

## London Introduction

Samuel Johnson arrived in London from his native town of Litchfield in early 1737, determined to make his name, and his living, as a writer. (He had already failed in his first career, as a schoolmaster, having squandered the money his wife brought with her to the marriage in a failed attempt to open a boy's school outside of Litchfield.) In particular, he hoped to interest the theater companies in a verse tragedy that he was finishing, a play called *Irene*, that portrayed a woman caught between the Muslim and the Christian worlds at the time of the Ottoman Empire's conquest of Constantinople in 1453. The 1730s had been a boom period in the London theater, following the astonishing success of *The Beggars Opera* in 1728, so Johnson had a lot of company at this moment in thinking that the theater was an excellent place to try to make a reputation--and a living--as a writer.

What Johnson did not know was that the Stage Licensing Act, passed in June 1737, was thoroughly going to alter the theatrical landscape. The Act closed down a lot of the theaters outright, and also demanded that the remaining theaters, licensed by the government, submit all plays in advance to a central licensing office for approval. In doing so, the Walpole government was responding to a number of things. First, having been burned by *The Beggars Opera* and its satire on Walpole and the establishment a decade earlier, they remained sensitive about plays that satirized the government, and lots of these had emerged in the 1730s, a number of them written and produced by Henry Fielding, whose (very funny) satires were a constant irritant. And at the same time, a lot of middle-class businessmen were getting worried about the effects of plays on younger people; they saw the theater as exerting a pernicious influence, and were quite ready to censor it.

The end result is that the market for new plays dried up. Theater managers got very cautious, and started recycling older plays to play it safe. Johnson had in effect arrived at the worst possible moment to try to make it as a playwright. Unable to sell *Irene* to the playhouses, he turned to hack writing in the world of Grub Street. His main employer became Edward Cave, the editor of the *Gentleman's Magazine*, the first magazine in the modern sense, a digest of news, opinion, essays, book reviews, political writing, and poetry. Johnson became Cave's most prolific writer, turning out book reviews, short biographies, political reports--anything he could to make a living. It was a big come down for Johnson, who would not achieve the fame and respect he sought for almost two decades.

*London*, published in 1738, represents Johnson's attempt to satirize the grubby world of London and also to rise above it. The poem is an "imitation" of the Third Satire of the Roman poet Juvenal, who imagines a friend, named Umbricius, who is sick and tired of the city of Rome and is leaving for the countryside for good. In doing an imitation of his classical source, Johnson is not simply *translating* Juvenal's poem (a modern translation of which is included here for purposes of comparison), but updating it, finding modern correlations to the Latin original. Here, London stands in for Rome, "Thales" stands in for Juvenal's Umbricius, and the Tuscan countryside to which Umbricius was headed becomes Wales. Exhausted by the filth, crowds, noise of London, and the difficulty of making a living as a writer, Thales (believed by some scholars to refer to Richard Savage, another hack writer who had become a friend of Johnson's) in some ways expresses Johnson's own frustrations. But *London* itself, published in a handsome folio edition, written in the heroic couplet form that to readers of the 1730s identified the high style of serious poetry, using the form of the imitation to signify its neoclassical aspirations, and hyped in the pages of the *Gentleman's Magazine* (which published ads for the poem, and also excerpted it), is clearly an attempt on Johnson's part to get out of hackdom as soon as possible, to become a poet like Alexander Pope, making a good living independent of the whims and tight fists of the booksellers and magazine editors. In this, it is clear that Johnson failed. *London* seems to have sold reasonably well, but it was a dead end, and Johnson had to continue to grind out work for hire for another decade and a half. It was not until he achieved fame in the 1750s, first as the author of a *Spectator*-like series of journalistic essays called *The Rambler* and then as the editor of the *Dictionary of the English Language*, which made him a kind of national treasure, since he had single-handedly accomplished for English what it had taken large teams of scholars to do for other European languages. Here, let's read Johnson as Grub Street's finest product--and its most perceptive critic.