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Rivalry in Literary Biography: Boswell's *Life of Johnson* and Holmes' *Dr Johnson and Mr Savage*

Abstract. This study aims to discuss the complicated nature of literary biography by focusing on the intertextual relations and anxiety of influence among biographers of a single subject. Taking Samuel Johnson's life and outlook on literary biography as a starting point, the article examines two influential works that are separated by a significant amount of time, *Life of Johnson* (1791) by James Boswell and *Dr Johnson and Mr Savage* (1993, 2005) by Richard Holmes, suggesting that in both there is a strong sense of rivalry with their subject and an anxiety about the influence of their predecessors. Both authors exhibit love for or interest in their subject while they strive for superiority in literary biography with their distinctive narrative technique and commentaries on Johnson's character and life. In this study, I utilise Harold Bloom's theory of influence in an attempt to show how anxiety and rivalry function as part of a creative process and driving force that leads to original contributions to the field.

Keywords: anxiety of influence, rivalry, James Boswell, Samuel Johnson, literary biography, Dr Johnson and Mr Savage.

1. Introduction

If the biographer writes from personal knowledge, and makes haste to gratify the public curiosity, there is danger lest his interest, his fear, his gratitude, or his tenderness overpower his fidelity, and tempt him to conceal, if not to invent.

– Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler* (1750)

In *The Rambler*, No. 60 (1750), Samuel Johnson expounds the principals of biography as a critical genre and foregrounds it as a medium of access to universal truths about human life and feelings (Rollyson 2001: 442). A poetics of the biography in Johnson's view is comprised of "a concern for ethics, a sense of empathy and the exercise of imagination" (Benton 2015: 12). Having remained generally untheorised for a long time, literary biography still oscillates between writing history

and writing fiction, as well as representing a real or imaginative self, yet it also offers vast possibilities for literary creativity and understanding complicated human nature. The “co-creation”, or “the commingling of consciousness” in the biography genre leads to an anxiety for the biographer who “carr[ies] on an interior dialogue with him/[her]self” while crossing back and forth between the past and present (Christianson 1993: 131). Johnson’s reference to the danger of biographers’ feelings, such as fear and gratitude, as well as their temptation to conceal or invent, highlights an overlooked aspect of literary biography: the motives of the biographers in writing the life of another and their competitive responses to the earlier authoritative works.

As a theorist and author of *The Life of Mr Richard Savage* (1777), Johnson has himself been the subject of a great number of literary biographies to date.¹ With regards to the motives of Johnson’s life writers, two critical works, by James Boswell and Richard Holmes, come to the forefront with their distinctive contributions to literary biography. The significance of the two works is not accidental and neither can it be attributed to their “perfect” subject. While Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* (1791) stands out with its extensive detail, evidence and techniques that give life to a colourful and intellectual Johnson after his fifties, Holmes’ *Dr Johnson and Mr Savage* (2005) illustrates the young lonely Johnson and his obscure, poet-friend Savage’s “inexplicable” friendship through the lens of sympathy by maintaining a tender and mysterious tone. The two biographies are not similar in terms of their narrative techniques or points of view on Johnson’s actions and character. Nevertheless, both reflect an unacknowledged feature of the biography genre: rivalry with their subject and other biographers writing on the same subject. That is, every biographer embodies both love for (or interest in) their subject and anxiety about the influence of their predecessors since they long for priority in their field of expertise. Life writing could thus be interpreted as unconscious revelations of the biographers’ fear of being influenced and their will for power, while attempting to create their own voice and secure their position in literary circles. In this regard, this article first provides a theoretical background for understanding the competitive nature of the biography genre and it then moves on to an analysis of the two biographies in sequence by focusing on historical proximity, Johnson as a biographical subject and biographer, the motives of Boswell and Holmes, their distinctive techniques and approaches, and their responses to earlier biographers of Johnson.

