “mother” as a loving, nurturing figure and regarding her as a domineering, over-authoritative figure.

Johnson had definite ideas of what characterized good mothers, and his ideas paralleled eighteenth-century traditional notions. Most importantly, an ideal mother

would place significant emphasis on her family and her duties in raising her children well, serving as a teacher and a nurturer to her children. Johnson counsels Hester Thrale, for example, on the importance of being a good mother, encouraging her to derive pleasure from her children (Chapman, Jan 21, '84). Additionally, however, a mother should be honorable, virtuous, and worthy of respect.

Domineering mothers fail, Johnson posits, because they inhibit their daughters' freedoms and abilities to choose. In a letter to Hester Thrale, for example, Johnson argues that children are not obligated to obey their parents, who may be wicked or foolish; it is important, he asserts, that daughters be allowed their own choice in marriage (Redford 31-32). In one instance, Thrale reprimands the daughter of the housekeeper for sitting in her mother's presence, but Johnson supports the right of the girl to do as she chooses (*Anecdotes* 20). Mrs. Thrale reiterates Johnson's support of daughters against domineering mothers in *Thraliana*: "As he was always on the side of the husband against the Wife, so he was always on the side of the Children against the Old ffolks" (181).

Johnson's treatment of the mother image in both his personal life and his writings, then, vacillates between traditional views of mothers as dedicated to their children and portrayals of ways in which women fail as mothers.

Just as in his fiction, Johnson treats the subject of a wife's responsibility for a happy marriage in his correspondence. In a letter to Joseph Baretti in 1762, Johnson writes that [in a failed marriage] women may not always be fair and virtuous; by contrast, men may merely fail to retain their respect for women (Redford *I*, 213-15). Again, however, we must consider the influence of Johnson's loyalty to friends in assessing how accurate his opinion may be in this instance. Letters to Boswell contain the same

assertions; in the period preceding Boswell's marriage, for instance, Johnson tells him that in his marriage his wife will make him more "regular and useful" (Redford 329). Even young Fanny Burney is not exempt from this advice; Johnson writes to her: "We tell the ladies that good Wives make good husbands" (Chapman # 117).

A man should additionally choose, however, a woman who is somewhat similar to him, and most definitely sensible, virtuous and intelligent. Writing to Joseph Baretti on Dec. 21, 1762, Johnson counsels him on the extreme importance of a "prudent and virtuous" marriage (Redford 214). Happy and satisfactory marriages necessitate, for example, choosing a wife with strong principles of religion (*Life of Johnson* 384), sense, education, and the capability of intelligent conversation (421).

In his *Diaries, Prayers, and Annals*, Johnson often expresses his affection and respect for Tetty, despite the couple's faults and failings (292). Johnson's entries in his *Diaries* hint perhaps of an implicit guilt he felt for the manner in which he had treated his wife; after her death he prays: "Grant that the affliction...may awaken my conscience [and] enforce my resolutions of a better life" (44). Indeed, Johnson's thoughts follow a pattern whenever he thinks about Tetty after her death; he prays for pardon and peace, and is unable often to settle his mind on the subject (79, 113, 263), suggesting that indeed he had failed to treat her as he would have liked.

In addition, Johnson's enlightened view of the role of wives is manifested in his argument that women should be able to choose their husbands: "Is not marriage a thing in which she is more interested, and has therefore more right of choice?" (*Letters*; Chapman # 308).

Throughout his life, Johnson enjoyed endearing and genuine friendships with strong and intelligent women such as Fanny Burney, Hester Lynch Thrale, Hannah More, Hester Maria Thrale, Elizabeth Carter, Elizabeth Montagu, and Charlotte Lenox, all of whom refer to Johnson with some term of endearment, such as “my dear Johnson” (Basker Multi 67). His dedication to these friendships are evident throughout his letters to or about them. In a letter, for example, to an unidentified correspondent in July, 1781, Johnson seeks assistance on behalf of Charlotte Lenox, as she had been “harshly treated by her husband.” Johnson proceeds in the letter to compliment her highly, defending her worthiness of assistance: “You were perhaps never called to the relief of a more powerful mind... She is a great Genius” (Redford *III* 354). Displaying a similar respect for the intelligence of Elizabeth Carter, Johnson writes to her: “From the liberty of writing to you if I have been hitherto deterred by the fear of your understanding I am now encouraged to it by the confidence of your goodness” (Redford *I*, 126).

Additionally, Johnson is highly and constantly sensitive about the status of his friendships with these women, worrying when he had quarreled with them. He regrets, for example, the loss of friendship between him and Elizabeth Montagu, writing to Hester Thrale: “I wish her name had connected itself with Friendship” (Redford *III*, 237). Of the incident, Johnson explains: “There are people who one should like very well to drop, but would not wish to be dropped by” (*Life of Johnson* 388).

Despite Johnson’s enlightened views of the roles of women in marriage and friendship, however, he was inevitably influenced by eighteenth-century culture, which viewed women as nurturers. Indeed, throughout the previous discussions of marriage and friendship, Johnson’s perception of women as nurturers has become clear; his view that

women should perform domestic functions is persistent throughout his lifetime. In a letter to Hester Thrale, Johnson emphasized her role as a mother and wife, encouraging her to emulate her own mother (Redford *II*, 21), whom Johnson describes as nurturing in his epitaph to her: “With genius blest, a pure enlighten’d mind; benevolence..., A heart for her friends With love o’erflow’d” (*Anecdotes* 86).

