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978-1-009-27142-4 — Making Boswell's Life of Johnson
Richard B. Sher
Excerpt
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1 Introduction

James Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson* has been a source of fascination ever since its publication in 1791. Rarely has someone dominated the literary life of a time and place as thoroughly as Samuel Johnson did in London during his mature years, from the mid-eighteenth century until his death in 1784. The range of his publications was extensive: *The Rambler* (1750–2), *The Idler* (1758–60), and other periodical essays; a colossal *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755); *Rasselas*, a popular work of fiction (1759); an edition of *The Plays of William Shakespeare* (1765); an account of a tour of Scotland with Boswell titled *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* (1775); a series of biographical prefaces to a multivolume poetry anthology (1779–81), later published separately as *Lives of the English Poets*; and much more. Yet Boswell had no intention of writing an intellectual biography, and his book would have relatively little to say about the substance of Johnson's published works. Rather, his aim was to capture what he called Johnson's "character," ascertained less from his publications than from his correspondence and conversation.

In the opening pages, Boswell stated that "the conversation of a celebrated man, if his talents have been exerted in conversation, will best display his character" (*Life*, 1:31). From their first meeting in May 1763, when he was just twenty-two years old and Johnson fifty-three, Boswell revered Johnson and sought to spend as much time with him as he could, acquiring "a facility in recollecting," and being "very assiduous in recording, his conversation, of which the extraordinary vigour and vivacity constituted one of the first features of his character" (*Life*, 1:26). As a Scot practicing law in Edinburgh, however, he had limited opportunities to be with Johnson – usually on annual visits to London in late winter and early spring, augmented by occasional meetings and travels elsewhere in England, and their excursion to the Hebrides in 1773. Nevertheless, Boswell claimed that by tracing his subject's correspondence and conversation chronologically he could produce a biography "more lively, and will make my readers better acquainted with him, than even most of those were who actually knew him, but could know him only partially." Indeed, he boasted that his method would enable Johnson to be seen "as he really was," and "more completely than any man who has ever yet lived" (*Life*, 1:29–30).

The main materials for learning how Boswell attempted to achieve this ambitious goal were discovered in two stages during the first half of the twentieth century (Buchanan, 1974; Pottle, 1982). First, in the 1920s an enormous fund of documents, including most of Boswell's journal (later supplemented by most of the manuscript of the *Life of Johnson*), emerged unexpectedly from Malahide Castle in Ireland. From this find came an eighteen-volume, privately printed

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edition of Boswell's *Private Papers* edited by Geoffrey Scott and Frederick Pottle (Scott & Pottle, 1928–34), who also produced a thorough bibliography of Boswell's publications during this period (Pottle, 1929). Then a second large collection of Boswell manuscripts, mostly correspondence, surfaced at Fettercairn House in Scotland during the 1930s. From the middle of the twentieth century, most of the materials from these two remarkable discoveries found a home at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University and became increasingly accessible through volumes published in the Yale Editions of the Private Papers of James Boswell. Landmarks for the *Life of Johnson* include the trade edition of Boswell's journal in thirteen volumes (1950–89, esp. Lustig & Pottle, 1986, and Danziger & Brady, 1989); the comprehensive catalogue of the Boswell papers at Yale (Pottle, Abbott & Pottle, 1993); Marshall Waingrow's masterful compilation of relevant correspondence, first published in 1969 (Waingrow, 2001); and the monumental four-volume manuscript edition of the *Life* (Waingrow, 1994; Redford with Goldring, 1998; Bonnell, 2012, 2019). Biographies of Boswell's earlier and later years (Pottle, 1966; Brady, 1984) were also part of the Yale project.

Thanks to these works and others, and to the recent digitization of much of the unpublished Boswell material at Yale, it has become possible to see how Boswell sought out and recorded Johnson's conversation, obtained and applied other materials, crafted the manuscript of the text from the entries in his journal, his correspondence, and other sources and then – working closely with his frequent collaborator Edmond Malone – transformed the work, through rigorous and often creative revisions, from manuscript to proofs to published book. Engaging with this process reveals the complexity and artfulness of the *Life* (Waingrow, 2001, p. xxvi; Redford, 2002). Gone was the nineteenth-century view of Boswell as a mere transcriber of Johnson's words – "the reporter Boswell," in Geoffrey Scott's dismissive phrase (Scott & Pottle, 1928–34, 6:30). Rather, it became clear that the depictions of Johnson's conversation in the *Life* were based on entries recorded in Boswell's journal but were altered for various purposes, such as making the text more concise and readable, rendering scenes more dramatic, and showing certain individuals in a better (or worse) light, or sometimes concealing their identities entirely. Moreover, it was learned that material taken from the journal constitutes less than half of the book. For the rest, Boswell had to go elsewhere, and so must scholars. As Marshall Waingrow put it, "for a complete history of the *Life of Johnson* it is necessary to look beyond the journal and behind the manuscript: specifically, at that part of the making of the *Life* which cast Boswell in the roles of researcher, compiler, and editor" (Waingrow, 2001, pp. xxv–xxvi).

