

Samuel Johnson and the Epitaph on a Duckling

O M BRACK, JR.

"To adjust the minute events of literary history is tedious and troublesome; it requires indeed no great force of understanding, but often depends upon enquiries which there is no opportunity of making, or is to be fetched from books and pamphlets not always at hand."¹ Samuel Johnson's notorious sentence, often used out of context as a salve for the scholar's conscience, has provided me little consolation. After all, I have puzzled over a small bit of literary history—a duckling—for almost two decades. After teaching at The University of Iowa for the first time in the summer of 1965, I went to Yale University to work on some now-forgotten scholarly project. While there I met Herman W. Liebert, librarian of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library and collector of the works of Samuel Johnson. Following a visit to his Johnson collection I found that I had agreed to edit all of the biographies about Johnson which appeared before James Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791). Liebert mentioned that he had discussed this project earlier with another young man but could not remember his name. In the spring of 1966 the Department of English hired an assistant professor, Robert E. Kelley, and over lunch in late summer I discovered to my amazement that he was the young man working on the early biographies. We joined forces, assisted with characteristic generosity by Frank Paluka and Frank Hanlin in acquiring needed materials, eventually completing a monograph about the early biographies and an edition of them, both published by the University of Iowa Press.

But even after the publication in 1974 of the *Early Biographies of Samuel Johnson*, a few problems remained to be resolved, one the story that as a young child Johnson had composed an epitaph on a duckling.²

¹ "Life of Dryden" in *Lives of the English Poets*, ed. G. B. Hill (Oxford: Clarendon, 1905), 1: 368.

² Johnson almost certainly killed a duckling. A child is not likely to injure a full-grown duck by treading on it; more likely he would injure himself. That "duck" was used in the poem suggests that Johnson's precocity did not extend to lexicography. It was also a better word for rhyming.

THE
L I F E
Edward OF *Phelips*
SAMUEL JOHNSON, LL.D.

1792
COMPREHENDING

AN ACCOUNT OF HIS STUDIES
AND NUMEROUS WORKS,
IN CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER;
A SERIES OF HIS EPISTOLARY CORRESPONDENCE
AND CONVERSATIONS WITH MANY EMINENT PERSONS,
AND
VARIOUS ORIGINAL PIECES OF HIS COMPOSITION,
NEVER BEFORE PUBLISHED.
THE WHOLE EXHIBITING A VIEW OF LITERATURE AND LITERARY MEN
IN GREAT-BRITAIN, FOR NEAR HALF A CENTURY,
DURING WHICH HE FLOURISHED.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

By JAMES BOSWELL, Esq.

— *Quò fit ut OMNIS*
Vetula patet veluti descripta tabella
VITA SENIS. —

HORAT.

VOLUME THE FIRST.

L O N D O N :
PRINTED BY HENRY BALDWIN,
FOR CHARLES DILLY, IN THE FOULTRY. .
MDC C XCI.

Title page of Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791).

In spite of a number of contemporary witnesses, there is little agreement as to how much of it is by Johnson, if any. No effort has been made to sort out the various texts or to suggest which version might be closest to the original. In the process of collecting the early biographies, Kelley and I discovered a biography of Johnson prefaced to James Harrison's edition of the *Dictionary* (1786). Although the biography is heavily derivative, it contains a few bits of new information, and these details almost certainly came from Charlotte Lennox (c. 1729/30-1804), author of *The Female Quixote* (1752) and friend of Johnson for more than 30 years. It is her version of the epitaph which seems to come closest to reflecting the original.

Here lies poor Duck,
That Samuel Johnson trod on!
If it had liv'd, 'twould have been good luck,
Because it was an odd one.

The few sentences, which introduce the anecdote of the epitaph on a duckling in the Harrison biography, provide an initiation into the problems this essay attempts to resolve.

There are few parents who have not remarked some prodigious display of sagacity in their little ones; whether the children ever afterwards realized the expectations raised by such flattering prognosticks, or not. It would, therefore, be extremely wonderful, if the childhood of such a man as Johnson afforded no anecdote presageful of extraordinary genius.

Only one story of this kind, however, is extant, which deserves to be particularly recorded; and that has been so often repeated, and every time in a form so different, that the authenticity of the whole account might be fairly doubted, if the fact had not been indisputably established.³

However "indisputable" the evidence for the authenticity of this anecdote might be for this biographer, others have been less certain. In their edition of the *Poems* (1941) David Nichol Smith and E. L. McAdam, Jr. placed the epitaph on a duckling under the rubric, "Poems Wrongly Attributed to Johnson." When McAdam edited the *Poems* with George Milne for the Yale Edition of the Works (1964), the status of the epitaph was raised slightly to "Contributions to Poems by Others." In the second edition of the Smith-McAdam *Poems* (1974) revised by J. D. Fleeman only a sentence is added pointing out that Anna Seward first told the story in the *Gentleman's Magazine*. While it is unlikely that the attribution of the epitaph on a duckling will ever be placed beyond

³ *The Early Biographies of Samuel Johnson*, ed. O M Brack, Jr. and Robert E. Kelley (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1974), p. 249.

dispute, some new evidence weighs heavily in favor of Johnson having composed it, at least in part.

