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Three Contexts for Reading Johnson's Parliamentary Debates

Thomas Kaminski

JOHNSON WROTE THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES in the *Gentleman's Magazine* from July 1741 to March 1744. These were years of considerable political and historical turmoil. In 1739 the clamors of the nation's merchants and the incessant attacks of the "Patriot" opposition had forced Sir Robert Walpole to go to war with Spain over that nation's attempts to restrict British trade to the West Indies. But Walpole was no war minister, and things had gone badly. During Johnson's tenure as a debate writer, a British army would suffer a humiliating defeat at Cartagena in Spanish America. The nation would be thrust into a second war—this time on the Continent—as the death of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles VI precipitated the War of the Austrian Succession. Here, too, the Walpole ministry would prove itself indecisive or incompetent. As a result, Walpole would fall from power and his old enemies seek to prosecute him for corruption—and fail in their attempts. Lord Carteret, who had been among Walpole's fiercest opponents, would succeed him as the dominant figure in the new administration, only to find himself, within a year, as hated as his predecessor.

All of these events were of immediate interest to Parliament, and all occupied Johnson's attention as the reporter of the debates. But the debates themselves are complex documents. They provide accounts of real events, but accounts based on information of uncertain reliability and tricked out in rhetorical finery that Johnson thought suitable to the dignity of a national legislature. For modern readers, who generally lack any context for reading Johnson's debates, they are likely to be reduced to a series of rhetorical flourishes—one speaker's passionate attack on a supposedly corrupt ministry, another's dignified defense of the government's programs, and so forth. The purpose of this essay is to provide three contexts for reading Johnson's debates. The first section of the essay focuses on their immediate parliamentary context and considers the accuracy of the debates as historical documents. The second compares Johnson's debates with the rival series being published concurrently in the *London Magazine*. The third considers the debates in terms of the broader historical and political background. My goals in all three portions of this essay, though, are limited: I shall not attempt to

show what Johnson has to teach us about Parliament or journalism or history, but what some knowledge of these matters can tell us about how to read Johnson's debates.



I shall begin with the debates' authenticity, the extent to which Johnson captured the actions, the arguments, and the expressions of those who spoke on the floor of the Lords or the Commons. This matter has long been obscured by Johnson's own reflections on the project, for a mere few days before his death, he spoke disparagingly of the debates to John Nichols: "He said, that the Parliamentary Debates were the only part of his writings which then gave him any compunction: but that at the time he wrote them, he had no conception he was imposing upon the world, though they were frequently written from very slender materials, and often from none at all,—the mere coinage of his own imagination."¹ If we take Johnson at his word, we should expect little correspondence between the reports of the debates in the magazine and the fragmentary historical record of the actual events, but that is not the case. The debates have a better grounding in fact than Johnson's rigorous adherence to truth or the anxiety arising from his approaching death allowed him to admit. Sir John Hawkins, who is perhaps the best informed of Johnson's biographers on the subject, tells us that Edward Cave, the publisher of the *Gentleman's Magazine*, attended the debates with some associates, took notes when possible, and then adjourned to a tavern where the small group of conspirators attempted to reconstruct what they had seen and heard, especially the names and the order of the speakers, the arguments made by each, and perhaps even some memorable phrases.² At the time it was illegal to report parliamentary information of any sort, so Cave and his associates were forced to act with discretion. Taking notes, for instance, was not permitted in the gallery of either House. Afterward Cave provided the materials he had assembled to his hired author, first William Guthrie, then Johnson, and finally John Hawkesworth. When we compare Johnson's debates with eyewitness accounts that have survived, we find that Cave's information was sketchy in some instances, but surprisingly complete in others.

The question of the debates' accuracy and authenticity has in fact received significant scholarly attention. Benjamin Hoover devoted nearly half of his book *Samuel Johnson's Parliamentary Reporting* to an analysis of the factual basis for the debates, and I have offered a briefer treatment in the introduction to the new edition of the *Debates* in the *Yale Edition* of Johnson's works.³ Rather than reproduce that

1. Nichols's conversation with Johnson is quoted in *Boswell's Life of Samuel Johnson, Together with Boswell's Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides and Johnson's Diary of a Journey into North Wales*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, rev. L. F. Powell, 6 vols. (Oxford, 1934–50), 4:408–9 (hereafter cited as *Life*).

2. Sir John Hawkins, *Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, 2nd ed. (London, 1787), 94–96.

3. See Benjamin B. Hoover, *Samuel Johnson's Parliamentary Reporting* (Berkeley, Calif., 1953), 55–130; and Johnson, *Debates in Parliament*, vols. 11–13 of *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson* (hereafter cited as *Debates*), ed. Thomas Kaminski, Benjamin B. Hoover, and O M Brack Jr. (New Haven, Conn., 2012), 11:xxvii–xxxii. Text references are to this edition.

work here, let me summarize the basic findings but then elaborate on several aspects of Johnson's practice.

First, there is no evidence that Johnson ever wrote a debate without significant information provided by Cave. For a number of debates we have collateral materials in the form of notes, diaries, and letters written by persons who attended or participated in the debates. The most important and extensive of these are Bishop Thomas Secker's notes. As bishop of Oxford, Secker sat in the Lords, and his record of the debates offers a substantial and detailed account of who spoke and what each person said. When Johnson's debates are compared with Secker's notes, we often find extensive overlaps between the two. Johnson's accounts generally capture only a portion of the material Secker preserved, but they often include the most important arguments and sometimes echo individual phrases. Similarly, Secker often lists more speakers than Johnson can accommodate, but Johnson usually places his selected speakers in the proper order. At times, though, a comparison with Secker reveals the dearth of Johnson's information. Some of his speeches clearly have no basis in fact, and others are liable to elaborate an idea or argument differently from what we find in the bishop's record. But for a debate like that on the indemnity bill, an attempt to indemnify from prosecution anyone who would give evidence against Walpole after his fall, it is clear that Johnson worked from a remarkable amount of reliable information. In a debate that fills seventy-five pages in the *Yale Edition*, we find more than fifty passages where Johnson's text echoes some idea, argument, or phrase preserved in Secker's notes and attributes that material to the appropriate speaker. In Lord Hervey's speech alone, there are thirteen correspondences in eight pages of text.⁴ Although the rhetoric throughout is wholly Johnson's, the debate itself is firmly anchored in the events and the arguments of the day.

The debates are not all as faithful as that on the indemnity bill, but in every case for which we have independent historical records, those records confirm various aspects of Johnson's account. From this it seems safe to conclude that none of the debates was in fact the mere coinage of his imagination; he always worked from notes. By examining those debates for which we have substantial information, we can also draw some inferences about his overall practice.

First, Johnson does not appear to make up examples or tell anecdotes on his own authority. In a speech in support of the indemnity bill, for example, Johnson has the Duke of Argyll tell of an attempt by his political enemies to prosecute him using a false witness who had been bribed and granted immunity for his own previous crimes.

4. In Johnson's debates, the speakers appeared in "Lilliputian" disguise, with Lord Hervey actually styled the Hurgo Heryef. Because it was illegal to publish debates, each magazine adopted a ruse to avoid prosecution. The *London Magazine* (hereafter cited as *LM*) claimed that its reports were merely the debates of a Political Club and hid the identity of its speakers behind classical names. Cave, on the other hand, loosely adapted the terminology of *Gulliver's Travels*, with Britain renamed "Lilliput" and France, "Blefuscu." Other names were anagrams or travesties, so that Walpole became "Walelop" and Chesterfield "Castroflet." Since the Lilliputian disguise is not on the whole relevant to this essay, I employ the speakers' real names throughout.