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The fundamental premise of this study is that "a complete history of the *Life of Johnson*" also requires careful assessment of another of Boswell's roles, which has largely eluded scholarly analysis: the role of author-publisher. This term draws attention to the fact that Boswell did not merely write the *Life of Johnson*; he was also chiefly responsible for publishing it. During the eighteenth century, especially its last decades, thousands of British books contained the phrase "Printed for the Author" on their title pages (Downie, 2013, p. 74). Those words indicated that the author covered the expenses of production and promotion and owned the product, both materially (the printed copies) and abstractly (the copyright). To facilitate this process, a circular issued by one enterprising London bookseller announced that "Authors who retain their own Copy Right, may have their Books published in London for a small Commission" (Hamilton & Company, 1794). Subscription publishing was another option for authors wishing to publish their own works, and various hybrid options were also available (Sher, 2006, pp. 224–35; Downie, 2013, pp. 64, 70). Yet it is unlikely that most authors of self-published books were as deeply engaged in the publication process as Boswell. Although the phrase "Printed for the Author" does not appear in the imprint of the *Life of Johnson*, Boswell not only assumed full financial responsibility but also made decisions about all aspects of production, participated in selling the book, wrote advertising copy, and received all the publishing profits. He was therefore an author-publisher in the fullest sense of that term.

At the turn of this century, Adam Sisman produced a lucid narrative about the making of the *Life of Johnson* based on Boswell's published journal and correspondence as well as other published sources (Sisman, 2002, p. xx). This Element seeks to dig deeper. In addition to the materials Sisman used, and others published since his book appeared, this study relies heavily on underutilized older published sources, such as contemporary articles and advertisements in newspapers and periodicals, unpublished correspondence, and book trade documents that have never been published or digitized and have rarely been consulted by scholars. The most important of these documents is a complete impression account of the first edition of the *Life*, located among the Boswell Papers at the Beinecke Library (Yale, A 59). Unlike printing ledgers, which normally do not contain information about paper, advertising, and other matters, an impression account (the complete record of a bibliographical "impression") contains details about all aspects of an edition. Another neglected item in the Beinecke Library is a summary of the printing and paper charges for the first edition. Sales records for the first and second (1793) editions have also survived, as have Boswell's notes about anticipated costs and profits from the second edition (Yale, A 60–64). Furthermore, an impression account of the posthumous third edition of 1799, incorporating the printing record, is among the papers of

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the executor of Boswell's estate – Boswell's Edinburgh banker and confidante, Sir William Forbes of Pitsligo – in the National Library of Scotland. The wealth of information that these materials provide about the making of the *Life of Johnson* is exceptional for an eighteenth-century book. Used in conjunction with other sources, they throw new light on the early editions.

In this Element, the primary device for making sense of these neglected materials, and for bringing new meaning to traditional sources, is the concept of the support network. We shall see that in making the *Life of Johnson*, Boswell relied on several kinds of overlapping networks, predominantly male and almost entirely situated in London. They included a social club and a more intimate literary coterie within it, a London bookseller, a printer and the workers in his shop, several newspaper and periodical editors and printers, an adviser in Edinburgh, some family members, and a correspondence network of friends, acquaintances, and well-meaning readers who made contributions to the book. The relationships that characterized these networks were at once personal and professional, intellectual and commercial. These interlocking networks enabled Boswell to publish, promote, and revise his biography of Johnson despite various disadvantages and disabilities, and they continued to drive the book's success after Boswell's death. Taken together, they constitute what I am calling Boswell's support network.