Best known is the account given in the *Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* by James Boswell, on whose authority the epitaph has been rejected as being not by Johnson but by his father. Behind this account is the earliest known *written* version of the epitaph, with the circumstances surrounding its composition, entered by Boswell in his notebook on March 25, 1776, or some unknown time shortly thereafter but unpublished until 1925.

This Miss Porter told me in his presence at Lichfield Monday 25 March 1776, at the same time she told me that his mother told her that when he was in petticoats he was walking by his father's side & carelessly trode upon a duck [inserted above the line, "one of thirteen"] & killed it. So then this duck it was said to him must be buried, & he must make an epitaph for it. Upon which he made these lines

Under this stone lyes Mr Duck
Whom Samuel Johnson trode on
He might have liv'd if he had luck;
But then he'd been an odd one.

Dr. Johnson said that his Father made one half of this epitaph That he was a foolish old man, that is to say was foolish in talking of his children But I trust to his mother's relation of what happened in his childhood rather than to his own recollection; and Miss Porter assured him in my presence upon his mother's authority that he had made this epitaph himself.

[Added in margin] But he assures me 21 Sepr. 1777 that he remembers his Father's making it. So I am convinced.⁴

Using these notes as the basis of what he writes in the *Life*, he rejects the epitaph but, curiously, gives a different version of it.

But there has been another story of his infant precocity generally circulated, and generally believed, the truth of which I am to refute upon his own authority. It is told, that, when a child of three years old, he chanced to tread upon a duckling, the eleventh of a brood, and killed it; upon which, it is said, he dictated to his mother the following epitaph:

'Here lies good master duck,
Whom Samuel Johnson trod on;
If it had liv'd, it had been *good luck*,
For then we'd had an *odd one*.'

There is surely internal evidence that this little composition combines in it, what no child of three years old could produce, without an extension of its faculties by immediate inspiration; yet Mrs. Lucy Porter, Dr. Johnson's

⁴ *Boswell's Note Book, 1776-1777*, ed. R. W. Chapman (London: Humphrey Milford, 1925), pp. 3-4. The manuscript is now in the Hyde Collection.

step-daughter, positively maintained to me in his presence, that there could be no doubt of the truth of the anecdote, for she had heard it from his mother. So difficult is it to obtain an authentick relation of facts, and such authority may there be for error; for he assured me, that his father made the verses, and wished to pass them for his child's. He added, 'my father was a foolish old man; that is to say, foolish in talking of his children.'⁵

Although Boswell—who among the eighteenth-century disputants was to have the final word on the subject—was convinced that Johnson did not write the verses, several of Johnson's friends and acquaintances were equally convinced that he did write them.

The epitaph did not appear in print until after Johnson's death. Anna Seward (1749-1802), poet and granddaughter of Johnson's old school-master at Lichfield Grammar School, Reverend John Hunter, in a letter dated February 5 in the February 1785 issue of the *Gentleman's Magazine* (p. 100), gave the following account:

When about 3 years old, he was master of a brood of eleven ducks, one of which he had the misfortune to destroy. Immediately after the accident, he came to his mother, and desired she would *write*. "Write, *what* am I to write?" "Write upon poor Duck." "Well, then, Sam, tell me what to say." The great infant, after shaking his head for a few minutes, thus lisped "in numbers, for the numbers came":

Here lies good master Duck,
Whom Samuel Johnson trod on,
If 't had liv'd 't been good luck:
For then there'd been an *odd one*.

When the anecdote was reprinted in the *Universal Daily Register* for March 5, it was preceded by a disclaimer: "*Anecdotes of Dr. JOHNSON*—for which we do not pledge ourselves."⁶

In the 1784 *Supplement* to the *Gentleman's Magazine* (p. 982), Thomas Tyers (1726-87), one of Johnson's early biographers, comments

To those whom the Biographical Sketch of Dr. Johnson may have amused, the following supplemental articles will not be disagreeable. . . .

Add, He composed a poetical stanza at three years old, on the death of a duck; an infantine subject for an infantine mind. If it is to be given to the publick, it ought to be with authentication. He was Hercules in his cradle.

⁵ *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, ed. G. B. Hill, rev. L. F. Powell (Oxford: Clarendon, 1934-50; 1964), 1:40.

⁶ The publication of the February issue of the *Gentleman's Magazine* is announced in the *Morning Chronicle*, and *London Advertiser*, March 3, and in the *London Chronicle*, March 1-3.

Could Lopez del Vega, or Cowley, or Milton, or even Pope, have asserted more truly that they “lisp’d in numbers”?

