

SAMUEL JOHNSON-  
*LONDON*(1738)

- “imitations” of classical poems were popular in English for about eighty years from the 1680s till past the midpoint of the eighteenth century.
- Juvenal’s Third Satire had earlier been adapted in an English “imitation” by John Oldham in 1682; it had also been translated into English by John Dryden in 1693.
- Juvenal’s poem subsequently also inspired Samuel Derrick’s *The Third Satire of Juvenal*, translated into English verse (1755) and Edward Burnaby Greene’s *The Satires of Juvenal Paraphrastically Imitated*, and adapted to the Times (1763).
- In discussing modern “imitations” of ancient poetry in his “Life of Pope” (1781), Johnson himself argues that “between Roman images and English manners there will be an irreconcilable dissimilitude, and the work will be generally uncouth and party-coloured; neither original nor translated, neither ancient nor modern.”
- More generally, “what was preeminently a social satire expressing disgust with the inequalities, the follies and the rottenness of city life, and exalting by contrast the conditions which are surmised to prevail in the country, becomes in Johnson’s hands largely a political satire. His antipathy to Walpole’s administration is given free scope in the allusions to [pusillanimity in the face of Spanish depredations,] excise, the abuse of pensions, the tyranny of the licensing laws, and the servitude of a thoughtless age. . . . London could be regarded by the ‘patriots’ as a political manifesto.

## London

(A Poem in Imitation of the Third Satire of Juvenal.)

Quis ineptæ

Tam patiens urbis, tam ferreus ut teneat se?

---- Juvenal

[Epigraph] “Who can endure this monstrous city? Who is so iron-willed he can bear it?”

Tho’ grief and fondness in my breast rebel,  
When injur’d Thales bids the town farewell,  
Yet still my calmer thoughts his choice commend,  
I praise the hermit, but regret the friend,  
Who now resolves, from vice and London far,  
To breathe in distant fields a purer air,  
And, fix’d on Cambria’s solitary shore, [Ancient name for Wales; “St. David” is the patron saint  
Give to St. David one true Briton more. of Wales]

For who would leave, unbrib’d, Hibernia’s land, [Ireland]  
Or change the rocks of Scotland for the Strand? [Street in England]  
There none are swept by sudden fate away,  
But all whom hunger spares, with age decay:  
Here malice, rapine, accident, conspire,  
And now a rabble rages, now a fire;

Their ambush here relentless ruffians lay,  
And here the fell attorney prowls for prey;  
Here falling houses thunder on your head,  
And here a female atheist talks you dead.

While Thales waits the wherry that contains [A narrow river vessel.]  
Of dissipated wealth the small remains,  
On Thames's banks, in silent thought we stood,  
Where Greenwich smiles upon the silver flood: [Johnson was lodging at Greenwich when he wrote the poem.]

Struck with the seat that gave Eliza birth, [Queen Elizabeth born at Greenwich]  
We kneel, and kiss the consecrated earth;  
In pleasing dreams the blissful age renew,  
And call Britannia's glories back to view;  
Behold her cross triumphant on the main, [England's flag, the red cross of St. George.]  
The guard of commerce, and the dread of Spain,  
Ere masquerades debauch'd, excise oppress'd,  
Or English honour grew a standing jest.

Line 30 English honour grew a standing jest] "An allusion to the peaceful policies of the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Walpole. His opponents [in the "patriot" opposition (cf. line 52)] called them cowardly" [Brady]; Walpole's "alleged failure to protect British merchant ships from depredations by Spanish coast guards" was a standard topic of Opposition rhetoric [Greene].

A transient calm the happy scenes bestow,  
And for a moment lull the sense of woe.  
At length awaking, with contemptuous frown,  
Indignant Thales eyes the neighb'ring town. [indignant=feeling or showing anger or annoyance  
at what is perceived as unfair treatment.]