Because Johnson depended heavily upon Hester Thrale as an emotionally supportive, genuine friend during much of his life, this notion of women as nurturers is particularly evident in his correspondence with her and in her anecdotes of him. “In [Hester Thrale], Roy Menninger elucidates, “a woman skilled at offering maternal caring, Johnson found psychologically nurturing elements that he had not found before and needed still” (192-3)^{xxii}. Indeed, Johnson confides his inner fears and weaknesses to Thrale, resulting in her intimate knowledge of him. Specifically, Johnson confesses his depression and fear of insanity to Thrale in a letter written in French sometime in June, 1773 (Redford *II*, 39), exhibiting a great deal of respect for her, as well as trust in her intellectual strength, but mostly taking advantage of her nurturing personality. Livingston even proposes that he seeks the nurturing from Thrale that he failed to receive from either his wife or mother (3041-A).

Thrale, however, resents Johnson’s view of her as his nurturer. In her *Anecdotes*, she complains that when her husband died, her problems included “her children, her brewery, and Dr. Johnson” (xiv). She continues accusingly: “I begin to see... that Johnson’s connection with me is merely an interested one; he loved Mr. Thrale, I believe, but only wished to find in me a careful nurse and humble friend for his sick and lounging hours” (xxiv). In her *Anecdotes*, Thrale reveals that Johnson perhaps too often confides

in her and depends on her about his affliction with melancholy (6); she writes that “his over-anxious care to retain without blemish the perfect sanity of his mind, contributed much to disturb it” (52). Exasperated and wearied with her role as nurturer to Johnson, she relates that “Dr. Lawrence told him one day, that... to hear his complaints was more than man could support. ‘Twas therefore that he tried... to weary the patience of a woman [herself]” (52).

Hester Thrale is not, however, the only woman whom Johnson views as a nurturer, although probably the most prominent nurturing figure within his life. Evidence points to his wife’s role as a nurturer of him also. Boswell, for example, cites a passage from Johnson’s *Diaries and Prayers* that illustrates Johnson’s perception of his wife as having a nurturing influence: “O Lord!... If thou hast ordained the Soul of the Dead to minister to the Living, and appointed my departed Wife to have care of me, grant that I may enjoy the good effects of her attention and ministration” (*Life of Johnson* 157). Indeed, in Thrale’s *Anecdotes*, he compares Tetty to a guardian angel (104).

Johnson goes so far as to assert that the nurturing role of women benefits themselves as well as men. For his relatively enlightened view of women, Johnson does a disservice to women by positing that the domestic and nurturing functions of women inhibit idleness and even relieve extreme grief which, in turn, prevents insanity. For example, Lady Tavistock grieved dramatically when her husband died; according to Johnson, performing her domestic, nurturing duty would have alleviated her distress: “I doubt not, if we had put my Lady Tavistock into a small chandler’s shop, and given her a nurse-child to tend, her life would have been saved” (*Anecdotes* 101). Even petty domestic functions such as needle-work for females, Johnson argues, lengthen their lives

by preserving their minds in states of sanity (*Ibid* 175). Despite his enlightened perspectives of women as capable of intelligence and education, he somehow maintains that domestic duties are the only activities that can prevent idleness in females. He does not, however, intend to criticize. Indeed, he only wishes to spare women from the idleness culture encouraged for women, but which scared him for himself.

Johnson's treatment of women as capable of intellectuality and brilliance, though, is well-supported in his letters to women. Livingston suggests that his correspondence with Hester Lynch Thrale, in particular, reflects his perception of women as men's intellectual equals (3041-A). Throughout his frequent and sometimes lengthy letters to her, he often compliments her and expresses his earnest interest in her responses: “[Your letters] are always too short for my curiosity; I do not know that I was ever content with a single perusal” (*Redford II*, 31). Johnson's considerable esteem for Thrale is also obvious in the letters she received; on November 7, 1772, he writes: “in great matters you are hardly ever mistaken” (*Redford I*, 406) and, consistent with his previous opinion, he tells her in 1775: “you know how much I honour you” (Chapman 330). At times he begins to advise her, then consciously recognizes that it is unnecessary (Chapman 42); indeed, Johnson compliments Thrale that she has “every right to distinction” (*Redford II*, 231).

Much evidence from Johnson's personal life suggests that Johnson highly respected the wit, intelligence, and rational capabilities of the women with whom he associated. In Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, as Johnson exclaims that he dined with Elizabeth Carter, Hannah More, and Fanny Burney, and that “three such women are not to be found,” the setting is significant. Johnson apparently made the remark during a

meeting of his Essex Head men's-only discussion club (Clarke 2). He apparently once told Hester Thrale that Elizabeth Montagu “‘diffuses more knowledge than any woman I know, or indeed, almost any man’” (Ibid 2). Johnson did surround himself with intellectually accomplished women. Elizabeth Carter, for example, taught herself nine languages, and was respected as an educated scholar who translated *All the Works of Epictetus* from Greek admirably (Ibid 26-7).