Since the *Supplement* usually appeared about the same time as the following January number, that is, around February 1, it is not likely that Tyers had seen Anna Seward’s account in print, but he may have been shown it or told about it by John Nichols, editor of the *Gentleman’s Magazine*, and friend of Johnson. When the account from the *Supplement* was incorporated into *A Biographical Sketch of Dr. Samuel Johnson*, published early in 1785 as a pamphlet, Tyers changed the age from “three” to “five.”⁷

Mary Adey (1742-1830), daughter of Joseph Adey (1704-63), town clerk of Lichfield, does not question the authenticity of the anecdote when she writes to Boswell February 26, 1785: “Miss Seward I hear has sent you his Epitaph on his Duck, it is needless in me to repeat it.”⁸ Although Seward’s letter of March 25, 1785 cannot be entirely trusted, she apparently tried to persuade Boswell that

There can be no doubt of the authenticity of that little anecdote of Johnson’s infancy; the verses he made at three years old, on having killed, by treading upon it, his eleventh duck. Mrs. Lucy Porter is a woman of the strictest veracity; and a more conscientious creature could not live than old Mrs. Johnson, who, I have heard Mrs. Porter say, has often mentioned the circumstance to her.⁹

Boswell remained adamant in his position and to his account of the epitaph in the *Life* quoted above, he appended a footnote pointing out that the anecdote was “disproved by internal and external evidence” and that “like many other theories, it is deduced from a supposed fact, which is, indeed, a fiction.” Unwilling to accept Boswell’s verdict, Seward retaliated first in a letter dated October 13, 1793, in the *Gentleman’s Magazine* (p. 875) appealing to the authority of Lucy Porter: “All . . . acquaintance in Lichfield, where she lived during a period of forty years, knew her to be a plain honest character, free from vanity, falsehood, and affectation.” On November 16 Boswell replied in the *Gentleman’s*

⁷ He changes the wording slightly to read “on his treading on a duck” and omits “an infantine subject for an infantine mind.” See *Early Biographies*, p. 64.

⁸ *The Correspondence and Other Papers of James Boswell Related to the Making of the LIFE OF JOHNSON*, ed. Marshall Waingrow (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969), p. 64.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 79. This letter is reprinted from the *Letters of Anna Seward* (Edinburgh, 1811), 1:43. “The 1811 edition cannot be implicitly trusted for facts or contemporary opinions and not even for strict chronology of the period.” See James L. Clifford, “The Authenticity of Anna Seward’s Correspondence,” *Modern Philology*, 39 (1941): 113-22. This version of the letter differs considerably from that quoted by Boswell in *Life*, 1:40 n. 3. Since the original is lost it cannot be known whether the changes are by Seward or whether Boswell changed the letter to emphasize her “ingenious and fanciful reflections.”

Magazine (p. 1009) that Seward's anecdotes were "not only poetically luxuriant" but "tinctured with a strong prejudice" against Johnson and that it became him to "examine them with much caution."

One of them, the idle and utterly improbable story of his making verses on a duck when he was but three years old, which good Mrs. Lucy Porter had, among others, credulously related, he himself had enabled me unquestionably to refute.

Seward countered on December 14.

I yet believe the neither idle nor improbable tale of the infant Johnson having lisped four doggerel rhymes on the death of a duck, because Mrs. Lucy Porter said Dr. Johnson's mother told her the circumstance; because it is more likely he should have forgotten what he said at three years old, than that either of those good women should invent a falsehood. (pp. 1098-99)

Then on January 20, 1794 Boswell reiterated his position in another letter to the *Gentleman's Magazine*.

The verses on a Duck, said to be composed by Johnson when he was only three years old, were not made by him, because, from *internal* evidence it is *impossible* they should, without a *miracle*; and because, from *external* evidence, it appears that his mother, and Mrs. Lucy Porter, did not "invent a falsehood," when they credulously told he had made them, so that their veracity is not questioned; his mother heard so from his father, and Mrs. Lucy Porter from his mother. The refutation does not rest on Johnson's recollection of his childhood; but on his telling me, in Mrs. Lucy Porter's presence, that his father had owned to him that he had made them, and wished to pass them for his son's. (p. 34)

In the period between Seward's first publication of the epitaph and Boswell's *Life*, several other biographers became involved. In 1786 Mrs. Hester Lynch Piozzi included it in her *Anecdotes of Samuel Johnson*, calling it "His epitaph upon the duck he killed by treading on it at five years old" and describing it as "a striking example of early expansion of mind, and knowledge of language."

Here lies poor duck
That Samuel Johnson trod on;
If it had liv'd it had been good luck,
For it would have been an odd one.¹⁰

¹⁰ Hester Lynch Piozzi, *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, ed. Arthur Sherbo (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 64.

Mrs. Piozzi was just beginning to write the *Anecdotes* when a letter dated February 25, 1785 arrived in Milan from Samuel Lysons (1763-1819), antiquary, containing the epitaph

—There is just arrived from Litchfield an Epitaph written by him at five years old on a Duck—

“Here lies poor Duck,
which Samuel Johnson trod on
If it had liv’d it had been more luck,
for then there had been an odd one.”

Lysons does not mention his source but it was probably either Anna Seward or Lucy Porter.¹¹ A few revisions in the poem recorded by Mrs. Piozzi might reflect another source but more likely indicate editorial license.

Sir John Hawkins in his *Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* (1787) publishes yet another version, although he appears indebted to Anna Seward.