With sensitivity to the complexities and contingencies that lie between a manuscript text and a published book, and between one edition of a book and another, this study probes the publication history of the early editions of the *Life of Johnson* by means of these concepts and materials. It argues that (1) the first edition of 1791 was a successful blend of art and enterprise, in which a highly motivated but in some ways flawed author-publisher made a series of wise publishing decisions with the help of his devoted support network; (2) the second edition of 1793 constituted a setback for the book, as an increasingly dysfunctional author-publisher, relying less on his support network, made a number of poor decisions, resulting in a publication that was deficient in several respects; and (3) beginning with the posthumous third edition of 1799, and continuing through the ninth edition of 1822, the extraordinarily resilient and dedicated remnant of the author's support network, backed from 1803 by Britain's foremost publishing and bookselling firm, enhanced and expanded the book while staying true to the author's text and original vision, in the process establishing the work's reputation as a biographical masterpiece.

1.1 "At His Own Risque"

When the *Life of Johnson* appeared in London on 16 May 1791, the imprint on the title page announced in capital letters "PRINTED BY HENRY BALDWIN, FOR

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CHARLES DILLY, IN THE POULTRY" (Figures 1a & 1b) – the same wording that six years earlier had graced the title page of Boswell's first Johnsonian volume, *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides, with Samuel Johnson* (hereafter cited as *Tour*). Upon seeing that imprint, which contained the standard terminology for identifying a book's printer ("printed by") and publisher ("printed for"), a reader would naturally assume that Charles Dilly was the sole publisher and that Boswell had either sold the copyright to him outright or else made a conditional arrangement to receive half the profits, as was commonly done (Raven, 2007, p. 333). In his career as a publishing bookseller, Dilly made use of both these methods, though his preference was for profit-sharing (Sher, 2006, p. 348). How, then, did the *Life of Johnson* come to be published by Boswell, and what was the significance of the arrangement with Dilly?

In August 1767 Edward and Charles Dilly agreed to pay Boswell one hundred guineas (£105) for the copyright to his first major book, *An Account of Corsica*. Printed in Glasgow by Robert and Andrew Foulis and published in February 1768 as a six-shilling octavo (Boswell, 1768; Gaskell, 1986, pp. 278–79, 396–400), it was hugely successful in promoting the ill-fated cause of Corsican independence under General Pasquale Paoli and brought "Corsica Boswell" an international reputation (Pottle, 1929, pp. 50–75; Pottle, 1966, pp. 237–39, 354, 364–68). It also established a strong connection with the Dilly brothers, who "thought they could not do enough for me," as Boswell wrote in his journal on 1 September 1769. Boswell grew especially close with Charles Dilly after Edward died in 1779. In the mid-1780s, when Boswell was contemplating publishing the journal of his excursion to the Hebrides with Johnson, he proposed to Dilly, in a letter of 23 December 1784 which has not survived but was summarized in Boswell's register of correspondence, that they "go halves in an edition" (Yale, M 255). Dilly's reply of 29 January 1785 is also known only from Boswell's summary: "Mr. C. Dilly . . . wishes me to have all the profits of my Tour to the Hebrides, & he will be the Publisher" (Yale, M 255). That is, Dilly would manage the publication in exchange for a commission, and his name would appear on the title page as if he were the publisher.

Dilly extended similarly favorable terms to the *Life of Johnson*, for which he would receive 7½ percent of gross wholesale income as a commission. I have been unable to determine if 7½ percent was a standard commission or a discounted rate for Boswell's benefit. In 1816 the standard bookseller's commission in London was 10 percent (Downie, 2013, p. 66), but that rate may reflect an increase occurring throughout the trade. Registrations at Stationers' Hall – a necessary step to protect a book from piracy within Great Britain – reflect the changes in Boswell and Dilly's publishing arrangements. Whereas the *Account of Corsica* was registered on 15 February 1768 to "Edwd & Charles Dilly," the *Life* was registered on 11 May 1791