¹ Major biographies of Johnson published in the eighteenth century include Hester Lynch Thrale’s *Anecdotes of the Late S.J., During the Last Twenty Years of his Life* (1786), Sir John Hawkins’ *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (1787) and James Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* (1791). Among recent biographies, *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, ed. by Arthur Sherbo (1974); Arthur Murphy, *An Essay on the Life and Genius of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* (1792, reprinted 1970); and George Birkbeck Hill (Ed.), *Johnsonian Miscellanies*, 2 Vol. (1897, reprinted 1966), Robert E. Kelley and O.M. Brack, Jr., *Samuel Johnson’s Early Biographers* (1971); Aelyn Lyell Reade, *Johnsonian Gleanings*, 11 Vol. (1909–52, reprinted 11 Vol. in 10, 1968); James L. Clifford, *Young Sam Johnson* (1955, reissued 1981) and *Dictionary Johnson: Samuel Johnson’s Middle Years* (1979); W. Jackson Bate, *Samuel Johnson* (1977); Thomas Kaminski, *The Early Career of Samuel Johnson* (1987); Robert Demaria, J.R., *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (1993); Peter Martin, *Samuel Johnson* (2008); Jeffrey Meyers, *Samuel Johnson: The Struggle* (2008); and David Nokes, *Samuel Johnson: A Life* (2009) are considered influential and original works on Johnson’s life and character.

1.1. Theoretical Outlook: Biographers as Poets?

In an attempt to understand the relationship between rivalry and biographical works, Bloom's theory on poetics from *The Anxiety of Influence* might help us to think about the "inevitable and undeniable" fear of influence among biographers who, like poets, experience "the melancholy of the creative mind's desperate insistence upon priority" (1973: 13). The act of writing is associated with will to power, which requires an intentional misreading and re-creation of the previous works so that poets can have a "clear imaginative space for themselves" (1973: 5). Instead of idealising their predecessors, poets of "capable imagination appropriate for themselves" by digesting or sublimating earlier works (1973: 5). Bloom suggests that writing with poetic influence does not make poems less original, "though not therefore necessarily better" (1973: 7). However, influence remains an essential part of strong literature that cannot be "detached from its anxieties about the works that possess priority and authority in regard to it" (Bloom 1994: 11). Bloom defines influence as "literary love, tempered by defense" (2011: 14). In this study, I define influence not simply as "literary love", but also as a strong interest or personal love that biographers feel for their subject; considering Johnson's biographers, this includes not only love, but also a sense of rivalry and anxiety due to his authoritative position in life writing.

Although in his later works, *The Western Canon* (1994) and *The Anatomy of Influence* (2011), Bloom extends his theory of influence to include other literary forms, such as novels and plays, biographical narratives still seem underrated despite their strong competitive nature and high chance of being influenced by both their subject and predecessors. Literary biography shares fundamental similarities with other literary forms in terms of intentional re-creation, the anxiety of influence and the will for priority. Not only poets and novelists, but also biographers, attempt to avoid the influence of others in order to be original and to maintain their integrity without emulating their predecessors. However, this is quite a challenging task for biographers since they should also stay one step behind their subject and, at the same time, prove their wisdom and literary ability. Since Johnson was himself a prominent biographer and literary celebrity when he died in 1784, the biographers narrating his life had to confront this reality by considering his literary skills and achievements. Johnson's characterisation in Boswell and Holmes' works is original in many ways; nevertheless, true admiration and will for priority are still evident as they attempt to reconstruct a biographical (textual and historical) subject. Simultaneously, Boswell and Holmes both display a strong desire to understand and describe Johnson better than their predecessors. In this sense, their narratives could be interpreted as an inevitable outburst of love, influence and rivalry between the biographer and his subject as well as with earlier and contemporary biographers.