Since worth, he cries, in these degen'rate days,  
Wants ev'n the cheap reward of empty praise;  
In those curs'd walls, devote to vice and gain,  
Since unrewarded science toils in vain;  
Since hope but soothes to double my distress,  
And ev'ry moment leaves my little less;  
While yet my stiddy steps no staff sustains,  
And life still vig'rous revels in my veins;  
Grant me, kind heaven, to find some happier place,  
Where honesty and sense are no disgrace;  
Some pleasing bank where verdant(bright green) osiers play, [osiers=willows; a tree or shrub]  
Some peaceful vale with nature's paintings gay;  
Where once the harass'd Briton found repose,  
And safe in poverty defy'd his foes;  
Some secret cell, ye pow'rs, indulgent give.  
Let —— live here, for —— has learn'd to live. \*\*  
Here let those reign, whom pensions can incite

To vote a patriot black, a courtier white;  
Explain their country's dear-bought rights away,  
And plead for pirates in the face of day;  
With slavish tenets taint our poison'd youth,  
And lend a lye the confidence of truth.

The invasions of the Spaniards were defended in the houses of Parliament”  
[Johnson's note, printed in 1787]. “The Parliamentary Opposition denounced Walpole's policy of allowing the Spanish to stop and search all ships trading with their American colonies”.  
The **War of Jenkins' Ear** (known as *Guerra del Asiento* in Spain) was a conflict between Britain and Spain lasting from 1739 to 1748, mainly in New Granada and among the West Indies of the Caribbean Sea, with major operations largely ended by 1742. Its name, coined by British historian Thomas Carlyle in 1858, refers to Robert Jenkins, a captain of a British merchant ship, whose ear was cut off by Spanish sailors when they boarded his ship at a time of peace.

Let such raise palaces, and manors buy,  
Collect a tax, or farm a lottery,  
With warbling eunuchs fill a licens'd stage,  
And lull to servitude a thoughtless age.

“Tax collecting and ‘farming’ a lottery (paying a fixed amount to the government to conduct a lottery and keeping the proceeds) were often highly profitable activities”.

Heroes, proceed! what bounds your pride shall hold?  
What check restrain your thirst of pow'r and gold?  
Behold rebellious virtue quite o'erthrown,  
Behold our fame, our wealth, our lives your own.

To such, a groaning nation's spoils are giv'n,  
When publick crimes inflame the wrath of heav'n:  
But what, my friend, what hope remains for me,  
Who start at theft, and blush at perjury?  
Who scarce forbear, tho' Britain's Court he sing,  
To pluck a titled poet's borrow'd wing;  
A statesman's logick unconvinc'd can hear,

And dare to slumber o'er the Gazetteer; [The Daily Gazetteer, est. in 1735, was funded by the  
ministry. It contained apologies for the Govt.]

Despise a fool in half his pension dress'd,  
And strive in vain to laugh at H—y's jest. [probably stands for “the Revd John ‘Orator’ Henley, a  
public buffoon and a supporter of Walpole”. ]

Others with softer smiles, and subtler art,  
Can sap the principles, or taint the heart;  
With more address a lover's note convey,  
Or bribe a virgin's innocence away.

Well may they rise, while I, whose rustick tongue  
Ne'er knew to puzzle right, or varnish wrong.  
Spurn'd as a begger, dreaded as a spy,  
Live unregarded, unlamented die.

For what but social guilt the friend endears?  
Who shares Orgilio's crimes, his fortune shares.  
But thou, should tempting villainy present  
All **Marlb'rough** hoarded, or all Villiers spent;

[The great general, John Churchill, first Duke of Marlborough (1650-1722), made an immense financial profit during his campaigns against the French in the War of the Spanish Succession (1702-11)]

Turn from the glitt'ring bribe thy scornful eye,  
Nor sell for gold, what gold could never buy,  
The peaceful slumber, self-approving day,  
Unsullied fame, and conscience ever gay.

The cheated nation's happy fav'rites, see!  
Mark whom the great caress, who frown on me!  
London! the needy villain's gen'ral home,  
The common **shore** of Paris and of Rome;  
With eager thirst, by folly or by fate,  
**Sucks in the dregs of each corrupted state.**  
Forgive my transports on a theme like this,  
I cannot bear a French metropolis.

[i.e., "a London whose customs imitate French ones"]



Illustrious **Edward!** from the realms of day, -→(i.e. heaven)

The land of heroes and of saints survey;

Nor hope the British lineaments to trace, [lineaments=a distinctive feature or characteristic, especially of the face.]