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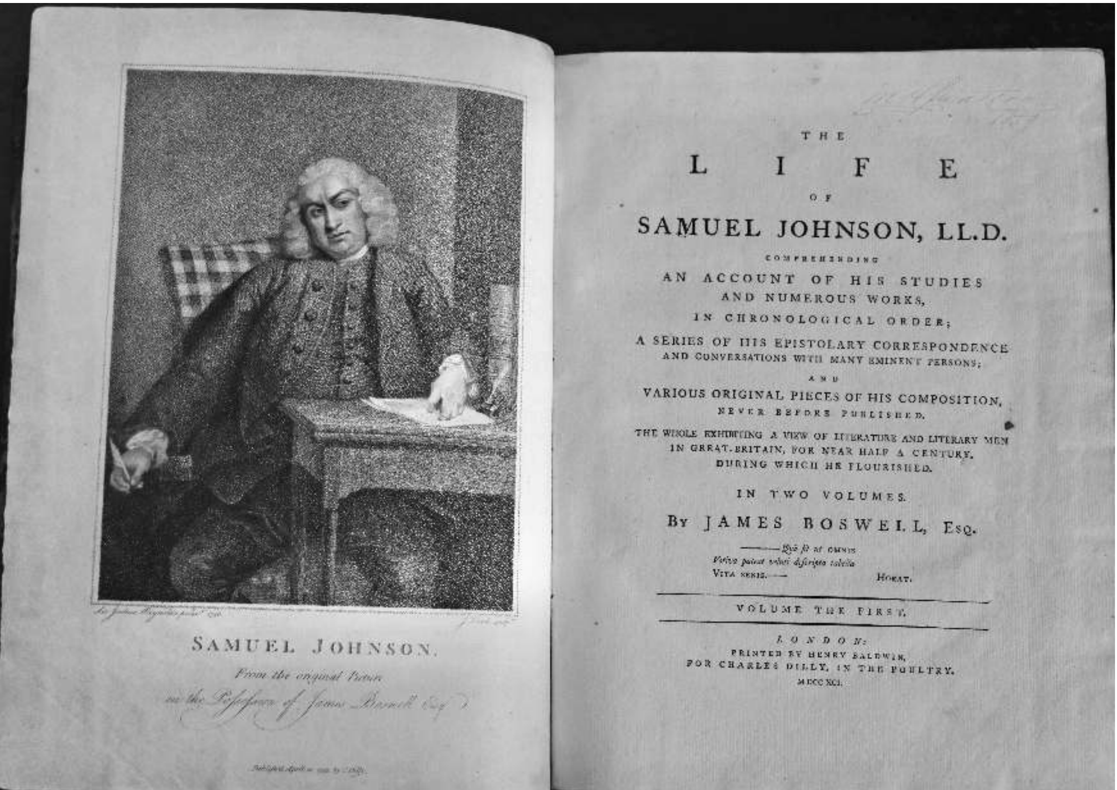

SAMUEL JOHNSON.

From the original Picture

in the Possession of James Boswell Esq.

THE

L I F E

OF

SAMUEL JOHNSON, LL.D.

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
Votivâ pateat veluti descripta tabellâ
Vita senis.—— HORAT.

VOLUME THE FIRST.

LONDON:
PRINTED BY HENRY BALDWIN,
FOR CHARLES DILLY, IN THE POULTRY.
MDCCXCI.

Figure 1a Title page of the quarto first edition, opposite James Heath's frontispiece engraving of Johnson after a portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds, "From the original Picture / in the Possession of James Boswell Esq." Terry I. Seymour Collection.

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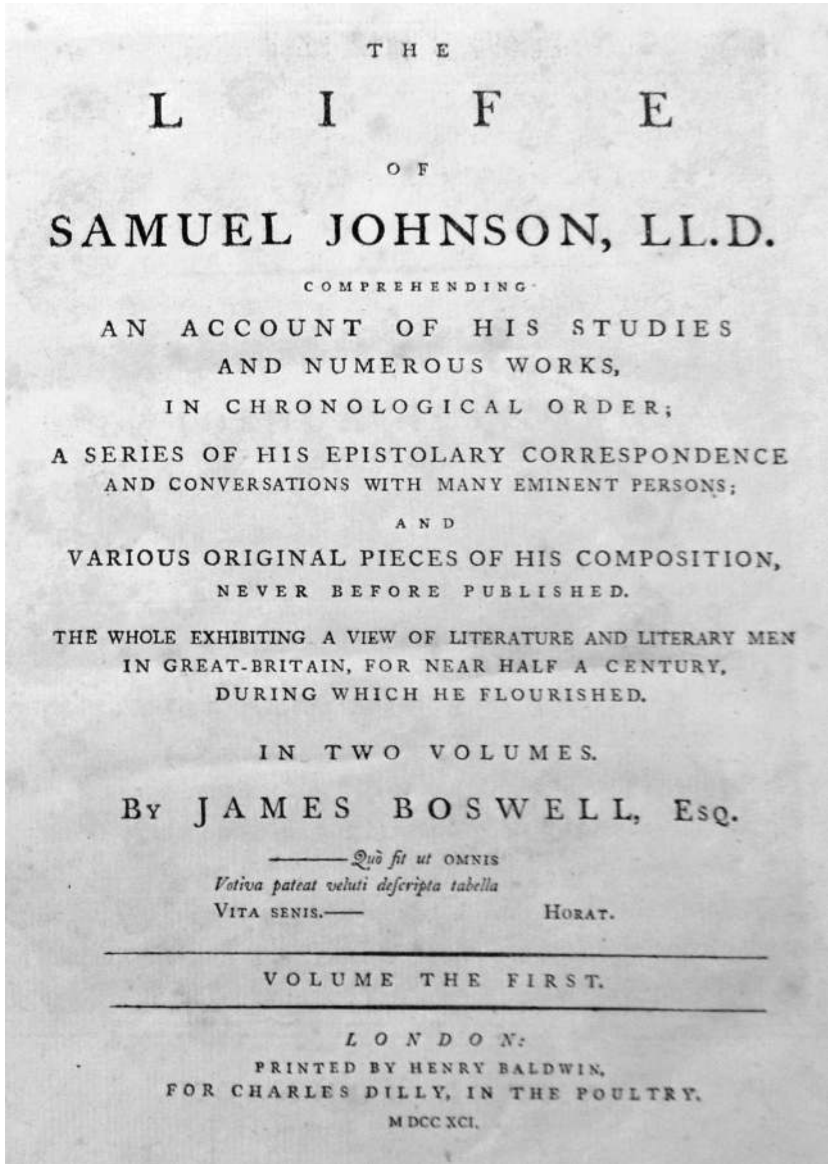

