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THE TEXT OF JOHNSON'S RASSELAS.

There are two statements of a more or less gossipy character relating to the writing and publishing of Johnson's moralizing tale. Each has come down to us through the usual Boswellian channel, and each has been fully accepted in the past as if Boswell's authority needed no further support. The first, which is said to rest on the report of Mr. Strahan the well-known publisher of the eighteenth century, is to the effect that Johnson wrote *Rasselas* to "defray the expense of his mother's funeral, and pay some little debts which she had left".¹⁾ The second contains three distinct assertions as follows: "He [Johnson] told Sir Joshua Reynolds that he composed it in the evenings of one week, sent it to the press in portions as it was written, and had never since read it over."²⁾

For more than a century both of these statements have borne a charmed life. They have been quoted by every historian of our literature, and have been more or less mangled by every schoolboy in his examination paper upon the Johnsonian period. They are about all that many a reader remembers regarding the book to which they refer. And yet two of the four assertions contained in these statements cannot possibly be true, and I now propose to show that a third probably rests upon equally shaky foundation. I say two of them cannot possibly be true, for a careful examination of his letters is all that is necessary to prove that Johnson did not write *Rasselas* to pay the funeral expenses of his mother, and that he did not send it to the press in portions as it was written. The proofs of this I showed at some length in the

¹⁾ Boswell's *Life of Johnson* edited by Hill, vol. I, p. 340—341.

²⁾ *Ibid.*

introduction to an edition of *Rasselas* printed some four years ago.¹⁾ In the same place some discredit was also reflected on the third assertion above, that Johnson wrote the book in the evenings of one week, since chapter forty-five was not improbably composed after he had heard of his mother's death. The probability of this rests on a significant sentence which is seemingly autobiographical, and on the fact that the whole chapter has no necessary connection with what precedes or follows.

It is, however, with the third assertion of the second statement above that I have primarily to do at this time. If Johnson never read *Rasselas* over after writing it,²⁾ the first edition alone must represent his work, and should be reprinted today as the proper text, after the correction of a few obvious misprints. On the contrary, however, the received text shows a good many slight changes from that of the first edition, most of which can scarcely be accounted for on the supposition that they have been inadvertently made. The character of these will be clear from the following pages, but I may here note that three of them are in chapter headings, while others include the omission or introduction of whole clauses and such other changes in words and phrases as no one would be so likely to make as the author himself. Now these changes, or the great majority at least, were made in the second edition of *Rasselas*, which appeared in the same year as the first and within a few months thereafter.

Before continuing the discussion, it seems best to place in tabular form the results of a close comparison of the first and second editions, so that the number and nature of the changes may be easily seen. The pages and lines at the left refer to my own reprint of the first edition already mentioned, while the chapter numbers will make it possible to compare with any copy of the book. I also add, at the right, the readings of the Oxford edition of 1825 where they differ from those of the first or second.

¹⁾ *The History of Rasselas*. New York. Henry Holt & Co. 1895.

²⁾ Account need not now be taken of Johnson's meeting the book within two or three years of his death, and eagerly reading it as he journeyed in a coach. Boswell's *Johnson* (Hill) vol. IV, p. 119.

Chapter, page, and line	First Edition	Second Edition	Oxford Edition
I, 1 : 13	he was confined	Rasselas was confined	to which those only
3 : 15	to which these only	joined by a cement	
3 : 30	joined with a cement	a long race of monarchs had	
4 : 11	successive monarchs reposit- their treasure	reposit their treasure	
II, 5 : 28	neglected their endeavours	neglected their officiousness	
6 : 32	Man has surely		Man surely has
7 : 8	burthened with myself		burdened with myself
III, 8 : 28	danger can procure	danger can procure or purchase	
IV, 11 : 21	and run forward		and ran forward
12 : 25	but without remorse	yet without remorse	
VI, 15 : 23	the rivulet that run	having seen	the rivulet that ran
16 : 17	and having seen	therefore I suspect	
18 : 1	and I suspect	many ingenious contrivances	
19 : 7	the ingenious contrivances	Imlac rehearsed	
VII, 20 : 17	Imlac recited		

