

Literary Biography
En 184
Spring 2011
Tuesdays 7-10 p.m.

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This class is devoted to studying one of the strangest and finest works of non-fiction ever composed in English, James Boswell's 1791 biography of Samuel Johnson (1709-1784). Johnson, a respected poet and the best-known critic of his time, was also famous for editing Shakespeare, publishing biographies of earlier poets, and compiling a mammoth dictionary of English. Boswell, his much younger admirer, obsessively recorded Johnson's conversation and gathered documents of his life in an effort to produce a real, unvarnished, and unprecedented kind of biography. In the process, Boswell jostled for Johnson's attention with a legion of other admirers, many of whom did not like Boswell at all; he also frequently showed himself in a very unflattering light, the better to call attention to Johnson's own brilliance. (All of this is what we mean when we say that one person is another's "Boswell.") In addition to the *Life of Johnson*, we examine some of Johnson's own works, poetry by other contemporaries, Boswell's diaries, and other relevant sources. So a broader aim is to understand the literary culture of eighteenth-century England by means of one focused and particularly rich case study.

Requirements:

(1) **Reading.** Each week we read 80 or 90 pages of the *Life of Johnson* along with some other relevant text or texts from the period. For example, when Boswell chronicles Johnson's early life, we'll look at poetry by Alexander Pope (1688-1744), the literary lion of London in Johnson's youth and clearly the poetic model to which the young Johnson aspired in his own writing. When Boswell actually meets Johnson and begins pulling all-nighters to write down Johnson's conversation in dialogue form, we will read from Boswell's copious diaries to see how he recorded other meetings with his suspiciously witty and articulate friends. When Johnson ghostwrites a sermon for a clergyman who is convicted of fraud for the clergyman to deliver before he is hanged, we will read the ghostwritten sermon; when Boswell mentions his archrival Mrs. Thrale, another friend of Johnson's who aimed to write a biography of him, we will look at the biography she eventually published (in fact, Mrs. Thrale beat Boswell to the press). And so forth.

(2) **Weekly problems.** A 1-page response paper concerning the week's reading will be due before each class. I will ask specific questions that need to be answered in your paper.

(3) **Oral presentation.** Each week, at least one student (and usually two) will give a 10-minute oral presentation about either the current reading in the *Life of Johnson* or the auxiliary reading we're doing for the week. That means that everybody will give one presentation in the course of the term. The presentation needs to be supported by a 5-page double-spaced paper to be handed in to me. You can come up with your topic independently, although I strongly encourage you to consult with me in advance.

(4) **Final paper.** In an 8- to 10-page final paper, you can either expand on your oral presentation or address a new topic; I will provide a list of topics that you can choose from if you like. The first draft of this paper will be due in the seventh or eighth week of class. I will return the first draft with written comments and ask you to meet with me for at least 15 minutes to discuss a revision. The final draft will be due the last week of class (for seniors, during their last week).

Don't hesitate to contact me if you have any questions about this course or about the *Life of Johnson*.