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Samuel Johnson and the Art of Sinking 1709-1791

Freya Johnston

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The traditional view of Samuel Johnson as hostile to particulars, trifles, and aesthetic mediocrity only half-explains his authorial character. *Samuel Johnson and the Art of Sinking 1709-1791* argues that, in a period dominated by social and literary hierarchies, Johnson's works reveal a defining interest in "little," "mean," or "low" topics and people.

Freya Johnston moves away from a critical emphasis on what literature of this period excludes, to consider its modes of including recalcitrant material. Of necessity finite, any piece of writing is informed by the subject matter it omits or to which it indirectly alludes. How can we identify the peripheral topics or characters purportedly "excluded" from a text, unless it provides compelling inferences that oblige us to supply the omission? In which case, something subtler is at work than barefaced proscription.

Rehearsing the comparative merits of great and little things, Johnson and his contemporaries tested the opposing claims of pagan and Christian authority. Ancient criticism, and its eighteenth-century adherents, held that each subject required an appropriate style: little matters call for the low, lofty ones for the high. Yet Gospel writers stressed Christ's incarnation as a praiseworthy and imitable descent to the humanly little--one that is compatible with the most sublime style.

Through a series of close readings, this book examines how Johnson conceived of his relationships to and with the margins of writing and of society. It proposes that his literary and critical practice is neither inclusive nor exclusive in its attitudes towards peripheral things.

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