The anecdote corresponds closely with the duke's own story as Secker recorded it (*Debates*, 12:957–58, 958n9). In the debate on the spirituous liquors bill—the attempt to replace a high-but-unenforceable tax on gin with a lower tax that could be collected more efficiently—Johnson's Chesterfield argues against the new law on the grounds that the lower levy will encourage rather than discourage drunkenness. When the law's proponents retort that the amount of the tax could be raised over time, resulting in a gradual decrease in the consumption of gin, Chesterfield tells the story of a certain Webb, known for his abstemious regimen, who had counseled a friend to forgo wine. The friend replied that he would attempt to do so by degrees: “By degrees, says [Webb] with indignation, if you should unhappily fall into the fire, would you caution your servants not to pull you out but by degrees?” In a truncated note Secker verifies the story: “It is said, raise it by degrees. If you should fall into the fire, would you bid your servant pull you out by degrees?” (*Debates*, 13:1410 and n4).⁵ Whenever we encounter an anecdote or illustrative tale of this kind, if collateral evidence is available, we can expect to find the anecdote in that material. Johnson did not invent such stories or supply them from his own experience.

The same is true of some of the more surprising, or less compelling, arguments that appear in the debates. In a speech against the indemnity bill, Lord Hervey suggests that criminals of all sorts will abuse the offer of immunity: “housebreakers, highwaymen, and pickpockets, will come up in crowds to the bar, charge the Earl of [Orford] as their accomplice, and plead this bill as a security against all enquiry.”⁶ He then offers an example:

A man whom the consciousness of murder has for some time kept in continual terrors, may clear himself for ever, by alleging, that he was commissioned by the [Earl of Orford], to engage, with any certain sum, the vote or interest of the murdered person; that he took the opportunity of a solitary place to offer him the bribe, . . . but that finding him obstinate and perverse, filled with prejudices against a wise and just administration, . . . he could no longer restrain the ardour of his loyalty, but thought it proper to remove from the world a man so much inclined to spread sedition among the people, and that therefore finding the place convenient, he suddenly rush'd upon him, and cut his throat.

Here, if anywhere, Johnson might appear to be indulging his imagination: he had run out of sense, and so Lord Hervey was made to talk nonsense. But Secker quickly dispels that notion. He records the following from Hervey's speech: “If any person can interweave a confession of his own crime with an accusation of the person mentioned in the Bill, he is safe, provided any question leads at all to such a confession. So that to confess

5. Although Secker does not mention Webb, the account in the *LM* confirms this part of the story.

6. Here and in all subsequent quotations, the Lilliputian terms are replaced with their proper names set in brackets.

his own guilt would be all a man would aim at in his answer. ‘Did lord Orford give 5 guineas at such an election?’ ‘Yes, for I saw the man take it, and I murdered him’” (*Debates*, 12:944–45, 945n7). The argument is undoubtedly Hervey’s, with some elaboration by Johnson. This is typical: the more eccentric or surprising the argument, the more likely we are to find it in the collateral records. In debates for which we have no such records, then, we should be wary of attributing such arguments to Johnson. In the debate on the seamen’s bill (January 27 to March 23, 1741), William Pulteney suggests that charity-school boys could provide a permanent supply of future seamen for the navy if they were sent to sea at an early age. Nowhere does Johnson force proposals of this sort on his speakers. We should presume the plan to be Pulteney’s rather than Johnson’s (*Debates*, 11:274–75, 275n7).⁷

Finally, Johnson does not use Latin phrases or cite classical examples without some sanction from the speakers themselves. In a speech opposing the indemnity bill, Johnson’s Carteret uses three Latin phrases: before a man can be accused, he asserts, there must be “a *corpus delicti*, a crime really and visibly committed” (12:925); speaking of what we would call “due process,” he notes that “*rectum recte, legitimum legitime faciendum*”—that is, right must be done properly and the lawful lawfully (12:931); and finally, he complains that the Commons were administering oaths to witnesses “*coram non iudice*,” before a magistrate who lacked proper authority (12:932). Secker records each of these phrases in Carteret’s speech, as well as a subsequent exchange between Chesterfield and Lord Chancellor Hardwicke, where the former asserts that even if there is no *corpus delicti* in Walpole’s case, there is *corpus suspicionis* (12:973), to which the great lawyer Hardwicke replies, “*Corpus suspicionis* is a new term, it is the body of a shadow: that is the foundation of the Bill” (12:975n1). Johnson captures not only the exchange between Chesterfield and Hardwicke, but Hardwicke’s precise formulation in his dismissal: “as to the words *corpus suspicionis*, I do not comprehend what they mean: it is an expression indeed which I never before heard, and can signify, in my apprehension, nothing more than the *body of a shadow*, the substance of something which is itself nothing” (12:975).

And so what are we to think when Carteret, in the debate on spirituous liquors, is made to assert that “luxury is . . . *ad modum possidentis*, of different kinds, in proportion to different conditions of life, and one man may very decently enjoy those delicacies or pleasures to which it would be foolish and criminal in another to aspire” (13:1350)? Secker offers only a brief record of Carteret’s speech; he makes no mention of luxury and does not record the Latin phrase. But we must nevertheless suspect that Carteret rather than Johnson was responsible for the Latin. The phrase itself, which translates “according to one’s means,” echoes a passage from Tacitus’s *Annals* where a senator, Gallus Asinius, argues against a sumptuary law on the grounds that luxury

7. The proposal had appeared in a contemporary pamphlet, *An Essay on Ways and Means for . . . Increasing the Number of Sailors in Great-Britain* (London, 1741), 35. It seems much more likely that Pulteney would have been aware of such a pamphlet, which professed on its title page to be “humbly offered to the consideration of Parliament,” than that Johnson should be.

and parsimony are relative to the means of the individual.⁸ Carteret himself was not shy of displaying his learning, and he undoubtedly knew his Tacitus. In 1730 Constantia Grierson had dedicated her edition of Tacitus to him, noting that she had undertaken the work at his suggestion and carried it out under his guidance and protection (“tuis auspiciis”).⁹ And within a year of the debate on spirituous liquors, in a debate not reported by Johnson (December 9, 1743), Carteret complained of the false rumors being spread among the British and Hanoverian troops on the Continent, illustrating his point with a story from the *Annals* of a soldier whose lies stoked a mutiny.¹⁰ Everything here suggests that the original echo was Carteret’s and that Johnson merely reported what Cave’s spies had carried away from the debate.¹¹

This is not to suggest that all of Johnson’s speeches merely rephrase what was actually said in Parliament. He was under pressure to fill pages in the magazine, and when Cave’s notes failed him, his imagination did not. In such cases he seems to have picked up a general topic—for instance, whether the “voice of the people” is to be followed or disregarded by the legislature—and expounded it for paragraphs, if not pages. He might then allow another speaker to challenge the earlier arguments. In some cases, the topic had emerged somewhere in the debate itself, but not always.¹²

At times Johnson used his authorial control to shape the debate. A good example occurs in the Commons debate on the motion requesting that the king “remove Sir Robert Walpole from his presence and councils for ever” (February 13, 1741). An

8. The passage reads, “Neque in familia et argento quaeque ad usum parentur nimium aliquid aut modicum nisi ex fortuna possidentis” (*Annals*, 2.33). The Loeb edition translates it as follows: “In slaves or plate or anything procured for use there was neither excess nor moderation except with reference to the means of the owner” (Tacitus, *Annals*, books 1–3, trans. John Jackson [London, 1931], 431).