Regarding Bloom's six types of theory of influence (clinamen, tessera, kenosis, daemonization, askesis and apophrades), I take a two-layered approach by drawing a clear difference between the biographer and his/her subject, as well as considering Johnson's exclusive position as a predecessor. Johnson is both the subject and an authoritative predecessor and this complicates writing a successful biography commenting on his professional skills, weaknesses and strengths. Considering Boswell and Holmes' works, I elaborate on Bloom's first four types of influence and read "clina-

men” as creative misreading of earlier biographies; “tessera” as an act of completion by giving a new meaning to the predecessor’s work or filling a gap regarding the subject’s life; “kenosis” as a movement towards discontinuity with the predecessor, either in terms of technique or approach; and finally “daemonisation” as a counter-sublime in response to the predecessor’s sublime, such as generalising the uniqueness of an earlier work (Bloom 1973: 14-15). In this context, this article reads Holmes’ work partly as a misreading of Johnson’s *Life of Savage* (clinamen) and as an attempt to complete a gap in Boswell’s and other biographer’s works (tessera) through a focus on Johnson’s underrated friendship with Savage. On the other hand, publishing Johnson’s biography soon after his death, Boswell discontinues Johnson’s biography of Savage (kenosis), as well as Hawkins and Thrall’s biographies, and attempts to present a counter-sublime with a distinctive approach and narrative technique in life writing. While Boswell and Holmes present a contrastive portrayal of Johnson’s life and character, they nonetheless both explicitly appreciate Johnson’s skills as a literary genius.

2. Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*: Admiration or Rivalry?

In Boswell’s *Life*, historical proximity and personal relations with the subject gain significance since they provide several advantages over recent biographers. Boswell was fully aware of this and benefited from being Johnson’s contemporary in writing an original account of his life. For about twenty years, he collected materials and information about Johnson’s life, recorded his conversations, exchanged letters with him and inquired with him about his early years. Even after Johnson’s death,

... having been admitted to the English Bar in 1786, Boswell moved to London with his family in order to collect material for the biography. He gathered most of Johnson’s letters; interviewed his old friends and even sent a questionnaire to Edmund Hector, a former schoolmate of Johnson. (Clifford 1970: 4).

Boswell (1946) further asserts that “few biographers have entered upon such a work as this, with more advantages; independent of literary abilities, in which I am not vain enough to compare myself with some great names who have gone before me in this kind of writing.” Yet, did Boswell’s friendship with Johnson produce an unclear image that might have distorted his judgment in the biography? Boswell’s *Life* suggests that this is possible because Johnson is primarily identified as a friend, master and father figure, which Boswell was strongly in need of when he was young. When he met Johnson, Boswell was just twenty-three years old, whilst the latter was “a middle-aged celebrity” (Clifford 1970: 2). Even before their first encounter, Boswell had been an admirer of Johnson, as he later admits:

Mr Davies mentioned my name and respectfully introduced me to him. I was much agitated; and recollecting his prejudice against the Scotch, of which I had heard much. I said to Davies, ‘Don’t

tell where I come from.' – 'From Scotland' cried Davies roguishly. 'Mr Johnson', [said I] 'I do indeed come from Scotland, but I cannot help it.' (1946: i261).

Boswell obviously fears that Johnson will be prejudiced against him because he is Scottish. However, they soon became friends, although with a dynamic more like disciple and master or father and son. Boswell visited London to meet Johnson on several occasions and their tour to the Hebrides provided the necessary conditions to learn more about Johnson's character and lifestyle. Boswell admired Johnson greatly and he explicitly admitted that he took him as a model in his journal: "Be like Johnson. Remember you are his friend" (1970: 93). Again in his journals, Boswell frequently questioned his acts and whether they were "worthy of James Boswell" or not, which reveals his seemingly low self-esteem (1970: 93). This might also be linked to an inferiority complex in the sense that he perceived the moral philosophy of Johnson as a shelter to save him from his own weaknesses (1970: 93).