It may seem a ridiculous attempt to trace the dawn of his poetical faculty so far back as to his very infancy; but the following incident I am compelled to mention, as it is well attested, and therefore makes part of his history. When he was about three years old, his mother had a brood of eleven ducklings, which she permitted him to call his own. It happened that in playing about he trod on and killed one of them, upon which running to his mother, he, in great emotion bid her write. Write, child? said she, what must I write? Why write, answered he, so:

Here lies good Master Duck,
That Samuel Johnson trod on,
If’t had liv’d, ’twould have been good luck,
For there’d been an odd one

and she wrote accordingly.¹²

When Arthur Murphy reviewed Hawkins’ *Life* he reprinted the anecdote and commented

Every great genius must begin with a prodigy, and this is scarcely exceeded by the bees on Plato’s lip, or the doves that covered the infant poet with

¹¹ See James L. Clifford, *Hester Lynch Piozzi (Mrs. Thrale)*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1952), pp. 242-43. Lysons’s letter is Rylands Eng. MS. 552.3. I am grateful to Edward A. Bloom for examining it for me.

¹² Sir John Hawkins, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, 2d ed. (London, 1787), p. 6. No revisions were made in this section for the second edition. In Edmund Malone’s comments on Hawkins’s *Life* he called the anecdote “false,” but it should be remembered that Malone was in Boswell’s camp. See Bertram H. Davis, *Johnson Before Boswell* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), p. 188.

leaves and flowers: for how should a child of three years old make regular verses, and in alternate rhyme?¹³

The next publication of the anecdote presents further difficulties. This is the life of Samuel Johnson, supposedly written by James Harrison, which appears in 18 unnumbered pages at the beginning of an edition of the *Dictionary* published by Harrison and Company (London 1786). For the most part it is an abridgement of Hawkins' *Life* with an occasional look at Mrs. Piozzi's *Anecdotes* and several other early lives. When the author did have new information, however, he inserted it in the proper place in the narrative. There are only two important additions: a new version of the epitaph on a duckling and information on Johnson's writings for Charlotte Lennox. The account of the epitaph is worth quoting at length. After the two paragraphs quoted earlier, the author begins to argue:

When he was "about *three* years old," says Sir John Hawkins; Mrs. Piozzi says, "*five*;" his mother had a brood of eleven young ducks, which she permitted him to call his own: and, as he was one day playing heedlessly among them, he had the misfortune to tread on one of the little creatures, and crush it to death. Alarmed at the accident, and full of emotion, he immediately snatched up the duck; and, running to his mother, bade her take pen and write. "Write, child!" said she, too much astonished at the request to be concerned at the accident, "what must I write?"—"Why, write," answered the child, "so."

He then gave his first indication of poetical genius, by prompting an Epitaph . . . [Hawkins' version is quoted, followed by Mrs. Piozzi's].

Some readers may perhaps think that the manifest awkwardness still unfortunately subsisting in this poetical effusion, has been moulded by Sir John and Mrs. Piozzi, to their respective ideas of what ought to have been, rather than what actually was, dictated by the child. To those who love truth and simplicity, and who do not expect metrical perfection in an infant, the lines in their original state will be far more acceptable, than with any adventitious ornaments, however successfully laboured. The genius of Johnson is to be looked for, on this occasion, and not the ingenuity of his biographers. This wonderful Epitaph, then—and wonderful it was for a child of five years old, miraculous for one of three—in its simple original state, appears to have run thus—

Here lies poor Duck,
That Samuel Johnson trod on!

¹³ *Monthly Review*, 76 (April 1787): 275-76. He does not mention the anecdote in his *An Essay on the Life and Genius of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* (London, 1792).

If it had liv'd, 'twould have been good luck,
Because it was an odd one. (*Early Biographies*, pp. 249-50)

Who was James Harrison? What is his source for the epitaph, and why is he so certain that he is presenting it in its "simple original state"?

According to *The House of Harrison* (1914), published anonymously by Cecil R. and H. G. Harrison, James was born in 1765 and died in 1847. Just exactly what he was doing between these dates has confused his own family.

James Harrison's printing office was at 35, Paternoster Row (1787-1798), at first with his uncle (to whom he *seems* to have been apprenticed), and at Warwick Square in 1799-1800. Between the years 1785 and 1794 there was also a Bookselling and Publishing business being carried on at 18, Paternoster Row, under the title of Harrison & Co., in which James Harrison *appears* to be the principal, if not the only, partner [italics mine].¹⁴

One of the Harrisons seems to have been responsible for the *Novelist's Magazine* (1780-88) which reprinted *Rasselas* (1788), but it was the firm of Harrison & Co. that published the *Dictionary* and "Harrison's British Classics," which included editions of the *Rambler* and the *Idler*.