9. C. *Cornelii Taciti Opera Quae Extant*, 3 vols. (Dublin, 1730), 1:i–ii. The work had been undertaken while Carteret was Lord Lieutenant of Ireland.

10. See the excerpts from Philip Yorke’s parliamentary journal in *Cobbett’s Parliamentary History of England*, vols. 12 and 13 (London, 1812), 13:276 (hereafter cited as *PH*). The reference was apparently to *Annals*, 1.22–23.

11. That Secker failed to record the remark is no sure indication that it was inauthentic, for his notes are clearly incomplete. He failed to record, for instance, a classical allusion made by Lord Chancellor Hardwicke in the Lords debate on the state of the army (December 9, 1740). The Duke of Argyll, a hero of the War of the Spanish Succession, had attacked Walpole for treating commissions in the army as a form of political patronage. In Johnson’s debate, Hardwicke, a lawyer by training, wishes to dispute some of Argyll’s points but fears to expose himself “to the censure of having harangued upon war in the presence of Hannibal.” He is clearly recalling the story of Phormio, a Peripatetic philosopher at the court of Antiochus who had lectured foolishly on war with Hannibal in the audience. The tale is recounted by Cicero in *De oratore*, 2.75. Although Secker missed the allusion, another spectator of the debate did not. The French ambassador in London, recounting the debate in a letter to his superiors in Paris, preserves Hardwicke’s concession that he was speaking “*coram Hannibale*”—that is, in Hannibal’s presence. Johnson’s statement is undoubtedly authentic, though no trace of it is to be found in Secker. See *Debates*, 11:99 and n1.

12. For a brief discourse on the importance of heeding the voice of the people, see *Debates*, 11:427–29. The argument, attributed to the Duke of Argyll, is not found in Secker’s notes to his speech, but the idea may have been suggested by several other opposition speakers who point out the popular discontent with Walpole’s policies.

identical motion had been offered in the Lords on the same day, and Johnson wrote a long account of the Lords debate for the July issue of the magazine. Since the two debates had covered the same matters, the report of the Commons debate was put off for another eighteen months, not appearing until February 1743. Overall, this debate contains numerous historically accurate elements. It records the failed effort of the opposition to force Walpole to leave the House while his conduct in office was discussed, and it includes speeches against the motion by Edward Harley and Lord Cornbury, two Tories who abandoned the opposition cause on the grounds that the motion was inherently unjust. But in the body of the debate, Johnson availed himself of a shortcut: he devoted more than half the debate to two grand speeches, one of indictment by Samuel Sandys, and one of defense by Stephen Fox. Sandys, we know, began the debate with a long speech of accusation, but Fox appears merely to have made a few miscellaneous remarks on the injustice of the proceedings.¹³ Johnson, though, has Fox provide a complete defense of Walpole's policies, both foreign and domestic, for the previous twenty years (*Debates*, 12:520–48). It seems clear that Johnson wished to balance the debate and clarify the issues: he already had Sandys's indictment, but he needed a defense. This he wrote himself and put in Fox's mouth. Many of the arguments he includes were undoubtedly employed by Walpole's supporters, but Fox did not utter them. The speech is almost certainly a fiction, but the extent to which it misrepresents what was said in the Commons that day is a more difficult matter.



The second context is also complicated by Johnson's statement that the debates were largely the product of his imagination. This has led some to assume that the competing series in the *London Magazine* must be more authentic, for the author of those debates, whoever he may have been, must certainly have relied more closely than Johnson on his source material.¹⁴ This assumption, as I now wish to argue, is largely without merit.

13. We possess an important eyewitness account of this debate by Thomas Tower, a Whig backbencher: see I. G. Doolittle, "A First-hand Account of the Commons Debate on the Removal of Sir Robert Walpole, 13 February 1741," *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 53 (1980): 125–40. For Sandys's speech, see pp. 128–31; for Fox's, p. 134.

14. A. S. Turberville, for instance, asserted that when one is forced to choose between the two series, "the *London* should always be preferred to the *Gentleman's Magazine*": *The House of Lords in the XVIIIth Century* (Oxford, 1927), 517. The author of the debates in the *LM* is sometimes said to be Thomas Gordon, the translator of Tacitus. Gordon was named by John Wright in the preface to volume 9 of *PH* (1811), [ii], but I can find no earlier evidence to support this claim. Although Gordon had been an active political essayist during the 1720s, attacking the Walpole administration in *Cato's Letters* (published in the *London Journal*, 1720–23), he was soon bought off by Walpole with the job of first commissioner of the wine licenses; see *ODNB*, s.v. "Gordon, Thomas (d. 1750)" by Leslie Stephen, rev. Emma Major, last modified January 2008, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/11083>. At this point he devoted himself to translation. He even dedicated his Tacitus (1728) to Walpole. He also married a wealthy widow, which made it unnecessary for him to write for bread. In these circumstances, it seems highly unlikely that Gordon would have involved himself in the illegal and burdensome activity of reporting debates.

The two sets of debates differ somewhat in their overall character. The series in the *London Magazine* tends to emphasize historical background; Johnson provides general arguments. In reading the *London Magazine* debates, one is often impressed by the large amount of information they contain: in the debate on the mutiny bill, one learns the history of quartering and victualling the home forces in Britain since the reign of William III; and in various attacks on Walpole's foreign policy, one is treated to a veritable history of European politics for the preceding two decades. The accumulation of facts often gives these debates an air of authority that Johnson's more rhetorical efforts can seem to lack. But an abundance of historical detail in a published debate is no guarantee that the actual participants presented that information in support of their arguments, and when we compare debates from both series with authentic records, we find that Johnson's generalities can sometimes be more authentic than the "facts" that fill the rival version. Consider the following example.

On March 9, 1742, a month after Walpole's fall, James Hamilton, Viscount Limerick, moved in the Commons that a "committee be appointed to enquire into the conduct of affairs at home and abroad during the last twenty years" (*Debates*, 12:847). But Walpole's supporters had come out in force, and the motion was defeated by two votes. The new ministry, however, knew that it could not let the matter drop without losing public support, and so two weeks later, on March 23, Limerick moved another inquiry, this one to focus on Walpole's management of the Treasury, and for only the last ten years. The second motion was successful and a committee of inquiry established.

These attempts by the Commons to investigate Walpole aroused great public interest, and both magazines carried versions of both debates. The *London Magazine* ran its reports from December 1742 to January 1743, with the *Gentleman's* offering its versions several months later, beginning in May. Limerick, though, was disdainful of what he read in the magazines, and in September he published his own account of what he had said. A prefatory letter asserted that "there has never yet been any authentic Copies published of the two inclosed Speeches," adding in a contemptuous footnote, "Except such as are made by Scribblers, hired by the Publishers of *Magazines* at so much *per Sheet*; that no one Member in the House can charge his Memory with a single Sentence of those palmed Speeches, and which may as properly be father'd upon *Chinese* as *British* Speakers."¹⁵ Limerick's pamphlet, then, gives us a direct means of testing the accuracy of the magazine debates.