THE

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Figure 1b Detail of the title page of the first edition from Figure 1a. Terry I. Seymour Collection.

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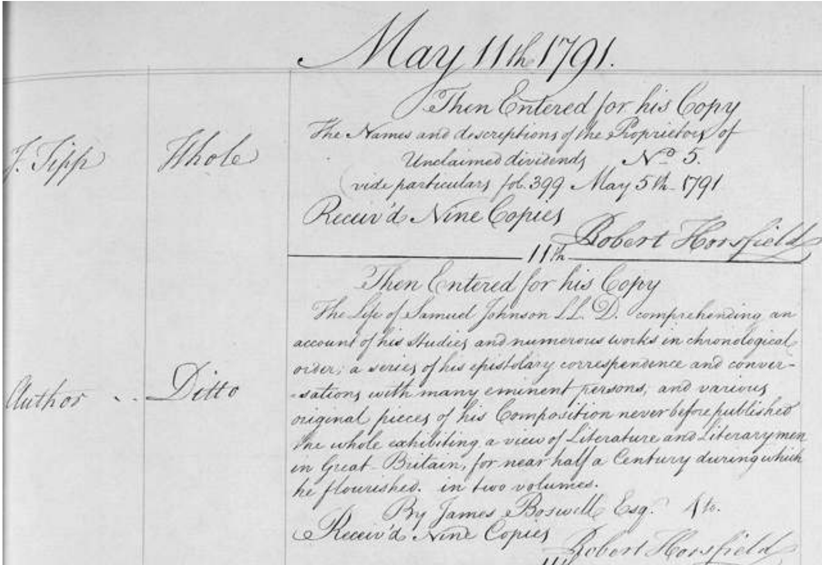

May 11th 1791.

J. Sipp	Whole	Then Entered for his Copy The Names and descriptions of the Proprietors of Unclaimed dividends No 5. (vide particulars fol. 399 May 5th 1791 Receiv'd Nine Copies Robert Horsfield
Author ..	Ditto	11th Then Entered for his Copy The Life of Samuel Johnson LL.D. 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. 4to. Receiv'd Nine Copies Robert Horsfield

Figure 2 Registration of the first edition to Boswell ("Author") at Stationers' Hall, London, on 11 May 1791. The entry reproduces the full title of the book and the name of the author as they appear on the title page, followed by the book's quarto format ("4to.") and acknowledgment that nine copies have been received. Stationers' Company Archive, TSC/1/E/0611 – Stationers' Register 1786–1792, f. 400

to "the Author" (Figure 2), as the *Tour* had been on 28 September 1785. Thus, the generous publishing arrangements that characterized both of Boswell's books about Johnson were the result of acts of kindness by a bookseller toward an author, grounded in a close personal relationship between them. Besides ceding the potential profits to Boswell, these arrangements would spare Boswell any stigma associated with the phrase "Printed for the Author" and would bring Dilly the prestige deriving from these publications.