Chapter, page, and line	First Edition	Second Edition	Oxford Edition
VIII, 22 : 7	honest gains for fear of losing by the rapacity	honest gains for fear of losing them by the rapacity	
IX, 25 : 19	With this hope	With this thought	
26 : 16	by warning you as betraying you	by warning as betraying you	
26 : 21	because they thought me rich	because they grieved to think me rich	
28 : 4	flocks and herbs	flocks and herds	
X, 28 : 13	And it yet		And yet it
28 : 20	or whether the province of poetry is to describe nature and passion, which are al- ways the same, and the first writers	or whether, as the province of poetry is to describe nature and passion, which are al- ways the same, the first writers	
31 : 9	successive generations	future generations	
31 : 11	[No paragraph at "His labor"]	[Paragraph at "His labor"]	
XI, 31 : 22	Proceed now with	Proceed with	

Chapter, page, and line	First Edition	Second Edition	Oxford Edition
33 : 20 XII, 38 : 13	the places where great actions with the recollection of the accidents	the fields where great actions by recollection of the accidents	
39 : 13 XIII, 42 : 16	my whole heart, that I have They returned to their labour and solaced their labour	my whole heart. I have They returned to their work and solaced their toil	
43 : 5 XIV, 43 : 14	I had often observed	I had long observed	
47 : 24 XVI, 47 : 24	served by her favourite	served by her favourite, Pekuah	
49 : 25 XVII, 52 : 13	beings of an higher most dreadful of all evils not to count their past years but by follies	beings of a higher most dreadful of all evils to count their past years by follies	
56 : 8 XIX, 56 : 8	Their way lay through fields	Their way lay through the fields	
60 : 28 XXI, 60 : 28	disgusted by the preferment of a younger officer and find- ing my vigour	disgusted by the preferments of a younger officer and feeling that my vigour	disgusted by the preferment etc. [as in second]
61 : 18	the practice of virtue	the exercise of virtue	

Chapter, page, and line	First Edition	Second Edition	Oxford Edition
XXII, 62 : 23	pronounced him an hypocrite	said he	pronounced him a hypocrite
63 : 5	says he	to think that there is	
XXIV, 66 : 19	to think there is	he found that almost every man who stood high	
66 : 26	he found that almost every man that stood high	some fury that destroys its quiet	some fury that destroys their quiet.
XXV, 69 : 10	some fiend that destroys its quiet	The good and evil	
XXVI, 71 : 26	The good and the evil	I am alternately effected by one and	anxiety by the caprice
72 : 3	anxiety to the caprice	interrupted them. "Imlac", said Rasselas	
XXVIII, 77 : 30	I am affected by one or	require attention and deserve it the revolutions	
XXX, 83 : 3	interrupted them. His look was clouded with thought. "Im- lac", said Rasselas		
84 : 1	necessarily require attention and sufficiently deserve it		
85 : 4	all the revolutions		

Chapter, page, and line	First Edition	Second Edition	Oxford Edition
XXXI, 87 : 10	shut us up forever	shut us in forever	
XXXII, 90 : 8	successive gratifications	perpetual gratifications	
XXXIII, 91 : 10	beasts of burthen	beasts of burden	
XXXV, (title)	The Princess continues to lament Pekuah	The Princess languishes for want of Pekuah	
95 : 5	treasured up with care	treasured with care	treasured up with care
97 : 5	communicated. Goodness	communicated; they must therefore be imparted to others, and to whom could I now delight to impart them. Goodness	
97 : 21	day never would return		day would never return
XXXVI, (title)	Pekuah is still remembered by the Princess	Pekuah is still remembered. The Progress of Sorrow	
XXXVII, 100 : 24	the Arab	the rover	
101 : 14	to their place appointed where he received the stipulated price, and with great respect restored her	to their place appointed where, receiving the stipulated price, he restored her with great respect	the place etc. [as in second]