If we start with the *London Magazine*, we find that Limerick's first speech, from the debate of March 9, 1742, is typical of that series. After some opening remarks on the Commons' duty to tell the king of the people's discontent and a brief digression on Walpole's "corrupt Influence, both at Elections and in Parliament," this "Limerick" takes us through a long and detailed survey of Walpole's errors and misdeeds, including the South Sea Scheme, the misuse of Civil List funds, the Treaty of Hanover (1725),

15. *Two Speeches on the Late Famous Motion, By the Right Honourable the Lord L—k* (London, 1743), 2, hereafter cited in text as *Two Speeches*. The folio pamphlet was advertised for sale in the *Daily Advertiser* for September 7, 1743.

the hiring of foreign troops in the 1720s without sufficient cause, the Treaty of Seville (1729), the excise scheme, the dismissal of officers from their places for opposing the excise, the tepid response to Spanish attacks on British merchants in the West Indies, and the Convention of the Pardo (1739). The Civil List alone is mentioned nine times, and we are treated to a brief but confusing relation of the increases in the appropriations for the Civil List between 1720 and 1727.¹⁶

There is, I suspect, nothing in this speech that the real Lord Limerick did not agree with, but the speech that he published as his own is, nevertheless, very different. It is much more general and considerably shorter, only one-quarter the length of the *London Magazine* speech. As in the magazine, Limerick is greatly concerned with the corruption of the Commons, but he first reflects on governmental finance: "It is owing to this [that is, the Commons' subservience to Walpole], that during a long and profound Peace, our Taxes have not been *diminish'd*, nor our Debts *paid*." His reflections on Walpole's foreign policy through the 1720s and 1730s are brief and general: "We plunged ourselves into inconsistent Treaties, and contradictory Engagements, till we had negociated away our most important Interests." He only descends to specifics when criticizing the conduct of the war with Spain, begun in 1739, and the failure of the ministry to support Britain's ally, Austria, in the great war overspreading the Continent, the War of the Austrian Succession: "We have had the Honour," he tells us with a touch of irony, "to compleat the Ruin of the House of *Austria*, and to raise the House of *Bourbon* to be Masters of the Fate of *Europe*" (*Two Speeches*, 4). There is no mention of the Civil List, no enumeration of treaties, no deploring the excise. Insofar as the *London Magazine* account talks about corruption, it cannot help but echo Limerick's main concern, but once it descends to particulars, it has nothing in common with the speech that Limerick published.

Johnson's speech, on the other hand, captures a number of the general assertions we find in Limerick's original. Here, too, the heavy costs of an extended peace are lamented: "But peace has in this nation by the wonderful artifices of our ministers been the parent of poverty and misery. . . . We have been so far from seeing any part of our taxes remitted, that we have been loaded with more rigorous exactions to support the expences of peace, than were found necessary to defray the charges of a war." Treaties, we are told, "have been concluded without any regard to the interest of [Great Britain]." Unlike the authentic speech, Johnson does not single out the disastrous war policies of recent years, but he echoes nevertheless the contrast between the relative strengths of the Bourbon and Austrian dynasties: "If we survey the condition of foreign nations, we shall find, that the power, and dominions of the family of [Bourbon] . . . have been daily increased. We shall find, that they have increased by the declension of the House of [Austria], which treaties and our interest engage us to support" (*Debates*, 12:846–47). Johnson's report is by no means a paraphrase of Limerick's published text, but it much more closely approximates the overall character of his speech than does the rival version in the *London Magazine*.

16. *LM* 11 (1742): 587–91 at 587; in *PH*, 12:448–56.

With respect to Limerick's second speech (March 23, 1743), the *London Magazine* dropped its litany of Walpole's errors and abuses, providing a broader, less detailed accusation. This report seems marginally more accurate than Johnson's, for it directly echoes a few statements found in the printed speech, even though it continues to elaborate these with material not to be found in the original.¹⁷ Johnson's version seems to have been written from very limited information. He suggests some of Limerick's main points, especially his concern for the constitution, but he provides no strong parallels or clear verbal echoes. There exists nonetheless one extended parallel between Limerick's published speech and Johnson's debate, though it does not occur where one would expect.

Toward the end of the published speech, Limerick defends the policy of appointing a "secret committee" to investigate political malfeasance:

I have heard a Secret Committee treated as the most terrible Thing in Nature; but surely, Sir, Gentlemen either don't know, or don't consider what it is they seem so much to fear. Secret Committees are not to *judge*, they are not even to *accuse*; they are only to *search* and *enquire* after Facts, they are to *collect* and *sort* them, and lay them before the House. To *judge* is the Province of the *Lords*, to *accuse* belongs to the *Commons*; and diligently to *search* and *enquire* is the Business and Duty of a *Committee*. This is the mighty Power, this is the dreadful Object; dreadful indeed it may be to the *Guilty*, but to the *Guilty only*. (*Two Speeches*, 8)

In Johnson's debate we find these ideas elaborated not under Limerick's name but in the seconding speech attributed to Sir John St. Aubyn:

But in every consideration of this kind, great terrors have been raised at the mention of a secret committee. It is called a most dangerous delegation; and to intimidate the assertors of justice it is represented so formidable, as to be able to controul that very body from which it derives its powers; and foreign examples are produced, no ways similar, under different constitutions, to support this allegation. It has been called a committee of accusation, tryal and judgment.

But, Sir, it is a constitutional appointment, always practised when high offenders are to be called to justice. . . . It is a committee of enquiry which is only to proceed no farther than the extent of their commission, revocable at your pleasure. It is only to collect and digest the materials of evidence, to produce facts supported by such evidence, facts afterwards to be canvass'd, to undergo a strict examination in the House, before you will found upon them a vote of accusation.

You yourselves are but accusers, and your accusation must be carried to an higher assembly for tryal and judgment. (*Debates*, 12:892)

17. *LM* 11 (1742): 655–57; in *PH*, 12:532–36.

The parallels are numerous and clear. It appears that Johnson was given accurate information about what was said, but a faulty indication of who said it. It is also possible that Johnson felt that this point was not appropriate for a speech moving the creation of a secret committee, and so he relegated it to the seconder, who might more properly attempt to sweep away potential objections. In such matters we are in the dark.

Perhaps the most important lesson to be learned from comparisons of the competing series is that both magazines were subject to the same limitations in compiling information, and both resorted to fictional representations when that material failed. For example, Horace Walpole's maiden speech in the Commons took place on March 23, 1742, in the debate that I have just been discussing. The next day he sent Horace Mann a "copy" of what he said. Johnson did not report the speech, but the *London Magazine* did, and some years later, while preparing his letters for publication, Walpole added the following note to the copy of his speech: "There is a fictitious speech printed for this in several Magazines of that time, but which does not contain one sentence of the true one."¹⁸ A comparison of the two versions bears out his claim. The speech in the magazine was the mere coinage of its author's imagination, and that author was not Johnson.

Johnson's debates are often more accurate in recording who spoke in a debate and what he said, for the *London Magazine* usually presented fewer speeches overall.¹⁹ This practice, as one might expect, frequently led to misattributed arguments, as significant statements made by those whose speeches had been left out were simply put into the mouths of others. Since its debates took this digested form, the *London Magazine* sometimes paid little attention to the proper order of the speakers—a failing that, in any attempt to give a realistic account of what had happened on the floor of the House, could be a matter of some significance. For example, in the *London Magazine*'s version of the debate on the indemnity bill, Hardwicke speaks before Chesterfield, yet we learn from Secker that Hardwicke not only followed Chesterfield but responded to his arguments.²⁰ Johnson gets the order of the speakers right and includes some of the apposite responses. (The passage quoted above, where Hardwicke dismisses the term *corpus suspicionis*, is the most important example.) Cave, of course, was aware of his rival's shortcomings and quick to point them out to his readers. In the prefatory material to Johnson's account of the indemnity-bill debate, he intruded a paragraph listing the errors in the competing version.²¹ Cave in fact had good reason to boast that his magazine's account had come much closer to the truth.