So, although “discussions of female education throughout the eighteenth-century stress the urgency of educating young women in the tender, virtuous emotions essential to their ethical ‘calling,’” (Harrington 42), Johnson does buck common thought by encouraging education for education’s sake. He supports the intellectual development of his female friends and colleagues and, importantly, their daughters. Johnson advises Hester Maria Thrale in a letter to “keep [her] eyes and ears open, and enjoy as much of the intellectual world as [she] can” (Lansdowne 19). Again, the stress is not only on education, but on an open mind as well. “Queeney”^{xxiii} receives these words of wisdom closely following the previous letter: “Endeavor to preserve what you know, and I hope we shall have an opportunity of increasing our knowledge. In the meantime, throw your eyes about you; acquaintance with the world is knowledge, and knowledge very valuable and useful” (Lansdowne 20). Hester Maria Thrale also directly receives this bit of counsel, connecting the effects of reading on conversational ability: “they who do not read can have nothing to think, and little to say” (Lansdowne 22); Johnson suggests that she will recognize the value of what she has read by discussing it openly (Lansdowne 22). Evidence of Johnson’s extreme respect for “Queeney’s” (Thrale’s eldest daughter) intelligence is also abundant; realizing her potential and the value of her thoughts, he

advises her against temerity: “Never delight yourself with the dignity of silence” (Lansdowne 22). He praises her wit: “You are a very thinking Lady” (Ibid 24) and encourages her to utilize her intelligence, also implying that women have many rich capacities: “Encourage yourself in an implacable impatience of doing nothing... Life has been so dozed away by many whom Nature had originally qualified not only to be esteemed but admired” (Lansdowne 35). Fanny Burney, of course, earns much of Johnson’s esteem. He endorses her extreme potential by comparing her to a great male writer, pointing to passages in *Evelina* that “might do honour to Richardson” (Ellis 250).

Conclusion

Throughout Johnson's writings, women of narrow experience are explicitly contrasted with educated women. There can be little misinterpretation of the texts available that Johnson did indeed advocate education for women. Indicative of the cultural, traditional view, Johnson labels girls' boarding schools in *Thraliana* as "roosts for ignorance" (465); similarly, he declares that "women's minds are commonly like their shapes, either screwed up to ridiculous smallness, or else loosed out" (*Thraliana* 198). He "[disparaged] a woman who 'had no more common sense than a Baby...having spent her Youth in acquiring Embellishments which were useless, instead of a solid Understanding'" (Wellington 54). Indeed, Johnson's personal life affords a plethora of examples of his encouragement of young women in their intellectual efforts. Especially favoring Fanny Burney and Hester Maria Thrale, he is highly supportive of both and attentive to their potential (Grundy 66), although Johnson encourages all women whose intelligence he openly admires, such as Charlotte Lenox and Elizabeth Carter. Specifically, Johnson promotes the habits of journal-keeping and letter-writing (Glendening 281); however, he is additionally instrumental in functioning as the girls' constant reassurer, urging Burney in particular to ignore "fame's censure" and speak up in company (Glendening 287). Especially concerned with "Queeney's" education, Johnson taught her Latin himself (Landsdowne ix).

Fanny Burney, however, seemed to capture most of Johnson's encouragement: "Johnson took to Burney immediately, praised her lavishly, ... and treated her, his 'little Burney,' with... gentleness" (Glendening 285). Glendening goes so far as to suggest that

Johnson largely functions as a surrogate father for Burney (289). Moreover, Fanny is not unaware of his praise; enthralled that such a great literary figure would admire her *Evelina* (Ellis 234), Burney enters the following words into her journal: “Dr. Johnson looked at me with great kindness, and not at all in a discouraging manner” (*Ibid* 256). Wellington correctly observes that Johnson was against the social tide in encouraging women’s education, but she perhaps gives him too much credit in perceiving his advocacy as selfless; Johnson’s motives for supporting education for females was to benefit men and society as a whole, that women might make better mothers, wives, and humans with whom one could have an intellectually engaging conversation. Johnson disliked “female frivolity,” certainly; however, he wanted these girls to learn reason and become educated largely because coquetry simply *annoyed* him. Educated women, thought Johnson, made much better wives: “ ‘Some cunning men choose fools for their wives thinking to manage them,’ wrote Johnson, ‘but they always fail...Depend upon it, no woman is the worse for sense and knowledge’” (*Ibid* 52). Indeed, both men *and* women of the eighteenth-century associated female education with more enjoyable marriages (Foy 45). Johnson also perceived that his parent’s marriage suffered because of his mother’s lack of experience and education: “ ‘Had my mother been more literate,’ he muses, ‘they had been better companions’” (*Ibid* 52). Wellington perhaps takes Johnson’s views to an unrealistic extreme, however, when she posits that Johnson supposed that “men who would exile women from the bookish part of the world degrade themselves and weaken the social fabric” (53).^{xxiv}