Chapter, page, and line	First Edition	Second Edition	Oxford Edition
XXXVIII, 102 : 22	looked up to me	looked on me	and I ate rather
108 : 17	and I eat it rather	could learn reverence or pity	
104 : 29	could have learned to spare	you shall rest after your journey	a few weeks
XXXIX, 107 : 14	you shall rest a few weeks after your journey	on the richest couch	
107 : 21	in the place of honour	are common	
108 : 3	were common	could receive solace from silken flowers	
109 : 24	could be much solaced by silken flowers	listen without	
110 : 6	listen long without	I was at first, great Princess	
XL, 114 : 9	I was at first, madam	I had quickly reason	
114 : 17	I had always reason	He would often send	
114 : 23	He would sometimes send	The opinion of the Astronomer is explained and justified	
XLII, (title)	The Astronomer justifies his Account of himself		

Chapter, page, and line	First Edition	Second Edition	Oxford Edition
XLV, 124 : 29 125 : 19	mind is burthened who enjoy themselves no longer than they can since nothing else is offered		mind is burdened who enjoyed themselves no longer than they could since nothing else offers
XLVII, 135 : 27	immateriality of the mind	immateriality of mind	
XLVIII, 137 : 21 139 : 32	from a higer nature	from a superior nature	
140 : 1	cause or principle of corruption may be collected from	cause of decay or principle of corruption may be shown by	
140 : 10	he shall never die		he should never die

There were three typographical errors in the first edition, *these* for *those*, Chap. I. (3 : 15); *herbs* for *herds*, Chap. IX (28 : 4); and *their* for *the*, Chap. XXXVII (101 : 14). Of these the first and third were perpetuated in the second edition, while one other was added in the latter, — *comes* for *becomes*, Chap. XLIV (102 : 17). Besides these, chapter thirty-nine was wrongly numbered thirty-eight in the first edition, and this was also repeated in the second.

Analysis of the collation above shows these significant facts. In the second edition of *Rasselas* there are some sixty, or exactly sixty-one, variations of the text of the first edition. Some of these are very slight in character it is true, and a few might be accounted for as merely inadvertent changes, as of the printer. Most of the alterations, however, are more considerable, and consist in choice of significant word, turn of important phrase, and better construction of sentence. As already mentioned, three chapter headings are materially altered, while one sentence is omitted entirely, and one new one added. If we go no further, all must admit that such changes, and so many of them in a single issue, are far more likely to have been made by the author himself than by anyone else. Many, no doubt, will not hesitate to believe with the writer that they prove, so far as circumstantial evidence can do so, that Johnson himself revised the second edition of the book, even though this conclusion is at variance with the oft-repeated tradition.

There is perhaps one way of reconciling such revision of *Rasselas* with the report of Sir Joshua Reynolds. The second edition is known to have followed close upon the first, and the book was frequently reprinted thereafter. It may be, therefore, that in later years Johnson himself associated the two issues so closely in his mind as to have made the statement which Sir Joshua later repeated to Boswell; or, Sir Joshua may have been the one who confused two issues of the book. Be that as it may, it is far easier to account for the somewhat erroneous statement attributed to Johnson's friend, than to explain the changes noted above on any other supposition than that they were made by Johnson himself.

There is no evidence that Johnson made any further alterations in *Rasselas* as it passed through subsequent editions. The few differences in later issues are easily explained. A comparison with the Oxford edition of 1825 shows that the changes up to that time are of the simplest character, and with one or two exceptions fall under three heads. The first is a slight change in word order, as of *has surely* to *surely has*. The second is the substitution of a modern for an older form, as *a* for *an* before a word beginning with *h*; the preterites *ran*, *ate* for *run*, *eat*; the newer *burden* for *burthen*. The third

is a change of tense, as of past for present when dependent on a past tense. Most variations from the second edition are thus due to changes in the language itself, rather than to intention on the part of any editor.

In conclusion it may be emphasized, that not one of the traditions concerning *Rasselas* which has been handed down by Boswell does not need some modification, while one or two of them cannot be relied upon at all. The errors are not considerable in some cases, yet each assertion of the self-satisfied biographer may be shown to belong, not wholly to the realm of fact, but rather to the legendary lore which readily springs up about the life of a famous man. Among the most certain corrections which must be made to the Johnson legend, as it may be called, is that Johnson did revise *Rasselas*, and did make in the second edition a considerable number of more or less significant changes.

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