18. For Walpole's speech, see *Horace Walpole's Correspondence with Sir Horace Mann*, ed. W. S. Lewis, Warren Hunting Smith, and George L. Lam, in *The Yale Edition of the Correspondence of Horace Walpole*, ed. W. S. Lewis, 48 vols. (New Haven, Conn., 1937–83), 17:376–77. This edition fails to print Walpole's note, which first appeared in *Letters of Horace Walpole . . . to Sir Horace Mann*, ed. George Agar Ellis, Baron Dover, 3 vols. (London, 1833), 1:136.

19. This portion of the essay is indebted to Benjamin Hoover's comparison of Johnson's debates with both the *LM* debates and Bishop Secker's notes; see *Samuel Johnson's Parliamentary Reporting*, 58–123, esp. 111–20.

20. *LM* 11 (1742): 368, 375; *PH*, 12:650–53.

21. Cave there criticized the *LM* for leaving out speakers, confusing their order, and putting "the Words of one Statesman in the Mouth of another," which, he said, "is with these People a common

In some debates, though, especially when the speakers turn to historical matters or international politics, the writer for the *London Magazine* shows a firmer grasp of the issues. For example, by 1742 Britain was involved in the war on the Continent, supporting Austria against the attacks of the new Holy Roman Emperor, Charles VII, and his French allies. In late summer that year, the Carteret ministry agreed to take sixteen thousand of the king's Hanoverian troops into British pay, an action that provoked a great popular outcry. Among other complaints, Carteret's enemies asserted that these troops were useless, for the king could not send them to fight against the emperor without exposing himself to the "imperial ban," a formal interdict that could deprive an electoral prince of his territory. This charge, it turned out, was unfounded. The emperor could not impose the ban at will; it could only be employed against those officially declared enemies of "the emperor and empire." Only the imperial diet could make such a declaration, and this would not be forthcoming while states of the empire were engaged on opposing sides in the current war. Nevertheless, members of the opposition brought up the ban during the Lords debate on dismissing the Hanoverian troops (February 1, 1743). Asserting the popular belief, they claimed that the king's electoral troops could not be used against the emperor. It is clear from Secker's notes that Carteret refuted these claims: "I am authorized by the king to say, that these troops shall march into the empire, which is not acting against the emperor and empire. France assists the emperor only as elector. If he calls France in as emperor, he breaks his Capitulation Oath" (*PH*, 12:1061). The *London Magazine* debate offers a generally accurate version of Carteret's assertion and spells out the conditions necessary for imposing the ban: "no law can hinder any prince of the Germanick body to assist [Austria] in repelling force by force. This, I shall grant, would be acting *contra imperatorem*, but it would not be *contra imperatorem et imperium*, and the latter only is what subjects a member to the ban of the empire."²² Johnson never clarifies the issue in this way. His Carteret asserts that the king will march his troops into the empire, and his Hardwicke declares that the emperor himself cannot impose the ban, but Johnson nowhere explains the conditions necessary for imposing it; that is, he fails to articulate the distinction made by Carteret in the actual debate.²³ One suspects that Johnson did not fully understand the issues—few did—and that he made no effort, beyond reading the sketchy notes that he had been given, to learn what he did not know.

In addition, competitive pressures forced the *London Magazine* to adopt some of the practices of the *Gentleman's*. Its debate on the spirituous liquors bill (February 22–25, 1743) contains a more complete roster of speakers than usual and marshals them in the proper order.²⁴ The speeches in the *London Magazine* also echo an

Mistake" (*Gentleman's Magazine* 12 [1742]: 512). The *LM* account had appeared between July and September 1742; Johnson's report began in October. Cave thus had been able to examine the rival version in its entirety.

22. *LM* 12 (1743): 580. The Latin phrases mean "against the emperor" and "against the emperor and empire."

23. For Johnson's most important references to the ban, see *Debates*, 13:1145–46, 1150, 1261.

24. The *LM* covered only two sessions of what in Johnson's version is a three-day debate. It also omitted a subsidiary debate on the second day when opposition Lords attempted to have the final

unusually large number of particular phrases that we find in Secker's notes—an ironic situation, perhaps, since the two speeches that Johnson wrote in Chesterfield's name for this debate were subsequently printed in Chesterfield's *Miscellaneous Works* as examples of his lordship's eloquence.²⁵ The speeches in the *London Magazine*, though less impressive rhetorically, adhere more closely to the content and expression of the original speeches. And so after Chesterfield's death, his reputation as an orator was allowed to depend more on Johnson's style than on the *London Magazine's* substance.

Finally, let me add a note about bias in the debates. Johnson himself led his readers to expect biased accounts. As Arthur Murphy recalled, when Johnson first revealed to the company at a dinner party that he had written the debates, one of those present “praised his impartiality; observing, that he dealt out reason and eloquence with an equal hand to both parties. ‘That is not quite true,’ said Johnson; ‘I saved appearances tolerably well; but I took care that the WHIG DOGS should not have the best of it.’”²⁶ I have argued elsewhere that this was largely a bit of conversational high spirits, for the debates themselves are remarkably evenhanded.²⁷ The same, though, cannot be said for the debates in the *London Magazine*, which clearly favored the opposition parties. Neither Walpole nor Carteret got a fair shake in its pages.²⁸ Perhaps the most glaring example of bias in the *London Magazine* is its introduction to the Commons debate on taking Hanoverian troops into British pay (December 10, 1742). In his speech at the opening of Parliament, the king had announced that he was sending sixteen thousand of his electoral troops to join the coalition army that Britain was assembling in the Austrian Netherlands. In the prefatory matter to this debate, the editor of the *London Magazine*, with obvious irony, tells of the joy that every friend of the “present happy Establishment” felt in learning that Hanover was finally going to contribute to the common good, “for none of us at first imagined, that we were to pay for these *Hanover Troops*. . . . But how greatly were we surprised, how greatly disappointed, and in our Turn abashed, when among the Estimates presented to the House of Commons, we found an Estimate of the Expence of those 16,000 *Hanover Troops*, . . . and even that

reading of the bill postponed for five days. Johnson often reported supplemental debates on procedural matters of this sort; the *LM* generally did not. As a result, Johnson's debates often present a more complete picture of what had gone on in Parliament. For the portions of this debate covered by the *LM*, its list of speakers is marginally more accurate than Johnson's. See also Hoover, *Samuel Johnson's Parliamentary Reporting*, 117–20.

25. See *Miscellaneous Works of the Late Philip Dormer Stanhope, Earl of Chesterfield*, ed. Matthew Maty, 2 vols. (London, 1777), 1:242–60. For Johnson's amused reaction upon discovering that his speeches had been published in Chesterfield's works, see *Life*, 3:351.

26. *Essay on the Life and Genius of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, in *Johnsonian Miscellanies*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1907), 1:379.

27. See Thomas Kaminski, *The Early Career of Samuel Johnson* (Oxford, 1987), 132–39; and *Debates*, 11:xxxvii–xliii.

28. As Benjamin Hoover has noted, in the Lords debate on the removal of Walpole, the *London Magazine* devoted more than 70 percent of its text to speeches attacking the Great Man, and less than 30 percent to his defense. Johnson also allotted more text to the opposition, but his division of about 60/40 was more in keeping with the balance of the actual debate. See Hoover, *Samuel Johnson's Parliamentary Reporting*, 77–78.

Estimate charged higher in Proportion, than ever this Nation had before paid for any foreign Troops taken into its Service.”²⁹ This was the opposition line presented as editorial background. Nothing similar is to be found anywhere in Johnson’s debates.