Johnson’s support for the education of women was somewhat qualified. Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*, however, presents a different perspective for the goal of

educating women, a goal which parallels the ideological trends of eighteenth-century society; Boswell characterizes Johnson as believing that women of “more understanding” are, as a result, more faithful and virtuous (3) and make better companions. Johnson was not the only one advocating the education of women to ensure felicity in the domestic and social spheres, especially in marriage; indeed, Johnson was seemingly merely echoing the thoughts of his contemporaries^{xxv}. The Reverend John Brown, for example, in his sermon “On the Female Character and Education” (1765), emphasized the need for the ‘proper’ education of women in order to maintain ““the natural delicacies of the sex;”” for without the integral characteristic of virtue in women, marriages were doomed to unhappiness (Harrington 33). In “Elements of Moral Philosophy” (1748), David Fordyce argues that men grow stronger morally through marriage and their relationships with women (Harrington 41). A relationship with a woman, Fordyce posits, “ ‘becomes the cement of *a new Moral Relation*, and gives a softer Turn to his Passions and Behavior’ ” (41). Again, in his “Dialogues concerning Education,” Fordyce urges that “female speech ‘is one of the best Instruments...by which they calm the Storms of Passion, and charm our rude Natures into a softer Kind of Humanity’ ” (41). In this context, then, Johnson seems not so visionary in his support of women’s education, but rather a follower of his culture’s ideas; Johnson would likely have read and digested these texts, and they would have influenced his thinking. The ideology of which Brown and others speak is novel to the eighteenth-century; however, Harrington, posits, “by the end of the century the view of the domestic woman as the moral nexus of society would go virtually unquestioned” (34). Fordyce and others “[position] women as the moralizing agents of society;...There was a growing sense that middle-class women were crucial to

maintaining the ethical equilibrium that allowed their male counterparts to participate in a commercial society” (42). Despite their apparent critical role in maintaining society’s moral fabric, however, women were still deemed unfit for participation in public pursuits, be they political or commercial.

In essence, then, Johnson expected women to balance intellectuality and education with the proper femininity as exhibited socially in dress, eating, and manners. Hannah More herself, in her “Thoughts on the Cultivation of the Heart and Temper in the Education of Daughters,” cautions that women should restrain and suppress “‘that bold, independent, enterprising spirit, which is so admired in boys’” and writes of the necessity of cultivating a “‘submissive temper’” (Harrington 44).

Although Johnson’s support of education for women is transgressive to an extent, it is not feminist. Johnson’s advocacy of female education was to benefit himself and other males just as much as to benefit women, as marriage and intellectual conversation could be significantly enhanced for both genders through female education. James Basker writes that, for Johnson, “the key to improving the female condition lies in education,” (74) and Johnson’s advocacy for women’s education was to benefit men as well as women.

Johnson’s support for and encouragement of education for women stands against a backdrop of a foundering of patriarchal political theory during the eighteenth-century (McKeon 297), rendering Johnson’s ideas not quite so transgressive. Studies in the history of sexuality unveil huge changes in the mid eighteenth-century; Catherine Gallagher reveals that the time period was, importantly, a “watershed of European discourse on the topics of sexuality and gender, a time when the very meaning of

‘woman’ underwent drastic revision” (xiv). In England, the absolute sovereignty of the state paralleled the authority of the husband, father, or master over the family household; the Restoration’s succession crisis, however, called into question whether patrilineage was indeed the best system for the well being of the people of England. In the Hanoverian Settlement of 1689, for example, England’s rulers concluded that special considerations can overrule dynastic inheritance (297). Reforms in marriage laws, too, enabled women to possess separate property by the end of the century (298). Michael McKeon points out that, while in the 1500s virtually *all* women were housewives, the growing middle class of the 1800s resulted in women’s and men’s sharing the labor market. Women began to write for publication and profit, although McKeon reiterates that male domination and the subordination of women were still “constants” (300). William Craig, writing in 1895, recognized this evolving female situation in British culture: The “new woman of the eighteenth-century...might dabble in republicanism, denounce the injustice of the laws affecting her sex, protest against the excessive domination of men, and assert her right to education, representation, and all the rest; but she was content to remain, a woman, in a sphere absolutely distinct from that of man” (78). The system of patriarchy was ingrained in English culture. Beth Kowalski-Wallace agrees that, in eighteenth-century literary biography, despite its being an “age of supposedly diminishing patriarchalism” (277), there remained a preoccupation with the “benevolent patriarch,” or a male father figure to which young women looked for support in their intellectual pursuits^{xxvi}, and these pursuits were stymied by the lack of possibilities to which they would lead: “The circumstances under which [these young women] grew to intellectual maturity,” Kowalski-Wallace observes, “offered neither

freedom of choice nor action. Despite the occasional glimpse of a feminist insight, these women were neither aware of a ‘meaningful past,’ nor were they free to shape their own futures” (290).