While the above details unveil Boswell's deep interest in Johnson as a biographical subject, at the same time, he appears to be more like a child in need of love and guidance from his father. For Boswell, Johnson seems to have the intellect and moral philosophy that he lacks. He is impressed by the authoritative and magnificent intellectual conversations of Johnson who proved to be "the greatest" man of his age; nonetheless, he is unable to move beyond the position of a young admirer. In fact, Boswell is fully aware of Johnson's weaknesses, yet it is Johnson's strengths that interest him most and this is what he wishes to use in re-creating his subject in his work as a respectable figure. Although he is familiar with Johnson's less agreeable traits, his achievements are even presented as turning his weaknesses into strengths (Mulgan 2007: 29). Johnson's influence on Boswell was even ridiculed by some of the people who knew them both. Funny Burney suggested that Boswell imitated Johnson in many ways: "Every look and movement displayed either intentional or involuntarily imitation ... His heart, almost even to idolatry, was in his reverence of Johnson" (qtd. in Clifford 1970: 89). Goldsmith criticised Boswell for entitling Johnson to the utmost superiority: "Sir [said he], you are making a monarchy of what should be a republic" (Boswell 1946: ii257). That is, Boswell's tendency for imitation and his overvaluing of Johnson endanger his identity as an independent and respectable individual. Despite being aware of his own wisdom and creative writing skills, Boswell's weakness seems to have originated from his wish to become a well-known literary figure like Johnson. The alternative path he takes, therefore, provides him with an opportunity to be acknowledged as a successful biographer.

Besides his personal interest in Johnson, Boswell's strong desire to promote his career and his will for priority propel itself in a disguised way via the biography genre. In *Life*, he skilfully uses his creative writing skills to reconstruct conversations with Johnson that he is quite familiar with. His textual and historical re-creation of Johnson functions as a means of self-defence against his subject. His ambitions and motives are revealed in the fact that he decided to write Johnson's life story while he was alive and visited him in London several times to learn more about his personality and earlier years. In his *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, Boswell explains this purpose in a

milder manner: “I shall lay-up authentic materials for the life of Samuel Johnson and if I survive him, I shall be the one who most faithfully do honour to his memory” (1785, 1791: 300). Interestingly, Boswell appears to have simply accepted Johnson’s success as a biographer and openly declares it: “In biography there can be no question that he [Johnson] excelled, beyond all who have attempted that species of composition” (1946: 256). In fact, this statement is misleading because Boswell himself is attempting to write an ideal biography that excels in the genre. This might be explained as a strategy to secure his position in case of a failure, or a way to disguise the rivalry between himself and his subject. Indeed, praising the greater one does not always signal mere admiration since it also reveals an unconscious will for priority and a desire to be in his place. In *Boswell’s Life of Johnson: New Questions, New Answers*, this aspect is more clearly identified by Donald Greene:

The most serious charge against Boswell, in my opinion, is that his much-touted ‘hero-worship’ of Johnson is a mask, disguising from himself and others an unconscious wish to cut Johnson down to size and establish in the end, the superiority of Boswell, the aristocratic, polished man-of-the-world, to this rugged provincial with his uncouth manners and quaint, old-fashioned prejudices. (qtd. in Vance 1985: 6)

For these reasons, in Boswell’s criticism, there has been a tendency to consider his biography of Johnson “a conscious misrepresentation of the truth” or essentially “a portion of his autobiography” (1985: 10-13). Boswell’s imaginative truth based on a selection of facts and his creative expressions, thereby, might serve as “defensive measures” erected in order to “diminish crippling anxiety” of influence (Havelka: 1968: 3).