The third context for Johnson’s debates is easily the broadest. It offers us the opportunity to examine the ways in which Johnson responded to immediate historical events and to the broader political culture. We can begin with a curious set of anachronistic statements within the debates that confirm something that has long been presumed about Johnson’s methods of composition. There was always a delay of at least four or five months, and sometimes as much as two years, between the actual debate in Parliament and Johnson’s report of it in the *Gentleman’s Magazine*. Because publishing debates was illegal, both magazines thought it wise, despite their disguised reports, to defer printing recent material until the current session of Parliament had come to an end, usually between April and June.³⁰ At that time, debates on the most controversial issues of the recent session would be rushed into print while older material would be put off indefinitely.³¹

These delays had one noticeable effect: Johnson sometimes mentioned recent events that had not yet taken place at the time of the actual debate. Lapses of this sort are most easily recognizable in two debates where the subject is the conduct of the current wars, first the war with Spain, which began in 1739, and later the great Continental war that began in December 1740. The first examples arise in the Commons debate on raising new regiments of marines for an attack on the Spanish West Indies (December 10, 1740). Johnson’s account of this debate would not appear for two years, until the magazine’s annual Supplement for 1742.³² When the actual debate had taken place, Britain was at war only with Spain and had no part in the new Continental war. Johnson’s speakers, though, articulate the concerns and anxieties of late 1742. General Wade talks of the possibility of a French invasion, and Sir William Yonge argues that Britain must bear the high cost of these new regiments as a means of showing its allies that it is committed to the war (*Debates*, 11:140, 148). In 1740, Britain had nothing to fear from France, and it had no allies in its war with Spain; two years later, all this had changed. Similarly, in the debate of April 8, 1741, on whether Britain should support Maria Theresa of Austria in her struggle to maintain the Habsburg inheritance, Johnson’s

29. *LM* 12 (1743): 209–10.

30. On the magazine’s disguised reports, see above, note 4.

31. The briefest delay was about four months, for the Lords debate on dismissing the Hanoverian troops (February 1, 1743), which began in the June 1743 issue of the magazine. The Lords debate on the removal of Walpole (February 13, 1741) and the debate on the indemnity bill (May 25, 1742) were each delayed for five months. The Commons debates on raising new regiments (December 10, 1740) and on the removal of Walpole (February 13, 1741) each had to wait about two years.

32. The Supplement was published in January of the new year; thus, the Supplement for 1742 appeared in January 1743.

speakers fulminate against the French, who “pour troops into [Germany]” in support of the new emperor, Charles VII (*Debates*, 12:661). The French, though, did not cross the Rhine until August of that year, four months after the debate took place. By June 1742, when this debate was published, Johnson had apparently forgotten the order of events.

Trivial as these details may be, they are useful because they confirm for us that Johnson did not write up the debates immediately after they took place, but delayed until copy was called for. Scholars had long assumed this to be the case, based largely on Sir John Hawkins’s vivid description of Johnson at work: the debates “were written at those seasons when he was able to raise his imagination to such a pitch of fervour as bordered upon enthusiasm, which, that he might the better do, his practice was to shut himself up in a room assigned him at St. John’s gate, to which he would not suffer any one to approach, except the compositor or Cave’s boy for matter, which, as fast as he composed it, he tumbled out at the door.”³³ This sounds like a man trying to keep ahead of the presses, and it is good to have confirmation in the texts themselves.

Overall, though, the debates’ broader political and historical context is much too large to consider in a single essay, so let me examine one case in which Johnson’s debates not only responded to events but may have contributed to shaping the popular perception of them. The immediate context is the virulent anti-Hanover sentiment of the years 1742 to 1744. Although the British people were undoubtedly committed to the Protestant succession, many resented the clear preference that both of the first two Georges showed for their German homeland, and whenever war threatened on the Continent, the opposition complained that British policy was being guided by concerns for the safety of Hanover. Such sentiment had last been widely felt during the late 1720s, when tensions with Austria led the Walpole administration to pay for twelve thousand Hessian auxiliaries as a force that could be mobilized on short notice. The opposition in both Parliament and the press complained that Britain had no interests on the Continent, and that the forces had been hired to protect Hanover. Despite the administration’s denials, popular resentment over the Hessians lasted for nearly five years, until Britain was reconciled with Austria and the Hessian subsidy ended.³⁴

In 1741 Britain again found itself entangled in Continental politics as the king declared his support for Maria Theresa against her Bavarian and French enemies. In August, France moved an army across the Rhine to threaten Hanover, and George lost his nerve. As elector he was committed by treaty to send four thousand Hanoverian regulars to Austria; he did not send them. In addition, Britain had hired twelve thousand Danish and Hessian auxiliaries also intended for Austria; these, too, were retained by the king in the electorate. It was a scandalous violation of Parliament’s intent and a breach of the Act of Settlement, the fundamental law by which the king held his crown.

33. Hawkins, *Life of Johnson*, 99.

34. See Jeremy Black, “Parliament and Foreign Policy in the Age of Walpole: The Case of the Hessians,” in *Knights Errant and True Englishmen: British Foreign Policy, 1660–1800*, ed. Black (Edinburgh, 1989), 41–54. Black argues that, despite administration denials, the Hessian forces were in fact hired to protect Hanover (47–48).

But the king was not through. When the immediate danger passed, he told his British ministers that he now found his Hanoverian troops too expensive, and that he intended to disband a portion of them. Carteret, who was now at the head of the ministry, had been engaged in putting together a coalition of nations to oppose France, and he feared that disbanding the king's electoral troops would signal to all Europe that George and thus Britain were not committed to the war. As a result, he proposed that Britain pay for sixteen thousand of the king's Hanoverian troops, well over half of the entire electoral army.³⁵ The move was deeply unpopular. As elector of Hanover, George had reneged on his treaty commitments with Austria, and now Britain was being asked to pay for the bulk of his troops. Even the most vigorous supporters of the Protestant succession might feel that Britain was being exploited by Hanover.³⁶

The general discontent over hiring the Hanoverians not only found its way into Johnson's debates but also took an unprecedented form—direct criticism of the king. In parliamentary matters generally, the king was exempt from criticism, based largely on the constitutional doctrine that “the king can do no wrong.” Although lawyers argued about the precise implications of the concept, in practice it had come to mean that whenever wrong was done, the king's ministers, not the king himself, were to blame.³⁷ We find this principle operating throughout the earlier debates, where Walpole and his ministerial colleagues are attacked even for policies over which they had little or no control.³⁸ But in the debates on the Hanoverian troops, the tone seems to have changed, and even when the king is not attacked directly, he is sometimes touched by implication.

In the first of the debates that Johnson wrote on the topic, the Lords debate of February 1, 1743, the Earl of Sandwich complains of the cost of the Hanoverian troops, for which he blames the ministry: “It must be indeed, confessed that if an estimate is to be made of our condition, from the conduct of our ministers, the fear of exhausting our treasure must be merely panic, and the precepts of frugality which other states have grown great by observing, are to us absolutely unnecessary” (*Debates*, 13:1139). But he then turns to the most explosive topic of the debate, the payment of levy money to the elector. It was typical in subsidy treaties for the nation hiring foreign troops to pay part of the cost of raising them, even if those regiments were already in existence.

35. See the letter of Newcastle to Hardwicke (October 24, 1743) in Philip Yorke, *Life and Correspondence of Philip Yorke, Earl of Hardwicke*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, 1913), 1:318–19; see also *Debates*, 13:1077.