Dana Harrington explains, though, that the rise of the middle class made ‘virtue’ more accessible to middle-class women, including the pursuit of economic interests: “Middle class intellectuals,” she outlines, “re-wrote the historical antagonism between civic virtue and commerce, in part, by relocating virtue in the private sphere and designating middle-class women the arbiters of virtue” (34). It was more acceptable, then, for these women to pursue intellectual interests such as writing and education, so from this perspective Samuel Johnson was only sailing with the winds of change when he advocated female education. The patronage, support, and encouragement from a writer like Samuel Johnson was, however, “essential to the transition women writers were making from the ill-repute inherited from Restoration women writers, to the public approval extended to women’s writing by the end of the eighteenth-century” (Brack iii). The changing values and virtues of the eighteenth-century, though, were not without challenge; in 1757, John Brown lamented in his “Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times” that there was then little distinction between the sexes. Women were bolder, he observed, and men more effeminate.^{xxvii}

Johnson’s enlightened views of women as intelligent, rational and capable did not, though, reflect traditional stereotypes of his cultural environment; indeed, his ostensible treatment of women as intellectual equals, despite the winds of tempered cultural change, did not reflect societal opinion and eighteenth-century culture (*Life of*

Johnson 384). Johnson's support of women was unusual and noteworthy given the backdrop of his patriarchal eighteenth-century culture.

Johnson did recognize the unequal role of women within marriage, both in his writings and as reported by his biographers, and in many instances he argues that wives should be treated with consideration and respect. Although his staunch belief in subordination contributed to his opinion that a wife owed obedience to her husband and that the subordination of the wife was necessary for a stable marriage, he was against tyranny of the husband, especially since the law was initially overwhelmingly in favor of the husband (Kemmerer 26).

Finally, Johnson's treatment of women was inevitably and consistently influenced by his cultural environment. Hence, while many of his writings reflect a societal, traditional treatment of women, Johnson's views of women are quite enlightened at the same time. Indeed, Johnson was a consistent advocate of education for women and of the cultivation of their capacities for reason; in addition, he stressed continually their power to choose, and the important moral implications of those choices.

Although critics have only recently begun to explore Johnson's treatment of women, his writings and personal life provide substantial evidence about the topic. Samuel Johnson's treatment of women in the eighteenth-century is indeed both compelling and conflicting, as his complex views reflect simultaneously the traditional views of women by which Johnson was inevitably influenced, and his enlightened treatment of women, which opposed ideas of the male contemporaries in his cultural environment. "Although Johnson was part of a profoundly chauvinistic culture, and sometimes uttered overtly misogynist statements himself," Steven Lynn concludes, "[he

still had a] ‘benign and rather enlightened attitude’” toward women (140). In addition, assessing Johnson’s ideas from the biographical accounts available is difficult, as his chief biographers, Hester Thrale and James Boswell, knew Johnson in different contexts and therefore depict conflicting and biased views of Johnson and his ideas.^{xxviii} Hence, although today Samuel Johnson is regarded largely as portraying women negatively, he deserves just credit for his dissenting voice of support for women and their intellectual capacities in a century well before the equal rights movement. “We must credit Johnson for this thinking in [such works as] *Rasselas*,” urges Foy, “even if he does make contrary comments elsewhere, as being ahead of his time in depicting women as a fundamental and rational part of the whole human race” (46). Though Johnson is firmly established in most public minds as a misogynist, he does “demonstrate in his writing an extraordinary sympathy with women” (Henson 67). Indeed, further exploration of Samuel Johnson and gender, which seems critical in any study of Johnson’s life and works, is undoubtedly needed.

Bibliography

- Barnett, Louise K. "Dr. Johnson's Mother: Maternal Ideology and the Life of Savage." Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth-century 304 (1992): 856-59.
- Basker, James G. "Dancing Dogs, Women Preachers and the Myth of Johnson's Misogyny." The Age of Johnson: A Scholarly Annual 3 (1990): 63-90.
- Basker, James. G. "Multicultural Perspectives: Johnson, Race, and Gender." In *Johnson Re-Visioned: Looking Before and After*, Ed. Philip Smallwood. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2001. 64-79.
- Boswell, James. The Life of Samuel Johnson, L.L.D. London: Oxford UP, 1974.
- Brack, Gae Annette. "Samuel Johnson and Four Literary Women." DAI 40 (1979): 231A.
- Brooks, Christopher. "Nekayah's Courage and Female Wisdom." College Language Association Journal 36 (1) (Sept 1992): 52-72.
- Chapman, R.W. The Letters of Samuel Johnson. 3 vols. London: Clarendon Press, 1952.
- Clarke, Norma. Dr. Johnson's Women. London: Hambldeon, 2000.
- Craig, William Henry. Dr. Johnson and the Fair Sex. Folcroft, PA: Folcroft Library Edition, 1977. Orig. London: Sampson Low, Marston & Co, 1895.
- Crotty, Mary Jane Burbank. "Images of Women: Boswell's Scotland Tour with Johnson Revisited." DAI (June, 1989).
- Deutsch, Helen. Loving Dr. Johnson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- Doody, Margaret Anne. "Dear Miss Boothby. [A Review of Redford's *Letters of Samuel Johnson.*]" London Review of Books 5 (November 1992): 10-11.
- Ellis, Annie Raine, ed. The Early Diary of Frances Burney 1768-1778. 2 vols. Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1889.
- Foy, Roslyn Reso. "Johnson's Rasselias: Women in the 'Stream of Life.'" English Language Notes 32 (1) (September 1994): 39-53.
- Gallagher, Catherine. Nobody's Story: The Vanish Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace 1670-1820. Berkeley: Univ of CA Press, 1994.