With his distinctive techniques and approaches to literary biography, Boswell not only breaks with Johnson’s *Life of Savage* and other earlier biographies of Johnson, but also demonstrates his literary genius as a biographer. Boswell goes beyond writing a generalised assessment of his subject’s character and instead he presents Johnson to the readership within specific contexts and lively scenes in a dramatised and unique way (Mulgan 2007: 10). Using both first and third person narrative techniques, he draws attention to Johnson’s “minute particulars” with a sense of humour to display his “distinguished” subject’s character (Boswell, 1946). He reconstructs Johnson’s public self in his conversations by “combining entertainment with instruction” (Rogers 1980: xxix). In *Boswell’s Presumptuous Task*, Adam Sisman depicts his efforts as follows:

Boswell seems like a ventriloquist, putting words into Johnson’s mouth. He became adept at steering the conversation in directions which would stimulate Johnson to say something memorable; he was proud of his ability, though often it required him to play the straight man alongside Johnson, the butt of Johnson’s wit. In this sense Boswell was creating his own copy, the reporter making news for himself. (2000: xviii)

This method, however, distorts the course of events through disconnected narratives and conversations in the book (2000: 10). Boswell has also omitted some details and people from Johnson's life (such as his wife Tetty, and seeking a second wife), possibly because he considers them to be irrelevant in the context he presents or due to his desire to put himself into the picture (Clifford 1970: 12-15). Almost half of the biography is devoted to Johnson's last eight years, characterising him as a public speaker by focusing on his sense of humour, humanity and moral identity (Rogers 1980: xxix-xi). Boswell's careful choice of material and avoidance of some factual evidence serve as a method to ensure that he can present Johnson as he wishes him to be remembered. Since he is not familiar with Johnson's attitudes towards children and his family life, the contexts he presents in his work constitute scenes of the club and dinners with other male attendees.²

Despite his genius and talent, Boswell had an unsuccessful career in law and he faced many disappointments in his life. As Adam Sisman suggests, "in the wreckage of his disordered mind, he clung to the memory of Johnson as a shipwrecked sailor clings to a rock" (2000: xxi). Writing Johnson's life seems to be his final hope for success in literary circles in his fifties and he openly attacks his two rival biographers, Hester Lynch Thrale and Sir John Hawkins. Thrale's *Anecdotes of the Late S.J., During the Last Twenty Years of his Life* (1786) and Hawkins' *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (1787) were published several years before Boswell's *Life*, and there were also a considerable number of short pieces in magazines on Johnson's life.³ Boswell considers his genuine companionship with Johnson a strength in his biography and undermines Sir John Hawkins' work as follows:

I never saw in his company, I think once, and I am sure not above twice ... It is evident that they never could have lived together with companionable ease and familiarity; nor had John Sir Hawkins that nice perception which was necessary to mark the finer and less obvious parts of Johnson's character. (1946: i18)

In a letter Boswell explains the reason for his deliberate delay in completing his work as stemming "from the motive of Sir John Hawkins to precede [him] that [he] might profit by his gross faults" (qtd. in Rogers 1980: xxv). In his introduction to *Life*, Boswell (1946: i18) criticises Hawkins' work as an unsuccessful biography of Johnson due to its inability to sufficiently relate to its subject, full of inaccurate statements of fact and misleading characterisation. He succinctly remembers Mrs Thrale, another biographer of Johnson, as "a lady who once lived in great intimacy with him" (1946: i19). In Boswell's first letter written to her in 1769, he admits that they were "rivals for that great man", and, as Rogers suggests, "two rivals in the wings, and public expectations high: it was

2 As Clifford notes, "Johnson was the greater man: greater in calibre, greater in learning, greater in philosophy [and] Boswell was the greater genius" (1970: 90). Mrs Thrale and Fanny Burney completed the picture with their descriptions of Johnson's family life and his relationship with the females he met.

3 For further information, see *The Early Biographies of Samuel Johnson*, ed. by O.M. Brack and Robert E. Kelley (USA: University of Iowa Press, 1974).

a daunting task Boswell faced when he contemplated his ‘deliberate’ undertaking” (1980: xx-xxiii). Indeed, his attitude towards Johnson’s first two biographers reflects not only an anxiety of influence, but also his desire to be the “best friend” of the great man who “had the management of the mind” (Boswell 1946: ii440).