36. For the fierce opposition to taking the Hanoverian troops into British pay, see Robert Harris, *A Patriot Press: National Politics and the London Press in the 1740s* (Oxford, 1993), 122–77.

37. See, for instance, *Craftsman* 855 (November 13, 1742). Two decades later Blackstone would express this same understanding of the phrase: “whatever may be amiss in the conduct of public affairs is not chargeable personally on the king; nor is he, but his ministers, accountable for it to the people”; see William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, 4 vols. (London, 1765–69), 3:254–55.

38. In the debate of December 9, 1740, the Duke of Argyll explicitly exempts the king from any blame for policies that Argyll considered damaging to the army (*Debates*, 11:92). Even when the king was clearly responsible for a flawed policy—as in his pursuit of a neutrality agreement between Hanover and France in 1741—speakers in the debates blame the Walpole administration (see *Debates*, 12:738 and n. 5, 741–42).

In the contract now submitted to Parliament, the king, like a mercenary foreign prince, was to be paid an additional £139,313 for levying the forces that he had only recently intended to disband. Sandwich now assumes a new tone:

This demand of levy-money shocks every [British subject] yet more strongly, on considering by whom it is required; required by that family whom we have raised from a petty dominion for which homage was paid to a superior power, . . . by a family whom from want and weakness we have exalted to a throne, from whence, with virtue equal to their power, they may issue their mandates to the remotest parts of the earth. . . .

I should imagine, my Lords, that when [a king] of the House of [Hanover] surveys his navies, reviews his troops, or examines his revenue, beholds the splendor of his court, or contemplates the extent of his dominions, he cannot but sometimes, however unwillingly, compare his present state with that of his ancestors; and that when he gives audience to the ambassadors of princes, who, perhaps, never heard of [Hanover], and directs the payment of sums, by the smallest of which all his ancient inheritance would be dearly purchased; and reflects, as surely he sometimes will, that all these honours and riches, this reverence from foreign powers, and his domestick splendor, are the gratuitous and voluntary gifts of the mighty people of [Great Britain], he should find his heart overflowing with unlimited gratitude, and should be ready to sacrifice to the happiness of his benefactors, not only every petty interest, or accidental inclination, but even his repose, his safety, or his life; . . . that he should consider his little territories as only a contemptible province to his [British] empire, a kind of nursery for troops to be employed without harrassing his more valuable subjects. (*Debates*, 13:1140–41)

This attack is not against the ministers but the king; its focus is not mistaken policy or corrupt practice but ingratitude. And yet it is unclear who was primarily responsible for this outburst, Sandwich or Johnson. There is no exact parallel in Secker's notes, but there are hints and suggestions of disapproval of the king's conduct. At the very start of the speech, Sandwich asserted that taking the Hanoverians into British pay "shakes the affections of the people at home" (Secker's notes, *PH*, 12:1059). Later, he objected that the contract required the British to pay for a troop of the king's Hanoverian Life Guards: "Why should not the king," he asks, "trust himself to the fidelity and courage of English Guards?" (*PH*, 12:1060). Near the end he brought up the levy money, complaining (in an anecdote repeated by Johnson) that Louis XIV, when hiring Hanoverian forces in 1672, had refused to pay levy money except for the portion that had in fact been newly raised: "Surely, then, we should not have been made to pay the whole for troops not intended to assist us" (*PH*, 12:1061). In this last matter, blame might properly have fallen upon the ministers, who should have told the king that levy money was

inappropriate in these circumstances, but in accepting it, the king had certainly done nothing to earn the affection of his people.

A more outrageous example of disrespect occurs in the Commons debate on this same topic (December 10, 1742). The speech that Johnson wrote in Pitt's name focuses on the king's failure to send electoral troops to Austria's aid, as required by treaty. In a remarkable piece of Johnsonian irony, he attributes the king's dereliction to the "pernicious counsels" of his advisers, yet one cannot read the passage without recognizing the speaker's overwhelming contempt for the king:

To what can we impute this negligence of treaties, this disregard of justice, this defect of compassion, but to the pernicious counsels of those men who have advised His Majesty to hire to [Great Britain] those troops which he should have employed in the assistance of the queen of [Hungary];³⁹ for it is not to be imagined that His Majesty has more or less regard to justice as [king of Great Britain] than as elector of [Hanover], or that he would not have sent his proportion of troops to the [Austrian] army, had not the temptations of greater profit been industriously laid before him. (*Debates*, 13:1108)

Surely, Pitt says with a derisive smile, the king would have acted honorably—if only his ministers had not appealed to his avarice. In quoting this passage, the historian Uriel Dann calls it "a sneer at the sovereign that seeks its equal in the history of Parliament."⁴⁰ But Pitt (or Johnson) is not done. He turns to the great matter of the Hanoverian exploitation of Britain:

If therefore our assistance [to Austria] be an act of honesty, and granted in consequence of treaties, why may it not equally be required of [Hanover]? and if it be an act of generosity, why should this nation alone be obliged to sacrifice her own interest to that of others? Or why should the elector of [Hanover] exert his liberality at the expence of [Great Britain]?

It is now too apparent, that this great, this powerful, this formidable kingdom is considered only as a province to a despicable electorate, and that in consequence of a scheme formed long ago, and invariably pursued, these troops are hired only to drain this unhappy nation of its money; that they have hitherto been of no use to [Britain], or to [Austria], is evident beyond controversy; and therefore it is plain, that they are retained only for the purposes of [Hanover]. (*Debates*, 13:1109)

There is perhaps a residual ambiguity in the speech: the "scheme formed long ago" to enrich Hanover at British expense may indeed have been executed by treacherous

39. That is, Maria Theresa, queen of Hungary and archduchess of Austria.

40. Uriel Dann, *Hanover and Great Britain, 1740–1760* (Leicester, U.K., 1991), 56.

ministers intent on maintaining the king's favor, but the ingratitude and fecklessness of the king is everywhere apparent.

Once again, it is difficult to know just how to apportion credit for these remarks. Anti-Hanover polemics were indeed fierce, but the rhetoric of these attacks tended to be less directly insulting to the king. Perhaps the most inflammatory pamphlet of the day was *The Case of the Hanover Forces in the Pay of Great-Britain, Impartially and Freely Examined*, unsigned, but now generally attributed to the Earl of Chesterfield and Edmund Waller. The authors suggest that the king should not expect to receive payment for the entire force of sixteen thousand troops:

The *British* Nation presume to hope and expect that either the 4000 Men which *Hanover* was to furnish the Queen of *Hungary* with, will be deducted from the 16000, or, that at least, we shall only pay the Difference between their own Pay and that which is necessary for their Service abroad. . . . For no Man thinks so meanly of his Majesty, as to imagine he designs, whatever his Ministers may do, to save and pocket what would be their own Pay at home, as well as the entire Expence of the 4000 Men, due from *Hanover* to the Queen of *Hungary*.⁴¹

There may be some irony here, for some men did “think so meanly of his Majesty,” but there is no obvious contempt. And when he spoke in the actual debates, as recorded by Secker, Chesterfield was coy. He criticized Hanover for its failure to live up to its treaties: “It is astonishing that Hanover is not one of the powers engaged to guarantee the Pragmatic Sanction. It hath not given even its quota [that is, its 4,000 men].” But in the matter of taking the Hanoverians into British pay, he exonerated the king and blamed his ministers: “the king knows his interest too well to be moved by such considerations, but ministers may mistake and flatter this way” (*PH*, 12:1066).