To say that Boswell would "have all the profits" from the *Life of Johnson* presents only one side of the story. One could just as easily say that Boswell would have all the losses. Another of Dilly's Scottish authors, the poet and philosophy professor James Beattie, went to the heart of the matter when he reported to a friend on 30 June 1791 that Boswell "publishes at his own risque" (Fettercairn Papers, box 92). An author-publisher could reap large profits from a book, but substantial financial losses were also possible, and the stakes increased in proportion to a book's size and special features. The *Tour* was a one-volume octavo of 535 total pages without any special features except an inexpensive woodcut of Boswell's family crest on the title page (Baker, 1986,

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Figure 3 The two-volume quarto first edition of the *Life of Johnson* (1791); the thin quarto *Principal Corrections and Additions to the First Edition* (1793); the three-volume octavo second edition (1793); one of the three volumes of the Dublin octavo edition (1792); the one-volume octavo first edition of the *Tour* (1785). Terry I. Seymour Collection

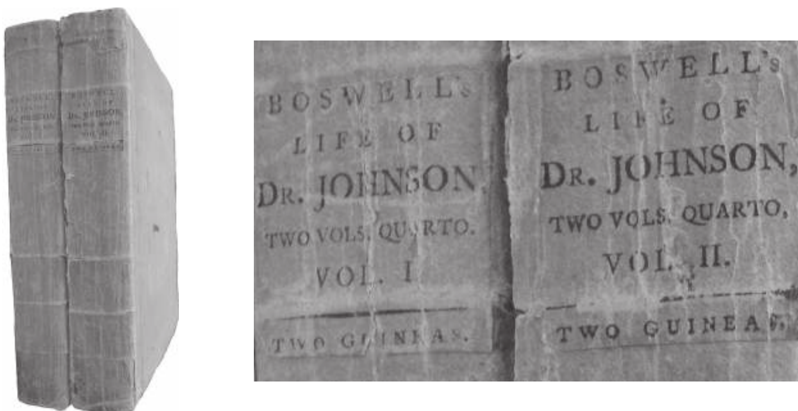

Figure 4 On the left is the first edition in boards, as it might be sold in bookshops. A purchaser might then pay a bookbinder to have the volumes bound in leather, as in Figure 3. On the right is a detail of the labels, showing the abbreviated title, number of volumes per set, format, volume number, and price. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University

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p. 199); it retailed for six shillings in boards – a rudimentary form of binding that was often preliminary to more expensive leather and gilt-tooled covers, such as those shown in Figure 3 (Hill, 1999). At that low price for such a thick volume, it was very good value, but the profit margin was consequently extremely thin, probably yielding no more than a few hundred pounds in combined publishing profits from the first two editions of 1,500 and 1,000 copies. Moreover, Boswell must have lost money on the sluggish third edition of 1786, illustrating the risks involved when authors published their own works.

The *Life of Johnson* was a different kind of undertaking. Published in two commodious volumes in the large and expensive quarto format, with various extra features that are discussed in this work, the first edition was much costlier to produce, seven times more expensive to buy at two guineas (£2 2s.) per set in boards (Figure 4), and a much riskier publishing endeavor than the *Tour*. Such a book could earn £1,000 or more – the equivalent of more than 150,000 British pounds or American dollars today. However, it could also lose large amounts. London's leading publisher of the mid-eighteenth century, Andrew Millar, once revealed to a contemporary that "he had lost by many more publications than he had gained" (quoted in Sher, 2006, p. 282).

A high level of risk brought correspondingly high levels of anxiety. As the author-publisher, Boswell had to make choices about every aspect of the production process, and every choice had financial implications. A notice appended to the first and second editions of the *Tour* referred to the forthcoming *Life of Johnson* as a "one Volume Quarto." As his text kept growing, Boswell had to decide whether he could afford to make the *Life* a two-volume quarto – or perhaps even a one-volume folio, as he once suggested. Other decisions were equally important. What paper and type should be used? Should the book contain illustrations, and if so, what kind, how many, and by whom? Should there be an index? How many copies should be printed, and how many should he take for his own use and for gifts? Before considering how Boswell answered such questions, it will be useful to investigate the network of knowledgeable and trustworthy individuals to whom he turned for guidance and support.

1.2 Boswell's Gendered, Anglicized Support Network

In recent years, much has been published about intellectual, social, and correspondence networks among men and women of letters in eighteenth-century Europe (e.g., Baird, 2014; Edmondson & Edelstein, 2019) and beyond (e.g., Gies & Wall, 2018; Czennia & Clingham, 2021, esp. p. 28 n. 27). Philosophes, literati, academicians, professors, and students associated in person, as did participants in literary and scientific clubs and societies, salons, coffee houses, masonic lodges, and places of worship. Private correspondences, circulating manuscripts,

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