Geller, Jaclyn. "The Unnarrated Life: Samuel Johnson, Female Friendship, and the Rise of the Novel Revisited." In Johnson Revisited: Looking Before and After. Philip Smallwood, ed. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell UP, 2001. 80-98.

Glendening, John. "Young Fanny Burney and The Mentor." The Age of Johnson: A Scholarly Annual vol. 4. Ed. Paul J. Korshin. NY: AMS Press, 1991. 281-312.

Grundy, Isobel. "Samuel Johnson as Patron of Women." The Age of Johnson: A Scholarly Annual v. 1. Ed. Paul J. Korshin. NY: AMS Press, 1987. 59-77.

Hagstrum, Jean H. "Johnson and the Concordia Discors of Human Relationships." The Unknown Samuel Johnson. Ed. John J. Burke, Jr. and Donald Kay. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983. 39-53.

Hansen, Marlene R. "Sex and Love, Marriage and Friendship: A Feminist Reading of the Quest for Happiness in *Rasselas*." English Studies 66 (December 1985): 513-525.

Harrington, Dana. "Gender, Commerce, and The Transformation of Virtue in Eighteenth Century Britain." Rhetoric Society Quarterly 31 (Summer 2001): 33-52.

Henson, Eithne. "Johnson and the Condition of Women." In The Cambridge Companion to Samuel Johnson. Greg Clingham, ed. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997. 67-84.

Johnson, Samuel. Diaries, Prayers, Annals. 1 vol. Ed. E.L. McAdam, Jr. New Haven: Yale UP, 1958.

Johnson, Samuel. "The Fountains." Rasselas and Other Tales. Ed. G.J. Kolb. New Haven: Yale UP, 1963.

Johnson, Samuel. The Idler and the Adventurer. 2 vols. Ed. W. J. Bate. New Haven: Yale UP, 1963.

Johnson, Samuel. "The Life of Savage." Samuel Johnson. Ed. Donald Greene. London: Oxford UP, 1984. 128-164.

Johnson, Samuel. The Rambler. 3 vols. Ed. W. J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss. New Haven: Yale UP, 1969.

Johnson, Samuel. "Rasselas." Samuel Johnson: Selected Poetry and Prose. Ed. Frank Brady and W. K. Wimsatt. Berkeley: U of CA Press, 1977. 73-154.

Johnson, Samuel. "The Vision of Theodore, The Hermit of Teneriffe." Samuel Johnson. Ed. Donald Greene. London: Oxford UP, 1984. 165-174.

Kemmerer, Kathleen Nulton. A Neutral Being Between the Sexes: Samuel Johnson's Sexual Politics. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell UP, 1998.

Kinsley, James, ed. Memoirs and Anecdotes of Dr. Samuel Johnson. London: Oxford UP, 1974.

Kowalski-Wallace, Beth. "Milton's Daughters: The Education of Eighteenth-century Women Writers." Feminist Studie 12 (Summer 1986): 275-93.

Lansdowne, Marquis of, ed. The Queeney Letters. NY: Farrar and Rinehart, 1934.

Lennox, Charlotte. The Female Quixote. London: Harrington Co., 1783.

Livingston, Chella C. "Johnson and the Independent Woman: A Reading of Irene." The Age of Johnson: A Scholarly Annual. v. 2. Ed. Paul J. Korshin. NY: AMS Press, 1989. 219-234.

Livingston, Chella C. "Samuel Johnson's Literary Treatment of Women." DAI (April 1986): 3041A. U of South Carolina.

Lynn, Steven. "Sexual Differences and Johnson's Brain." Fresh Reflections on Samuel Johnson: Essays in Criticism. Ed. Prem Nath. Troy: Whitston, 1987.

McGowan, Ian. "Boswell at Work: The Revision and Publication of the Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides." In Tradition in Transition. Women Writers, Marginal Texts, and the Eighteenth-century Canon. Alvaro Ribeiro and James G. Basker, editors. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996. 127-43.

McKeon, Michael. "Historicizing Patriarchy: The Emergence of Gender Difference in England, 1660-1760." Eighteenth-century Studies 28 (Spring 1995): 295-322.

Menninger, Roy W. "Johnson's Psychic Turmoil and the Women in His Life." The Age of Johnson 5 (1992): 179-195.

Morrison, Sarah R. "Samuel Johnson, Mr. Rambler, and Women." Age of Johnson: A Scholarly Annual 14 (2003): 23-50.

Nussbaum, Felicity A. "'Savage' Mothers: Narratives of Maternity in the mid-Eighteenth-century." Eighteenth-century Literature 16 (February 1992): 162 -181.

Nussbaum, Felicity A. The Autobiographical Subject: Gender and Ideology in 18th Century England. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.

Piozzi, Hester Lynch. Anecdotes of Samuel Johnson. England: Cambridge UP, 1932.

Piozzi, Hester Lynch Thrale. Thraliana. 2 vols. Ed. Katharine C. Balderston. Great Britain: Clarendon Press, 1942.

Redford, Bruce. The Letters of Samuel Johnson. 3 vols. NJ: Princeton UP, 1992.

Schnorrenberg, Barbara Brandon. "A Paradise Like Eve's: Three Eighteenth-century Female Utopias." Women's Studies 9 (1982): 263-73.