Even Pitt, for whom we have authentic records of subsequent remarks on this matter, nowhere else shows contempt for the king. A year later, in December 1743, the Hanoverians once again came up for parliamentary approval, and Pitt once again had his say. But in this case, Philip Yorke, the eldest son of Lord Chancellor Hardwicke, kept notes of Pitt's speeches. Yorke's accounts portray Pitt as an implacable enemy of Carteret but not demonstrably hostile toward the king. In the debate of December 6, 1743, Pitt sees the king as endangered by Carteret's policies: “his Majesty yet stands on the firm ground of his people's affections, though on the brink of a precipice: it is the duty of parliament to snatch him from the gulph where an infamous minister has placed him, and not throw paltry flowers on the edge of it to conceal the danger: it may be a rough, but it is a friendly hand which is stretched out to remove him.”⁴² Pitt abuses Carteret, though, in language similar to that which he had used against Walpole: he is “an execrable, a sole minister, one who had renounced the British nation, and seemed to have drunk of the potion described in poetic fictions, which made men forget their

41. *The Case of the Hanover Forces* (London, 1743), 78–79.

42. *PH*, 13:141–42. Yorke's accounts, like Secker's, are included in *PH*.

country” (*PH*, 13:136). Like many of his countrymen, Pitt had been incensed by reports that the king had favored his Hanoverian officers at Dettingen, but even here he is less critical of the king than he appears in Johnson’s debate. Pitt averred—in Yorke’s condensed phrasing—that he “could prove that the invariable rules of service had been neglected with regard to the English officers. General of the English army not advised with: the great person [that is, the king] hemmed in by German officers, and one English minister; how could he then be informed of the sense of the army, or of the people, almost exasperated to despair” (*PH*, 13:142). Once again the blame is deflected from the king to his advisers. Nor was Yorke unwilling to mention intemperate remarks. He described the general disturbance in the House brought on by “the inconsiderate warmth of Stanley,⁴³ who charged the king (by name) with having shewed a notorious partiality to his electoral troops”; and he recorded the dark insinuation of the Jacobite John Hynde Cotton that “to get rid of the Hanover yoke will be difficult” (*PH*, 13:464, 145).

From the evidence, then, it appears that Pitt fiercely opposed any measures by which Hanover benefited financially from its connection with Britain, but he, like almost all his contemporaries in Parliament, refrained from blaming the king directly for these actions. He probably noted, as he does in Johnson’s account, that Hanover had failed to meet its treaty commitments; as we have already seen, Chesterfield had made the same complaint in the Lords. In the authentic reports, though, Pitt attacks Carteret rather than the king. The minister had abetted the king’s attempts to evade his commitments and had hidden the people’s discontent from him. The counselor, not the king, was at fault.

In these matters, I wish to suggest, Johnson’s essential characterization of Pitt’s complaint—his indignation that various military and financial costs had been transferred from Hanover to Britain—was accurate, but its focus and its tone were distorted. Johnson’s Pitt despises the king, but the Pitt we find in the authentic records rails only at his minister. And it may well have been Johnson rather than Pitt who lamented that Britain had been reduced to “a province to a despicable electorate.” Writing in the early months of 1744, Johnson would have fed off the anti-Hanover polemics that had dominated political discourse for more than a year. Unlike those who wished well to the present royal family, he did not have to find ways to blame the king’s follies on his ministers. His hatred for George II is well attested,⁴⁴ and it appears to have spilled over into Pitt’s speeches.

If my inferences here are correct, Johnson’s distorted account had two powerful effects. First, to Pitt’s contemporaries the speech would have provided an exaggerated picture of his audacity. He appeared to be the only Member of Parliament willing to scorn the constitutional fiction that the king can do no wrong, daring even to insult the king on the floor of the House. The debates, we must remember, were read by many,

43. Hans Stanley (1721–1780), the member for St. Albans, was only twenty-two years old at the time of the debate (January 18, 1744) and apparently unaccustomed to parliamentary restraint.

44. See *Life*, 1:147, 2:342.

while only a few would have heard the actual speech from the gallery of the Commons. The contemptuous reference to Hanover as a “despicable electorate” may even have contributed to the king’s long refusal to admit Pitt to office. The second effect is on the writing of history. This particular speech has generally been used to characterize Pitt’s opposition to “Hanoverian measures.” In a recent essay, the historian Brendan Simms refers to it as “[Pitt’s] famous diatribe against the Hanoverian connection, which did so much to colour contemporary and subsequent perceptions of him as a diehard critic of the Personal Union.”⁴⁵ It stands as a prime example of the vehemence of the young, reckless Pitt. A century ago Lord Rosebery suggested that the tone was itself one of the signs of the speech’s genuineness: “it is scarcely possible to conceive sarcasms more calculated to afflict the sovereign in his tenderest susceptibilities than those which Pitt now launched, even as we read them in an imperfect report; they are, indeed, so masterly in this way as almost to prove their authenticity. This is the first speech of real point and power delivered by Pitt of which we have any record.”⁴⁶ But the tone, I am suggesting, was Johnson’s, not Pitt’s, and so any conclusions drawn from it are likely to skew our understanding of Pitt’s early political character. The willingness of historians to accept this speech as genuine is, of course, readily understandable. Johnson’s speech is the only record we have of what Pitt said in this important early debate, and so they have a choice: Johnson’s evidence, or no evidence at all.⁴⁷ Since Johnson’s speech is sneering and contemptuous and allows them to tell a more compelling story than they could otherwise, they are happy to tell Johnson’s story. Whatever the case, it seems inescapable that the “historical” Pitt is at least in part the creation of Johnson’s pen.



In this essay I have argued three very different things. First, Johnson’s debates are more firmly rooted in fact than he led his contemporaries to believe. Although quite a few speeches bear little resemblance to the recoverable historical record, many, perhaps most, rest on reliable source material. In addition, features that catch the reader’s attention—eccentric arguments, anecdotes, Latin phrases, classical allusions—generally have some basis in statements actually made on the House floor. Next, the idea that Johnson’s debates must have been less reliable than the rival series in the *London Magazine* does not stand up to scrutiny. If Johnson sometimes wrote speeches wholly from his imagination, so did his competitor. In such matters as the number and order of participants and the overall completeness of a report, his debates are, in general, superior. But if he did not know much about an issue, he did not go off in search of knowledge: he made what sense he could of the notes that Cave provided, and he left it

45. Brendan Simms, “Pitt and Hanover,” in *The Hanoverian Dimension in British History, 1714–1837*, ed. Simms and Torsten Rott (Cambridge, 2007), 32.

46. Archibald Philip Primrose, Earl of Rosebery, *Lord Chatham, His Early Life and Connections* (New York, 1910), 173.

47. The *LM* published a report of the debate, but it did not include a speech by Pitt.

at that. Finally, Johnson's debates did not merely reflect the political world they were intended to report; they also influenced that world. The public perceptions of Walpole, Carteret, Chesterfield, and perhaps most of all, Pitt, were shaped, at least in part, by the speeches that Johnson wrote in their names. This was not just the influence of a fleeting moment, for these speeches found their way into histories of Parliament and, in the cases of Chesterfield and Pitt, into biographies and other collections whose readers would have had little reason to suspect their dubious origins.⁴⁸ From the remarks of more recent historians, it appears to be an influence that continues to this day.

48. For example, several speeches written by Johnson in Pitt's name were included in the first volume of John Almon's *Anecdotes of the Life of the Right Honourable William Pitt, Earl of Chatham*, 4 vols. (London, 1792).