Admittedly there is some room for doubt that "Mr. Harrison," the reputed author of our sketch, is James Harrison. As the authors of *The House of Harrison* point out

at the date when the first volume of "Harrison's British Classics" appeared, James Harrison was hardly of age [he was 20], so it seems improbable that he could have been the senior partner. Possibly, the business had been started by his father, the first James [d. 1769], and was continued by some other partner whose name did not appear during the son's minority. (p. 7)

His partner in the firm, as suggested earlier, may have been his uncle, Thomas (1723-91), who was master of the Stationers' Company in 1784, but he seems an unlikely candidate for journalistic hackwork at this period of his life. There is some evidence, however, for James Harrison having been responsible for "Harrison's British Classics"—a device "J. H." on the title page. Perhaps James Harrison was a very enterprising young man and established himself in business early.

In any case, did James Harrison take time from his publishing and printing activities to write the *Life* himself or did he hire someone to do it? His method in the *Memoirs of Charles Frederick, King of Prussia*. By Samuel Johnson, LL.D. with Notes, and a Continuation, by Mr. Har-

¹⁴ *The House of Harrison* (London: Harrison, 1914), p. 6. See also *Harrison: A Family Imprint* (London: Harrison [1950]), p. 14.

ri-son, *Editor of the British Classics, Dr. Johnson's Folio Dictionary, &c. &c.* (London, 1786) was to reprint Johnson's *Memoirs* in the first 86 pages (with a few fatuous and argumentative notes), write the next 137 pages himself, and have the remaining 248 pages written by a "Literary Friend."¹⁵ Whether or not he wrote Johnson's *Life* or simply provided the materials may not ever be known. The important thing is the source for his new information.

Harrison had some interest in Johnson—perhaps only commercial but maybe not. No doubt he would have liked some new materials for his *Life*, if for no other reason than it would sell dictionaries; but little came his way. The little new information that he did find appears to have come from Charlotte Lennox. The clue is the phrase: "Mrs. Lennox has been lately heard to declare." What Mrs. Lennox had declared was that the famous literary party given for her by Johnson was somewhat less elaborate than the celebration described by Hawkins: "she can by no means remember what is so ingeniously represented as a coronation, though she perfectly well recollects the circumstance of receiving a sprig of laurel stuck in her glass of jelly" (*Early Biographies*, p. 273).

It is likely that Mr. Harrison heard Mrs. Lennox declare this to him personally, since Harrison & Co. published several of her works about this period. The relationship began in 1783 with the publication of *The Female Quixote* separately and in volume 12 of the *Novelist's Magazine*.¹⁶ Harrison & Co. later published *Henrietta* in 1787 (and in volume 23 of the *Novelist's Magazine*—in the same volume with *Rasselas*). The business connection with Charlotte Lennox also explains the proprietary interest in her works shown in the biography of Johnson.¹⁷ The author

¹⁵ On page 472 of the *Memoirs* appears the following note: "Mr. Harrison thinks it proper to acknowledge, that the Continuation of the preceding Memoirs from Page 223, Line 10, was written by a Literary Friend." The "Literary Friend" was William Fordyce Mavor (1758-1837). See R. H. H[ill], *Bodleian Quarterly Record*, 6 (1931): 259-60.

¹⁶ See Miriam Rossiter Small, *Charlotte Lennox: An Eighteenth Century Lady of Letters* (1935; rpt. Hamden, CT: Archon, 1969), pp. 249, 257.

¹⁷ Harrison praises Johnson for being "partial to her great abilities, from the earliest dawn of her infant genius, which had appeared two or three years before in a small collection of beautiful little poems," a reference to her *Poems on Several Occasions*. Written by a Young Lady (London, 1747). He thinks that the celebration after the publication of Lennox's first novel, *The Life of Harriot Stuart* (1751), "exhibits Johnson in no unamiable view. It indicates great goodness of heart, and manifests the friendliest disposition towards kindred genius. He considered Mrs. Lennox as possessing talents of the first order; and the event has proved, that he was not mistaken in his judgment. How few, among the female authors of past or present times, deservedly risen to fame, have written so much, so variously, and so well!" After mentioning that General John Burgoyne's comedy, *The Heiress*, is indebted to *Henrietta*, published by Harrison, for some of its best scenes, he adds, "Mrs. Lennox, it is reported, has just finished another novel, equally rich in invention," and there is more in the same vein. See *Early Biographies*, pp. 272-73.

also states that Johnson “favored her with a few essays for the Lady’s Museum, and wrote a paper of the Trifler in that respectable miscellany” (p. 273). This bit of information does not appear in any of the earlier lives of Johnson, and since the contributors are not indicated in the *Lady’s Museum*, it is probable that Harrison learned it from Mrs. Lennox.

Let us return to the epitaph and the question of why Harrison is so certain that he is presenting it in its “simple original state.” No evidence exists that Harrison had met Johnson. Had he met Johnson late in life he might be expected to have added a few personal observations, as William Cooke and William Shaw did in their biographies, but there are none. All the other extant versions of the epitaph have come from persons close to Johnson. Admittedly the evidence is slender, but since Harrison knew Mrs. Lennox, and Mrs. Lennox knew Johnson with some degree of intimacy, and since the only other important new information in the Harrison biography (the *Lady’s Museum* contribution) must have come from Mrs. Lennox, she would appear to be the most plausible source for this version of the epitaph.