Spacks, Patricia Meyer. "The Subtle Sophistry of Desire: Dr. Johnson and The Female Quixote." Modern Philology 95 (May 1988): 532-542.

Vickery, Amanda. The Gentleman's Daughter – Women's Lives in Georgian England. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.

Wellington, Charmaine. "Dr. Johnson's Attitude towards the Education of Women." New Rambler: Journal of the Johnson Society of London 18, (1977): 49-58.

Further Reading

- Armstrong, Nancy. "Desire and Domestic Fiction." In The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory, 1900-2000. Ed. Dorothy J. Hale. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006. 621-43.
- Basker, James G. "Radical Affinities: Mary Wollstonecraft and Samuel Johnson." In Tradition in Transition. Women Writers, Marginal Texts, and the Eighteenth-Century Canon. Alvaro Ribeiro and James G. Basker, editors. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996. 41-55.
- Cafarelli, Annette Wheeler. "Johnson and Women: Demasculinizing Literary History." The Age of Johnson: A Scholarly Annual 5 (1992): 179-200.
- De Rose, Peter L. Jane Austen and Samuel Johnson. Washington, DC: Press of America, 1980.
- Elliott, Helen Yvonne. "Johnson, Nature, and Women: The Early Years." DAI 55 (9) (1995). 2840A. University of North Carolina Greensboro.
- Emden, Cecil S. "Dr. Johnson's Attitude to Women." Quarterly Review 304 (1966): 419-430.
- Gallagher, Catherine. "Nobody's Story: Gender, Property and the Rise of the Novel." In Eighteenth-century Literary History, an MLQ Reader. Marshall Brown, ed. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1999. 27-42.
- Hinnant, Charles H. Johnson and Gender. College Station, TX: 1992.
- Mackie, Erin. Market a la Mode: Fashion, Commodity, and Gender in the Tatler and the Spectator. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997.
- O'Donnell, Sheryl Rae. "'Born to Know, to Reason, and to Act': Samuel Johnson's Attitude Toward Women as Reflected in his Writings." DAI 40 (1979): 873A.
- Perry, Ruth. Novel Relations: The Transformation of Kinship in English Literature and Culture 1748-1818. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004.
- Sloman, Judith. "The Female Quixote as an Eighteenth-century Character Type." Transactions of the Samuel Johnson Society of the Northwest. Robert H. Carnie, ed. Calgary, Alberta: Samuel Johnson Society of the Northwest, (1972): 86-101.

Solberg, Daniel Arnold. "The Ladies and the Lion: The Bluestockings and Samuel Johnson." DAI 56 (October 1995) (4). 1373A.

Spacks, Patricia Meyer. "The Talent of Ready Utterance; Eighteenth-Century Female Gossip." In Women and Society in The Eighteenth-century. Ian Duffy, ed. Bethlehem, PA: Lawrence Henry Gipson Institute, (1983): 1-14.

Notes

ⁱ The earliest criticism I could locate on the topic of this study was published in 1983 by Jean Hagstrum, who investigated Johnson's portrayal of relationships between men and women.

ⁱⁱ Hester Lynch Thrale Piozzi is referred to throughout this paper as Hester Thrale.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hester Thrale's *Thraliana* is her personal journal, the source from which she wrote *Anecdotes of Samuel Johnson* after Johnson's death. Thrale describes Johnson in her *Anecdotes* through her bias as his nurturer in his last twenty years of life. Boswell attacks Thrale's images of Johnson throughout his own *Life of Johnson*.

^{iv} Christopher Brooks points out that though Johnson made uncomplimentary remarks about women, he also criticized Scots, Americans, French, etc., he was also friends with members from each of these groups throughout his life (61).

^v Craig humorously admits that he has been "less scrupulous in the matter of references than beseemed a compiler" (viii), but does tell the reader that his facts are "borrowed mainly from Boswell, Horace Walpole, Sir N. Wraxall, Mme. d'Arblay, Mrs. Piozzi and Hannah More; but [he has] appropriated whatever suited [his] purpose elsewhere" (vii).

^{vi} Craig does allow that Johnson was not known for a generally gracious demeanor, however: "It must be confessed that we are precluded from dwelling at any great length upon the amiable side of Johnson's character by sheer paucity of materials" (24).

^{vii} As previously discussed, however, Boswell's depictions of Johnson are perhaps biased in Boswell's endeavor to defend Johnson's manliness.

^{viii} Scholars believe Floretta's character paralleled that of Hester Thrale, even though Johnson and Thrale supposedly wrote the tale in collaboration.

^{ix} Scholars only recently "disentangled themselves" from Boswell's influence. Geller points out that some scholars still misquote from *Life* as if it were Johnson speaking (rather than Boswell) (87-88).

^x Boswell's wife never cared much for Johnson; hence Johnson was continually trying to win her favor.

^{xi} Foy theorizes that Johnson wrote *Rasselas* after the death of his mother "as a kind of solution to this notion of friendship in his depiction of the bond among Rasselas, Nekayah, Pekuah and Imlac to compensate for the loss of his wife (in 1752) and his mother (in 1759) (41).