Boswell further denies that the young Johnson and Richard Savage were, for a short period, intimate friends. He describes Savage as “a man, of whom it is difficult to speak impartially, without wondering that he was for some time the intimate companion of Johnson ... Savage’s misfortunes and misconducts had reduced him to the lowest state of wretchedness as a writer for bread” (1946: i111). At this point, it can be suggested that Boswell wishes to be at the centre of Johnson’s life and considers Savage unworthy of his attention as a friend and a biographical subject. Boswell’s own inclusion as a character in *Life* reveals his strong desire to be present both as a character (though Johnson is the subject) and a biographer narrator. His work, in this sense, might be interpreted as “an unending contest between author and subject for posterity” and the two “are locked together for all the time, in part-struggle, part-embrace” (Sisman 2000: xix). Boswell’s insistence upon priority, therefore, enables him to write a distinctive biography of Johnson with minute details and footnotes, and it has since been a controversial topic in literary criticism.⁴ His extensive efforts reveal the anxiety of a disappointed yet ambitious writer who attempts to create a “great” subject to reflect his own intellect and greatness in biography.

3. Holmes’ *Dr Johnson and Mr Savage*: Rivalry or Empathy?

The relationship between the biographer and his subject takes a different form and direction in Richard Holmes’ *Dr Johnson and Mr Savage*, since Holmes attempts to disguise rivalry with his subject by using Johnson’s own techniques in life writing. Published over two centuries after Johnson’s *Life of Savage* and Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*, Holmes’ narrative utilises historical distance as an advantage for creative misreading and empathy. Holmes indeed writes “the biography of a biography” and works like an archaeologist gradually excavating the layers of an unknown and mysterious friendship no one has interpreted:

It concerns the kind of human truth, poised between fact and fiction, which a biographer can obtain as he tells the story of another’s life, and thereby makes it both his own and the public’s. It asks what we can know, and what we can believe, and finally what we can love. (2005: 5)

Unlike Boswell, Holmes is a contemporary writer writing the life of an eighteenth-century celebrity and, therefore, he is partially free of the risk of having a distorted judgment of Johnson

⁴ Contemporary and recent criticisms of Boswell’s biography include “an alleged bias or incomprehension ... the deliberate relegation of Mrs Thrale, the haziness with regard to Burke (compared to Goldsmith, say), the lack of curiosity in areas remote from Boswell’s experience distorting Johnson’s political opinion, turning him into a romantic Tory” (Rogers 1980: xxxi).

as a close friend. He is also a successful biographer who has already assured his fame with *Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer* (1996). Holmes confidently places himself in Johnson's position to outline the young Johnson's circumstances, thoughts and close relationship with his poet-friend. It is also important to note that this is not a complete biography of Johnson or Savage; rather, it is "the fragments of two unusual lives that converged for the brief period of two years", as Christianson notes (1993: 132). The scarcity of primary sources, such as letters, diaries and statements of eyewitnesses, in the book has been substituted or completed by Holmes' rich imagination, interpretation and literary skill as an experienced biographer.

Holmes is most influenced by Johnson's skills as a biographer and his ability to sympathise with his subject, Richard Savage. In his work, Johnson establishes his notorious poet-friend's "literary self" as a rejected but talented child "equally distinguished by his virtues and vices" (Benton 2015: 29; Johnson 1968).⁵ This representation is indeed "provisional and inevitably partial" due to the gap between Johnson's views and Savage's facts, their brief night-walking friendship and his motive for writing the life of his killer-poet friend (2015: 9). Johnson's work carries some features of a memoir of an intimate companion, while it preserves an aesthetic and objective approach to the subject's weaknesses and strengths. By distancing himself from the night-walks as a third person narrator, Johnson writes a biography that diverges from the scandalous thriller style of earlier ones. His friendship with Savage and his interest in presenting a moral truth in the genre by focusing on the environmental factors in a person's life reveal both his gratitude for his companion and his fear of being tempted to conceal some information about the poet's life and character. However, as Schwalm also notes:

