

Headnote for Samuel Johnson

By John O'Brien

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From many points of view, Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) was the most significant literary figure of the eighteenth century in Britain, so much so that if you had taken a class in eighteenth century literature fifty years ago, there's a good chance that it would have had a title something along the lines of "The Age of Johnson." That's testimony to the influence that Samuel Johnson had over his period, and to the wide range of his accomplishments. Johnson wrote moral and critical essays such those that appeared in *The Rambler*, the first useful *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755); he edited the works of William Shakespeare in an edition that is still useful to modern scholars; he wrote a series of biographies of English poets that helped establish one of the first "canons" of writers deemed to be significant in a national tradition; he published a great novel (*Rasselas*), an interesting travel narrative about his trip to Scotland (*A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*), and some great poems, including *London* and *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, two very loose translations of classical satires by the Roman poet Juvenal, updated by Johnson to include references to the contemporary world of eighteenth-century Britain.

But to call that period The Age of Johnson is (among many other problems) to look retrospectively from the end of Johnson's life, where he got to rather than where he started and how he got there. Johnson rose to prominence from humble beginnings, and although he is associated with the city of London because of his famous statement that "to be tired of London is to be tired of life," he was from the provinces. Johnson was born in Litchfield, a country town about 120 miles from London. His parents ran a bookstore that never made a lot of money, and Johnson's own account seems to imply that his father Michael suffered from depression, as did Johnson himself in adulthood. Johnson did take advantage of growing up in the store—he was a prodigious reader as a child, and obviously gifted. But he was also sickly, plagued by a number of diseases in childhood that left him physically scarred and pretty much blind in his left eye. It is also now believed that he had Tourette's syndrome, a condition that makes a person have involuntary spasms and sometimes odd vocalizations (contemporaries who knew Johnson remarked on both of these behaviors, but the medical vocabulary did not exist to diagnose or treat him, and we still cannot be sure of what accounted for his tics.) Johnson spent a semester at Oxford, but his parents ran out of money and he had to return. He tried to get teaching positions at some boys' schools, but was not very successful. He tried to start his own school, using his wife's savings; that failed as well. Finally, in 1737, at the age of 28, Johnson went to London to try to sell a play, a verse tragedy called *Irene*, that he hoped would be his path to fame and fortune. He walked all the way.

It took years for *Irene* to make it to the stage, but it did not do all that well. There are good reasons for this; Johnson's talents were not suited to the stage, and *Irene* is kind of boring. Johnson supported himself for years as a journalist, writing for the *Gentlemen's Magazine*, publishing poetry, reviewing books, writing short biographies for the magazine, publishing poetry and trying to make a reputation for himself in the London publishing world. He became famous with the publication of the *Dictionary* in 1755, which made him a kind of national institution; he was known as "Doctor" Johnson after Oxford gave him an honorary degree in recognition of the *Dictionary's* achievement.

The eighteenth century was not really an Age of Johnson; the period is too rich and diverse for any one figure to represent it. But Johnson's achievement in many kinds of literature is profound, and there's no one quite like him in literary history.

Image: There are many portraits of Samuel Johnson, especially once he became famous after the publication of his *Dictionary* in 1755; his appearance was striking to contemporaries. Here is a portrait done by the great portrait artist Sir Joshua Reynolds right after the *Dictionary* came out; the book is over Johnson's shoulder. (National Portrait Gallery)