Anna Seward provided the first printed version of the epitaph. Among the difficulties of accepting her account is the very early age at which she says Johnson is supposed to have written the verses. Tyers, Murphy, Harrison, Boswell, and undoubtedly others, thought it unlikely that such a poem was written at the age of three. “The great infant” seems remarkably like the elder Johnson with his tics—“shaking his head.” The allusion to Pope reinforces the impression that Seward was more concerned with literary effect than with truth. Tyers, although uncertain about the anecdote’s authenticity, decided on the basis of new information or common sense that five would be the more likely age of composition. Hawkins, trusting Seward (“it is well attested”), reprints the anecdote but makes a few changes in the verses, probably on his own authority. But even before Seward’s account was in print, Samuel Lysons secured a different version of the epitaph by a five-year-old Johnson. He mentions that the verses had “just arrived from Litchfield” but his letter provides no hint as to who sent them or to whom. When Mrs. Piozzi included the verses in the *Anecdotes*, she made several revisions. The change of “more” luck to “good” luck suggests that she may have seen Seward’s version. Harrison probably received the “simple original state”

Hawkins’s own account of the celebration is conveniently available in his *Life*, ed. Bertram H. Davis (New York: Macmillan, 1961), pp. 121-22.

of the epitaph from Charlotte Lennox, but the first two lines are the same as those in Mrs. Piozzi's *Anecdotes* and the third line follows Hawkins.

The variant versions of the epitaph can be accounted for by the different sources which have not, and probably cannot, be identified, and by the fact that the epitaph appears to have had an oral history until late in Johnson's life. In addition some of the variation may be the result of editorial license common in the period—Mrs. Piozzi's changes in the verses sent her by Lysons, for example (although the possibility of her having had another source, perhaps Johnson himself, cannot be dismissed). Next to the anecdote in her 1807 copy of the *Life* she wrote: "& now all is over!! I do protest he told them to me himself as I printed them; & I believe he made them."¹⁸ Perhaps Johnson gave a version of the epitaph from memory to Mrs. Lennox, and Harrison's account is the way she recollected it; her recollection influenced, perhaps, by the accounts already in print.

All surviving versions of the epitaph can be traced back to persons who might be expected to have heard accounts of his childhood from reliable sources or Johnson himself. Yet the assumption that Johnson composed all four lines of the epitaph raises some question about the reliability of all these versions. The numerous variants, some the result of an oral tradition or of compositors' errors but others, undoubtedly, the result of editorial tampering to add a new lustre to the genius of the boy Johnson, make it difficult to establish a text.

The version which would appear to be closest to the source, Johnson's mother, did not appear in print until this century. It was given to Boswell by Lucy Porter, citing the authority of Johnson's mother. Johnson was present and maintained that his father had written half of the epitaph, but Boswell was inclined to believe Lucy's secondhand report of Mrs. Johnson's claim that he had written all of it. During a visit to Ashbourne the following year, however, Boswell questioned Johnson and wrote a brief entry in the same notebook: "But he assures me 21 Sept. 1777 that he remembers his Father's making it. So I am convinced." When Boswell

¹⁸ Next to Boswell's footnote in the *Life* beginning "This anecdote of the duck, though disproved by internal and external evidence, has nevertheless, upon supposition of truth . . .," Mrs. Piozzi wrote: "& true it was." See James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* With marginal comments and markings from two copies annotated by Hester Lynch Thrale Piozzi, ed. Edward G. Fletcher (New York: Heritage Press, 1963), pp. 12-13. John C. Riely reports that James L. Clifford suggested "that Mrs. Thrale may very well have heard Johnson recite the verses, but had forgotten about them because they were not included in *Thraliana* (her only source material in Italy). Lysons's letter may simply have reminded her of the whole story." This would explain why she saw no reason to doubt the authenticity of the information sent to her by Lysons. See "Bozzy and Piozzi: The History of a Literary Friendship and Rivalry" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1971), p. 194.

came to write up his account of the epitaph for the *Life*, he interpreted this entry as meaning that Johnson had told him that his father had written all four lines, and most scholars have concurred. Aleyn Lyell Reade, however, when he published his account in *Johnsonian Gleanings* in 1922, thought that “it seems, from Boswell’s note-book, that Johnson admitted being responsible for half the epitaph—of course the first half.”¹⁹ As Donald Greene has pointed out, Boswell misread his own memorandum.²⁰ What Johnson *assured* Boswell on September 21, 1777 was that his statement on March 25, 1776 was accurate—his mother was wrong in saying that he wrote it all—his father made half of it. That he misunderstood his own memorandum is clear from his letter of January 20, 1794, to Anna Seward in the *Gentleman’s Magazine*: “The refutation does not rest on Johnson’s recollection of his childhood; but on telling me, in Mrs Lucy Porter’s presence, that his father had owned to him that he had made them, and wished to pass them for his son’s.” That is not what Johnson said.