... as a friend-biographer addressing Savage's biography to an audience already more or less familiar with the facts of the case, Johnson could not have suppressed or invented much about Savage – even if he had wanted to – without sacrificing the credibility of the narrative. If he wanted his vindication of Savage to be believed, he had to face the facts of his life squarely. (1985: 133)

Regarding the brief friendship between Johnson and Savage, John Hawkins claims that they had several significant features in common: "They had both felt the pangs of poverty and the want of patronage... They seemed both to agree in the vulgar opinion that the world is divided into two classes, of man of merit without riches, and men of wealth without merit" (Nokes 2009: 65). Johnson seems to have dwelt upon their friendship long after Savage's death and it must have had vital importance for him in writing his biography in "recapturing something of the limitless horizons of London, of the night, and the drunken excess he has first experienced, as a nostalgic dream, with his cousin Cornelius" (2009: 65).

⁵ Literary self, here, refers to "a sense of identity defined by the subject and represented by [his] biographer" (Benton 2015: 29).

When Holmes describes Johnson and Savage's motives and brief companionship, he uses the available evidence in a particular order and tries to fill the missing parts or scenes by using his imagination, creative misreading and a mystical tone. With an attempt to understand his subject, Holmes demonstrates his own literary skill and capacity to put himself in his subject's position, while as a biographer he assures himself of his integrity and credibility by keeping a distance between himself and his subject. Holmes' anxiety about being influenced by Johnson's description of Savage in his own work can be traced to the point where he advocates Johnson's biography. He claims that Johnson was quite aware of Savage's bad manners:

If Johnson came to see Savage's failings so clearly, as their intimacy deepened in the autumn of 1738, why did he continue to defend him retrospectively in the *Life*? This is the question that evidently haunted Boswell – particularly since it was to Boswell that the sacred baton of friendship was eventually passed; as well as the sacred duty of the biographer to tell the truth as candidly as possible. For it is a mistake to believe that Johnson did not penetrate deeply into Savage's vanity, delusions and opportunism ... This rueful and damaging admission deepens our whole sense of Johnson's powers as a biographer. He is not taken by Savage, but still extends sympathy and insight. (2005: 192)

When he describes Johnson's friendship with Savage, Holmes does not ignore their circumstances, yet he emphasises their enchantment as intimate friends who failed to understand each other. He pretends to be an invisible third friend witnessing their sorrow and happiness in situations that nobody saw or understood. Whilst doing this, it is possible to observe Savage through Johnson's eyes, as if he is not narrating their friendship as a third person. When reading about Johnson's Savage, it is difficult not to sympathise with the unlucky, rejected child who was to be a killer-poet. Similarly, Holmes draws an intense and emotional but rational picture of their friendship, which was largely considered insignificant. In this way, Holmes justifies Johnson's biographical style by turning it into another story. He owes his success to his particular method, which addresses the complicated nature of literary biography and the significance of readership in the genre, as Schwalm notes:

Ironically, however, neither the reader nor the biographer knows what "the truth" about the subject is. All either has to go on is the available evidence, that fragmentary, distorted, and perhaps unrepresentative remnant of the complicated nexus of behaviors that constitutes a life... What a biographer aims for, and what a reader looks for, is a credible or probable organization of the available evidence. Although the nature of the evidence imposes some limitations on the biographer, he has considerable freedom to select, emphasize, and arrange the evidence. Thus the same body of fact can be shaped into quite different, even contradictory, biographies. Our judgment of the truth of a biography finally depends not so much on the verification of the

facts as on the probability of the particular arrangement of facts and on the credibility of the biographical narrator. (1985: 131-32)