The rustick grandeur, or the surly grace; [surly=bad-tempered and unfriendly]

But lost in thoughtless ease, and empty show,

Behold the warrior dwindled to a beau; [beau=a rich, fashionable young man; a dandy.]

Sense, freedom, piety, refin'd away,

Of France the mimic, and of Spain the prey.

All that at home no more can beg or steal,

Or like **a gibbet better than a wheel**;

Hiss'd from the stage, or hooted from the court,

Their air, their dress, their politicks import;

**Obsequious**, artful, voluble and gay, [obedient or attentive to an excessive or servile degree.]

On Britain's fond **credulity** they prey. [a tendency to be too ready to believe that something is real or true.]

No gainful trade their industry can 'scape,

They sing, they dance, clean shoes, or cure a clap; [Gonorrhea, or "the clap," ]

All sciences a fasting Monsieur knows,

And bid him go to hell, to hell he goes.

Ah! what avails it, that, from slav'ry far,  
I drew the breath of life in English air;  
Was early taught a Briton's right to prize,  
And lisp the tale of Henry's victories; [Henry V (1386 – 1422), also called Henry of Monmouth,]  
If the gull'd conqueror receives the chain,  
And flattery subdues when arms are vain?

Studious to please, and ready to submit,  
The **supple** Gaul was born a parasite: [bending and moving easily and gracefully; flexible]  
Still to his int'rest true, where'er he goes,  
Wit, brav'ry, worth, his lavish tongue bestows;  
In ev'ry face a thousand graces shine,  
From ev'ry tongue flows harmony divine.  
These arts in vain our rugged natives try,  
Strain out with fault'ring **diffidence** a lye, [modesty or shyness resulting from a lack of self-  
And gain a kick for aukward flattery. confidence.]

Besides, with justice, this discerning age  
Admires their wond'rous talents for the stage:  
Well may they venture on the mimick's art,  
Who play from morn to night a borrow'd part;  
Practis'd their master's notions to embrace,  
Repeat his **maxims**, and reflect his face; [a short, pithy statement expressing a general truth or rule of conduct.]

With ev'ry wild absurdity comply,  
And view each object with another's eye;  
To shake with laughter ere the jest they hear,  
To pour at will the counterfeited tear;  
And as their patron hints the cold or heat,  
To shake in **dog-days**, in December sweat. [A/C Romans and Greeks, the hot, sultry days of summer.]

How, when competitors like these contend,  
Can **surly** virtue hope to fix a friend? [bad-tempered and unfriendly.]  
Slaves that with serious **impudence** **beguile**, [lack of respect; rudeness.] [charm or enchant (someone), often in a deceptive way.]

And lye without a blush, without a smile;  
Exalt each trifle, ev'ry vice adore,  
Your taste in snuff, your judgment in a whore;  
Can **Balbo's** eloquence applaud, and swear [Italian for 'stutterer']  
He gropes his breeches with a monarch's air.

For arts like these preferr'd, admir'd, caress'd,  
They first invade your table, then your breast;  
Explore your secrets with **insidious art**,  
Watch the weak hour, and ransack all the heart;  
Then soon your ill-plac'd confidence repay,  
Commence your lords, and govern or betray.

(sleathily)

By numbers here from shame or censure free,  
All crimes are safe, but hated poverty.  
This, only this, the rigid law pursues,  
This, only this, provokes the **snarling** muse;  
The sober trader at a tatter'd cloak,  
Wakes from his dream, and labours for a joke;  
With brisker air the silken courtiers gaze,  
And turn the varied taunt a thousand ways.  
Of all the griefs that harrass the distress'd,  
Sure the most bitter is a scornful jest;  
Fate never wounds more deep the gen'rous heart,  
Than when a blockhead's insult points the dart.

(growling)

(i.e they taunt them in 1000 ways)

Has heaven reserv'd, in pity to the poor,  
No pathless waste, or undiscover'd shore;  
No secret island in the boundless main?  
No peaceful desert yet unclaim'd by Spain?  
Quick let us rise, the happy seats explore,  
And bear oppression's insolence no more.  
This mournful truth is ev'ry where confess'd,  
SLOW RISES WORTH, BY POVERTY DEPRESS'D:  
But here more slow, where all are slaves to gold,  
Where looks are merchandise, and smiles are sold,  
Where won by bribes, by flatteries implor'd,  
The groom **retails** the favours of his lord.