Apart from Boswell’s shaky physical and mental health at the time he was writing the *Life*, several reasons may explain why he misinterpreted his memorandum. Boswell received on February 11, 1785, from Anna Seward a packet of anecdotes, including the epitaph, and on February 15 wrote enthusiastically requesting more stories of Johnson’s “boyish years” (Waingrow, p. 55). On his way to London he stayed March 26-27 in Lichfield and received another packet, which Seward was just preparing to send to him. It was in this second packet of March 25 that she attested to the anecdote of the duckling on the authority of Lucy Porter, “a woman of the strictest veracity.” But it also contained the erroneous story refuted by Edmund Hector that the “Sprig of Myrtle” verses, which were to cause the vituperative exchanges of letters to the *Gentleman’s Magazine* discussed above,²¹ had been written by Johnson

¹⁹ *Johnsonian Gleanings*, 10 parts (Privately printed, 1909-46), 3:73. In the Preface to Part X in 1946 Reade says, “I must add in conclusion that the scholarly edition of *The Poems of Samuel Johnson*, by David Nichol Smith and Edward L. McAdam, 1941, has enabled me to make a number of minor corrections and additions to my narrative . . .” (p. x). Unfortunately the “amateur” scholar allowed his better judgment to be overridden by the “professional” scholars. Reade’s later account in Part X is “It was to Samuel’s fourth year, also, that was ascribed the composition of the verse about the duck on which, while still in petticoats, he trod with such careless violence as to cause its death. As a matter of fact, the epitaph was composed by his father, and the four variants of it we possess, all equally feeble and futile, suggest that old Michael, in his vain anxiety to have it attributed to his little boy, perhaps underrated the poetical capacities even of a clever child of three” (p. 28).

²⁰ See the *Poems*, ed. E. L. McAdam, Jr., with George Milne, in the Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), 6: 354.

²¹ See especially *Gentleman’s Magazine*, 64 (January 1794): 34-35. See also Waingrow, pp. 438-40, 575-76; *Life*, 1: 92 and n. 2.

as a love poem to Lucy Porter. This anecdote and that on the duckling became in Boswell's mind linked to the controversy and both were rejected. Having caught Seward in one egregious error, her anecdotes had to be examined "with much caution." Also, since his rivals for biographical eminence, Piozzi and Hawkins, included the epitaph, he could laud his own accuracy at their expense. By beginning the anecdote with "It is told" and citing Piozzi and Hawkins in a footnote, he disassociates himself from the anecdote. By printing a version drawn largely from Seward, he obscures the fact that he too had written down the epitaph and had believed it to be true.

Johnson's authorship of half the epitaph is confirmed by his own testimony and those of Piozzi and Lennox. Reade is undoubtedly right in suggesting that Johnson wrote only the first two lines, since it is difficult to imagine that the verses could be composed in alternate rhymes by a young child.²² Understandably, Boswell thought that "from *internal* evidence it is *impossible* they should, without a *miracle*." Discovering that the child Johnson wrote only the first half of the epitaph—and did not therefore compose rhyming lines—eliminates one of the major objections to the authenticity of the anecdote. Another objection was the age at which the verses were composed. When Boswell recorded the anecdote in his notebook, he mentioned Johnson was in petticoats. Since young boys often wore petticoats until they began school at age six or seven, age is not much of a factor in Boswell's note. But when Anna Seward first published the anecdote she said Johnson was "about 3 years old."²³ Although this very early age did not bother Seward or Hawkins, others objected, as we have seen. On some basis Tyers decides to change the age from three to five in his account and Lysons says specifically "at five years old." While both three and five would be covered by Boswell's "in petticoats," the latter age would be the more likely.

Now, just which version of the opening two lines of the epitaph did Johnson compose at about the age of five? The version in Boswell's notebook—"Under this stone lyes Mr Duck / Whom"—is the most elaborate and does not sound like the composition of a young child. Seward's version with its "good master Duck" repeated by Boswell in the *Life* also seems a bit contrived. Only the versions by Mrs. Lennox and that sent by Lysons to Mrs. Piozzi with their unmetrical "Here lies poor

²² Although when Reade revised the account of the anecdote, he suggested that the verses were not good enough to have been written by a three-year-old Johnson. He was not aware that there are seven versions and knew nothing of the simpler version given by Mrs. Lennox to Harrison. See n. 19 above.

²³ In the *Life* Boswell says specifically "when a child of three years old."

Duck” have the simplicity of a child’s verse and I suggest this line is probably the closest to what the young Johnson actually said.

Since the last two lines are, so far as I know, Michael Johnson’s only claim to being called a poet, some effort should be made to determine his contribution. In order to do this, it is necessary to determine the meaning or meanings of the poem. It should be recalled that Boswell, in his notebook, states that there were 13 ducklings. Seward, and her followers, including Boswell in the *Life*, says that there were 11 ducklings; the Lysons-Piozzi version confuses the reader by failing to mention the number. An odd number of ducks is absolutely essential to deriving any meaning from the poem.