Rivalry among the biographers of Johnson comes to the fore more clearly when Holmes refers to Johnson's earlier biographers, in particular Boswell and Hawkins. Holmes simply notes that: "Sir John Hawkins and Boswell could not understand the friendship of Samuel Johnson and Richard Savage" (2005: 1). Holmes' will for authority is identified in this statement since he considers himself one who could understand their friendship, although Boswell and Hawkins were Johnson's contemporaries. Holmes focuses on this brief period of friendship, which empowers his status as a biographer able to fill an existing gap in Johnson's life writing. Holmes takes the companions' intimacy very seriously: "I have tried to approach this central period of intimacy that so puzzled Hawkins and Boswell from a number of different angles" (2005: 228). In order to achieve this, he uses the most important tool available to a biographer and destroys the picture of Johnson created by Boswell:

We have to reconstruct almost entirely that powerful, domineering, confident figure whom Boswell created in his own biography ... We have to recover a much more shadowy, fraught, and uncertain personality: young Samuel Johnson, failed schoolmaster, provincial poet and desperate Grub Street hack, who signed his letters in 1738 'impransus-supperless.' (2005: 9)

Holmes criticises Boswell for always projecting Johnson as "a venerable father-figure, a moral counsellor detached from passion" (2005: 20). He is aware of Boswell's eminent status as Johnson's biographer, yet he challenges both Johnson and Boswell's positions as influential biographers. While Holmes adopts some features from Johnson's biography, he strongly opposes Boswell's technical and literary approach. He does not use disconnected scenes and conversations in a dramatised way as Boswell does. He narrates Johnson and Savage's companionship by misreading Johnson's biography and filling in one of the gaps in Boswell's *Life*. He highlights the importance of understanding his subject through empathy and uses these particular techniques to dethrone his predecessors' writings on Johnson.

4. Conclusion

Considering the challenges Boswell and Holmes have faced as biographers writing on the same subject, the significance of their unconscious rivalry and anxiety of influence is addressed through their relationship with their subject and other biographers. In Boswell's case, there is an obvious link between his personal relationship with Johnson and his biography as a commemoration of his distinguished friend. Although Boswell finds the ideal figure he is looking for in Johnson, he is also aware of his subject's weaknesses. Yet, as a candidate biographer of Johnson, he holds a strong desire for authority and breaks with the earlier biographies of Hawkins and Thrale (kenosis), but he also produces a counter-sublime by using his particular literary methods (daemonisation) to

surpass his predecessors, including Johnson. He thereby transforms this influence into a creative process to reconstruct Johnson's image as a public self in a unique biographical narrative. Boswell possibly experiences the anxiety of being less original than Johnson in life writing; therefore, he strives to generate a biography with distinctive qualities. He maintains his integrity and literary success by creating a greater Johnson than his contemporary biographers, such as Hawkins and Thrale. A magnified Johnson in his work means a stronger Boswell. His anxiety and rivalry are more clearly disclosed when he defends his literary methods and describes Johnson's character as a learned and humorous man in specific contexts.

Centuries on, Holmes uses his life writing skill and confidence to demonstrate that he understands his subject better than his precursors. Unlike Boswell, he avoids using the pronoun "I" and narrates the story as a father-like or experienced friend who has removed himself from all passions and desires. The third person narrative and his intimate approach create an implicit self-defence method to disguise his will for power with the language of modesty. Holmes not only confronts his subject, but also a great number of biographies written on Johnson. He needs to be original and distinctive in all ways in order to stand out as a successful biographer. In order to achieve this, Holmes chooses one of the most interesting periods of Johnson's life, which other biographers have failed or refused to understand: his friendship with the killer-poet, Richard Savage. He creatively misreads Johnson's biography and attempts to complete a gap in earlier biographies on his life. Using these methods (*clinamen* and *tesserae*, in Bloom's terms), Holmes clears a space for himself to demonstrate his literary skill as a life writer. Although he is unable to entirely avoid the influence of Johnson's biography, he succeeds in maintaining his own literary style. His anxiety about being influenced by Johnson and his will for authority over earlier biographers help him produce a more original work and increases his credibility as a biographer by contributing to the field. In this way not only do human feelings of love and interest, but also rivalry and anxiety, function as a means of progress and development in literary biography across two centuries.

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