{relate or repeat (a story) in detail}

But hark! th' affrighted crowd's tumultuous cries  
Roll thro' the streets, and thunder to the skies;  
Rais'd from some pleasing dream of wealth and pow'r,  
Some pompous palace, or some blissful bow'r,  
Aghast you start, and scarce with aking sight,  
Sustain th' approaching fire's tremendous light;  
Swift from pursuing horrors take your way,  
And leave your little all to flames a prey;  
Then thro' the world a wretched vagrant roam,  
For where can starving merit find a home?  
In vain your mournful narrative disclose,  
While all neglect, and most insult your woes.

Should heaven's just bolts Orgilio's wealth confound,  
And spread his flaming palace on the ground,  
Swift o'er the land the dismal rumour flies,  
And publick mournings pacify the skies;  
The laureat tribe in **servile** verse relate,  
How virtue wars with persecuting fate;  
With well-feign'd gratitude the pension'd band  
Refund the plunder of the begger'd land.

(of or characteristic of a slave or slaves)

See! while he builds, the gaudy vassals come,  
And crowd with sudden wealth the rising dome;  
**The price of boroughs and of souls restore,**  
And raise his treasures higher than before.  
Now bless'd with all the **baubles** of the great,  
The polish'd marble, and the shining plate,  
Orgilio sees the golden pile aspire,  
And hopes from angry heav'n another fire.

(a small, showy trinket or decoration)

**Could'st thou resign the park and play content,**  
For the fair banks of Severn or of Trent;  
There might'st thou find some elegant retreat,  
Some **hireling** senator's deserted seat;  
And stretch thy prospects o'er the smiling land,  
For less than rent the dungeons of the Strand;  
There **prune** thy walks, support thy drooping flow'rs,  
Direct thy rivulets, and **twine** thy bow'rs;

(\*\*)

(a person employed to do menial work)

(cut away what is unwanted or superfluous

(interlace)

And, while thy beds a cheap repast afford,  
Despise the **dainties** of a venal lord:  
There ev'ry bush with nature's musick rings,  
There ev'ry breeze bears health upon its wings;  
On all thy hours security shall smile,  
And bless thine evening walk and morning toil.

(something choice or pleasing)

Prepare for death, if here at night you roam,  
And sign your will before you sup from home.  
Some fiery **fop**, with new commission vain,  
Who **sleeps on brambles** till he kills his man;  
Some **frollick** drunkard, reeling from a feast,  
Provokes a broil, and stabs you for a jest.  
Yet ev'n these heroes, mischievously gay,  
Lords of the street, and terrors of the way;  
Flush'd as they are with folly, youth and wine,  
Their prudent insults to the poor confine;  
Afar they mark **the flambeau's bright approach**,  
And shun the shining train, and golden coach.

(a dandy)

(sleeps uneasily as on thorns)

(the Dutch word vroolijk ("merry"))

In vain, these dangers past, your doors you close,  
And hope the balmy blessings of repose:  
Cruel with guilt, and daring with despair,  
The midnight murd'rer bursts the faithless bar;

Invades the sacred hour of silent rest,  
And plants, unseen, a dagger in your breast.

Scarce can our fields, such crowds at Tyburn die,  
With hemp the gallows and the fleet supply.  
Propose your schemes, ye Senatorian band,  
Whose Ways and Means support the sinking land;  
Lest ropes be wanting in the tempting spring,  
To rig another convoy for the k—g.

A single jail, in Alfred's golden reign,  
Could half the nation's criminals contain;  
Fair justice then, without constraint ador'd,  
Held high the steady scale, but drop'd the sword;  
No spies were paid, no special juries known,  
Blest age! but ah! how diff'rent from our own!

Much could I add,—but see the boat at hand,  
The tide retiring, calls me from the land:  
Farewel!—When youth, and health, and fortune spent,  
Thou fly'st for refuge to the wilds of Kent;  
And tir'd like me with follies and with crimes,  
In angry numbers warn'st succeeding times;



Then shall thy friend, nor thou refuse his aid,  
Still foe to vice forsake his Cambrian shade;  
In virtue's cause once more exert his rage,  
Thy satire point, and animate thy page