The version with the richest texture and, in my judgment, the furthest removed from Samuel and Michael’s original composition, is that in Boswell’s notebook. Clearly the key word is “odd.” On the simplest level if the duckling had been lucky enough to live, he would have been the thirteenth, “odd” in the sense of “not even; not divisible into equal numbers,” which is Johnson’s first definition in the *Dictionary* (1755). It might also be odd in the sense of “particular,” “not like the others,” “strange.” As Harrison suggests, there is an allusion to an old proverb, “odd things are lucky,” or “there is luck in odd numbers.”²⁴ Perhaps in this case there is also an allusion to the “odd trick” in whist, the thirteenth trick, won by one side after each side has won six.

The third line presents few problems. The version in Boswell’s notebook says, “if he had luck,” Lysons has “more” luck, but five versions agree in having “good” luck. In the case of the last line no two versions agree exactly with each other, although Lysons and Seward are close, and Hawkins follows them but omits “then.” I am inclined to accept the version in the Harrison biography, “Because it was an odd one,” as the least contrived.

Harrison describes his version from Mrs. Lennox as “simple”—“plain; artless; unskilled; undesigning; sincere; harmless” is Johnson’s first definition in the *Dictionary* (1755). Mrs. Lennox had known Johnson since the late 1740s and must have heard this anecdote (“something yet unpublished; secret history,” Johnson defines it) on several occasions. Perhaps she wrote it down, but if she did the record is lost. Perhaps she remembered it, as Mrs. Piozzi appears to have done. In any case two close friends of Johnson thought the four-line verse worth remembering, and it was seized upon avidly by others who saw no reason to question

²⁴ *Early Biographies*, p. 250. See *The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs*, 3rd ed., rev. F. P. Wilson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), p. 496, and Morris Palmer Tilley, *A Dictionary of the Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1950), p. 401 (L 582).

its authenticity. That a five-year-old child, or an occasional three-year-old child, can make doggerel verses will come as no surprise to anyone who has spent time around children. The verses, however, are likely to be in couplets, not alternate rhymes. But this objection is overcome by remembering that Johnson composed only the first two lines. When Lucy Porter told the anecdote in front of Johnson on March 25, 1776, he did not protest vigorously that it was impossible. In fact Johnson shared with his contemporaries a love of early signs of genius. He laments in the *Life of Sir Francis Drake* that there is no knowledge of "any disposition to hazards and adventures which might have been discovered in his childhood, or of the education which qualified him for such wonderful attempts" and in the *Life of Dr. Thomas Sydenham* that "under whose care he was educated, or in what manner he passed his childhood, whether he made any early discoveries of a genius peculiarly adapted to the study of nature, or gave any presages of his future eminence in medicine, no information is to be obtained."²⁵

Johnson also shows an interest in youthful genius in *An Account of the Life of John Philip Barretier. Who was Master of Five Languages at the Age of Nine Years*. Boswell, in his memorandum of March 25, 1776, says "But I trust to his mother's relation of what happened in his childhood rather than to his own recollection." But in an autobiographical fragment called *Annals*, parts written between 1765 and 1772, when Johnson was in his late fifties and early sixties, he records his memories of his trip to London to be touched for the King's Evil by Queen Anne. Although "but thirty months old," "I seem to remember, that I played with a string and a bell . . . and that there was a cat with a white collar, and a dog, called Chops, that leaped over a stick." Uncertain "whether I remember the thing, or the talk of it," he certainly remembered the placement of a counter in a shop and other things from his childhood.²⁶ It is interesting that Johnson thinks these little details worth recording. On the basis of the evidence from the *Annals*, there is no reason to think that Johnson would not have remembered this small event from his childhood. As valuable as Boswell's *Life* is, it is unfortunate that it has become the final authority for all matters Johnsonian in the minds of most people, for as hard as he tried to gather information, much eluded him. Neither Boswell

²⁵ *Early Biographical Writings of Dr. Johnson*, ed. J. D. Fleeman (Westmead, England: Gregg International, 1973), pp. 37, 189.

²⁶ See *Diaries, Prayers, and Annals*, ed. E. L. McAdam, Jr., with Donald and Mary Hyde, in the Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), I: xiii-xv, 8-10. For a good account of the *Annals* and its importance to Johnsonian biography, see Donald Greene, "The Uses of Autobiography in the Eighteenth Century" in *Essays in Eighteenth Century Biography*, ed. Philip B. Daglian (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), pp. 43-66.

nor Hawkins, for example, knew of *Annals*, owned by Johnson's servant, Francis Barber, and not published until May 1805. Often Boswell's rivalry with Sir John Hawkins and Mrs. Piozzi as to who would produce the most authoritative account, hurt his judgment.²⁷ For after careful weighing of the evidence, Johnson's own testimony supported by Mrs. Lennox and Mrs. Piozzi combined with the secondary authority of Johnson's mother and Lucy Porter, it must be concluded that Johnson composed the first two lines of the epitaph on a duckling.

²⁷ See Davis, *Johnson Before Boswell*; Mary Hyde, *The Impossible Friendship: Boswell and Mrs. Thrale* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972); and John C. Riely, "Bozzy and Piozzi: The History of a Literary Friendship and Rivalry." I am grateful to J. D. Fleeman, Donald Greene, and John C. Riely for reading early drafts of this essay and sharing some of their materials with me.