^{xii} Records of Johnson's close friendships with educated and independent women abound. He cultivated and enjoyed friendships with such intellectuals as Hester Thrale, Hannah More, Elizabeth Montagu, Charlotte Lennox, Elizabeth Carter, and Fanny Burney. He also took Miss Williams into his home after Tetty's death (Foy 42).

^{xiii} Johnson's satire, though, is not limited to women; Johnson is more interested in satirizing human weaknesses than being sexist.

^{xiv} Both Kemmerer and Brooks assert that Johnson considers women intellectually equal to men.

^{xv} Kemmerer produces some interesting information about the origin of the name of Abyssinia in this text which forwards her argument. Johnson translated Lobo's *Voyage to Abyssinia* and, in many cases, apparently censored the translation to mitigate misogynistic behavior or discrimination among Abyssinians. He does not translate, for example, two sentences which depict separate churches for men and women, and he completely omits the phrase: "les femmes sont obligées de se purifier" (93).

^{xvi} One piece of evidence Kemmerer cites is Johnson's withholding of physical descriptions of the characters' bodies, implying that the difference between men and women lies in the body rather than the mind or soul (104).

^{xvii} Many female writers perhaps took their cue from *Rasselas* in their ideas about marriage. Burney's *Evelina*, with which Johnson was surely familiar, explores disenfranchised women and indicates that marriage is more about a power base than love. Additionally, many novels of the period, including Lennox's *The Female Quixote*, feature illegitimate children, proving that marriage is unnecessary for the continuation of human species. Jane Austen's novels illustrate that older marriages, such as the Bennetts' in *Pride and Prejudice*, are not necessarily happier.

^{xviii} Kemmerer writes that a biography of a woman was considered unchaste and would have shamed her. Even obituaries of females stressed how virtuous or pious women were rather than listing accomplishments. "A woman's talking about herself to any but the most intimate friend, even in private correspondence, left her open to charges of immodesty" (78).

^{xix} Johnson, in fact, treats gender in many different essays, even on topics not stereotypically related to gender, such as marriage and motherhood. In *Rambler* # 34, when Mr. Rambler admits that he has been criticized for hitherto having only dedicated few essays “to the ladies,” Morrison points out that, in fact, he had already: responded to female correspondents (#10); adopted two female personae (Zosima in # 12 and Cleora in # 15); mocked male correspondents who failed to “write like a woman under female pseudonyms” (#20), and written an essay on marriage (#18) (Morrison 24-5).

^{xx} Morrison goes into a great bit of detail as to how elements of Johnson’s style itself indicate an awareness of and sensitivity to women readers. Although he expectedly uses the masculine generic form, he exhibits these elements as well, which together constitute, in Morrison’s estimation, a significant awareness of female readers: regular use of all-inclusive first person pronouns by Mr. Rambler; frequent “generalizations about mankind and men, but extreme caution in making pronouncements about women as a distinct group”; alternation between masculine singular and non-gendered plural forms; balanced examples of males and females; and avoidance of gendered discourse through the combination of personification of abstractions and the passive voice (29).

^{xxi} Margaret Ann Doody supports the idea that Johnson conveys different attitudes depending on his audience. In essence, he expresses different ideas to personal acquaintances than he would in a general statement to readers.

^{xxii} Menninger, a psychiatrist, is particularly interested in Johnson’s need for emotional nurturing. Johnson’s mother, Sarah Ford Johnson, was 40 years old when Johnson was born and “by all accounts” was not particularly nurturing. Menninger thinks it not coincidental that Johnson chose to marry Elizabeth Porter, who was, as a widow at 46 years old with three children, 20 years’ his senior (192).

^{xxiii} Queeney is the nickname for Hester Thrale’s oldest daughter, Hester Maria Thrale

^{xxiv} To draw this extreme conclusion, Wellington uses this passage from *Rambler* # 75, in which “Melissa” exclaims: “ ‘[male scholars are] not so much wiser than ourselves, but that they may receive as well as communicate knowledge...From those men...something may be gained... which..., will always add dignity and value to female conversation’” (53). I note that male scholars are *still* perceived as *wiser*.

^{xxv} Johnson notes in his diary that had his mother been literate, his parents would have likely been happier. His mother’s father discouraged her from being social because of the expense of tea (Greene 772-3).

^{xxvi} Kowalski-Wallace terms these young women, looking to their fathers for support, “daddy’s girls,” and cites examples such as Elizabeth Carter, Hannah More, Maria Edgeworth, and Fanny Burney (276).

^{xxvii} Harrington’s central argument is that virtue and its connection to women was undergoing change from the preceding century, during which Thomas Hobbes and David Filmer notably argued that the “unbridled pursuit of individual self-interest” leads to anarchy and war. In the next century, David Fordyce and others counter this opinion by arguing that humans have innate benevolence and that “prosperity is compatible with virtue and political stability” (39). Harrington outlines an eighteenth-century society in which women are depended upon to maintain social morality and virtue.

^{xxviii} It is interesting to consider, however, that Boswell may be to thank for his depiction of Johnson as a chauvinist, as his *Life of Johnson* is certainly the magnet which has drawn many scholars to study Johnson’s relationship with and treatment of women.