

SAMUEL JOHNSON AND
THE MAKING OF
MODERN ENGLAND

NICHOLAS HUDSON

The University of British Columbia



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

published by the press syndicate of the university of cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge cb2 1rp, United Kingdom

cambridge university press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge, cb2 2ru, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, vic 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

© Nicholas Hudson 2003

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2003

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Adobe Garamond 10/12.5 pt. *System* L^AT_EX 2_ε [tb]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Hudson, Nicholas.

Samuel Johnson and the making of modern England / Nicholas Hudson.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p. 264) and index.

isbn 0 521 83125 3

1. Johnson, Samuel, 1709–1784. 2. Johnson, Samuel, 1709–1784 – Homes and
haunts – England. 3. Nationalism – England – History – 18th century. 4. National
characteristics, English, in literature. 5. Authors, English – 18th century – Biography.
6. England – Civilization – 18th century. 7. England – In literature. I. Title.

pr3533.h.79 2003

828'.609 – dc21

[b] 2003046265

isbn 0 521 83125 3 hardback

Contents

| | |
|---|------------------|
| <i>Acknowledgments</i> | <i>page</i> viii |
| Introduction | 1 |
| 1 From “rank” to “class”: the changing structures of social hierarchy | 11 |
| 2 Constructing the middle-class woman | 43 |
| 3 From “Broad-bottom” to “party”: the rise of modern English politics | 77 |
| 4 “The voice of the nation”: the evolution of the “public” | 108 |
| 5 The construction of English nationhood | 133 |
| 6 The material and ideological development of the British Empire | 170 |
| Conclusion | 221 |
| <i>Notes</i> | 227 |
| <i>Bibliography</i> | 264 |
| <i>Index</i> | 283 |

CHAPTER I

From “rank” to “class”: the changing structures of social hierarchy

JOHNSON AND THE FORMATION OF THE “MIDDLE CLASS”

Georgian England has presented serious problems for modern social historians who wish to understand its systems of social privilege and status. These difficulties have been perhaps particularly unsettling for scholars loyal to the historiographic tradition of Karl Marx, for a rigid division between three classes – aristocracy, bourgeoisie, working class – can hardly do justice to the subtle and changing gradations of eighteenth-century English society. Beneath the 160 or so officially “noble” families in England lay the subtly graded expanse of the “middling orders,” stretching from the great City merchants to the artisans and shop-keepers whose feelings of political exclusion fueled the Wilkite protests of the 1760s. Wilkes had little interest in liberating the poor and lower orders who, as E.P. Thompson acknowledged, themselves seemed more intent on protecting the comforts they enjoyed under the old system of manor and tenant than protesting against the harsh new realities of enclosure in the country and exploitation in the city.¹ It was only after about 1780, with the advent of industrialism and later the panic sown by the French Revolution, that we can speak adequately of an English “class” system.² For it was only then that English people themselves began to speak and write a language of “class,” consciously identifying themselves with causes, publications, and organizations formed on behalf of the upper, middle or lower classes.

Samuel Johnson, therefore, belongs to the prehistory of “class,” a time that can at best be seen as an age in transition towards the class consciousness that begins to materialize near the end of the century. Indeed, his own *Dictionary* (1755) indicates how society was categorized throughout most of the eighteenth century. Johnson’s only relevant definition of “class,” “a rank or order of persons,” is illustrated not by a reference to the social order, but to types of readers: “Segrais has distinguished the readers of poetry, according to their capacity of judging, into three *classes*.” The most

socially relevant definition seems to be “degree,” which designates “Quality; rank; station; place of dignity.” Notable here is that Johnson does not seem to be thinking primarily of economic categories: “dignity” seems totally abstracted from wealth or function in the economy, and to describe what Peter Laslett has called “social status” derived mostly from one’s heredity or profession.³

To most historians, indeed, Johnson has seemed very much an artifact of this passing world of privilege and rank, even, as recently claimed, an advocate of a social hierarchy inscribed in the “Great Chain of Being.”⁴ Even among some good social historians, Johnson plays the walk-on part of truculent villain, the pompous defender of a system of social elitism, the eminently quotable adversary of all that is progressive and liberating in class history.⁵ A main claim of the following chapter is that this portrait is profoundly unfair and based on little evidence. I will present Johnson as a far more complex, significant, and even forward-looking figure than historians have generally acknowledged. He certainly recognized that he belonged to a society that was being revolutionized by trade and commerce: this was a process that he accepted, and even welcomed in many respects. A man of modest origins who had benefitted from a changing order, he knew that social status and privilege were increasingly based on wealth rather than birth, a process that was at once liberating and potentially disruptive, as demonstrated by the Wilkite agitations of the 1760s and 70s. In the face of these changes, Johnson’s most significant effort was to define the values and social role of what later became known as the “middle class,” the stratum of professionals, writers, and men of commerce distinct from both the nobility and upper gentry above and the lower orders below.

In examining Johnson’s role in this process, I will avoid the misleading and anachronistic model of the “rise of the middle class.”⁶ A “class” cannot “rise,” obviously, if it does not yet exist, and what eighteenth-century people called “the middling orders” were internally divided by income, social function, birth, and innumerable other factors.⁷ Even less satisfactory is the favorite Marxist term “bourgeois,” an official rank division in France, where rigid social stratification finally exploded under the pressure of economic change. The same explosion did not occur in England because here there was an important measure of flexibility in the language and symbols of social status, particularly at the hotly contested zone traditionally dividing the nobility from the commonality – the rank of the “gentleman.” In what I suggest was a slow-burning “revolution” in English society, a whole new mass of men – including Johnson’s father and his early employer Edward Cave – claimed this status without the previously necessary advantages of

birth or substantial property. From this gradual reclassification of the social order, facilitated by the general enrichment of the upper and middle orders, we can trace the later emergence of a self-conscious middle class.

Johnson's work helped to consolidate two main features of this reconfiguration. First, he made clear that the advantages of birth had become subordinate to the power and dignity of wealth. Second, he promoted an ideal of learning and virtue that, while derived from the older model of the "gentleman," came to characterize a new understanding of middle-class respectability. As I will go on to emphasize with relation to Johnson's *Dictionary*, it is indeed quite deceiving to identify this writer with the ruling class *tout court*, for he came to embody values of an English middle class that was self-consciously distinct from the nobility and upper classes, but which, at least among the majority of its members, ultimately believed that its own and the nation's interests were best protected by excluding the lower classes from political power.

The Marxist division of society into three ranks has, in fact, a long intellectual pedigree, and was developed in the nineteenth century on the basis of older and more traditional divisions. In 1707, Guy Miège rehearsed a conventional division of the people into "*Nobility, Gentry, and Commonality*."⁸ And this ranking was also repeated almost half a century later by Henry Fielding in his *Enquiry into the Causes of the Late Increase of Robbers* (1752): "One known Division of the People of this Nation is into the Nobility, the Gentry, and the Commonality."⁹ Neither Miège nor Fielding assumed that these three groups were based on wealth; wealth represented, traditionally, only an outward *sign* of a rank founded principally on heredity, education, and social function. By Fielding's time, however, the influx of wealth into the nation through trade had begun seriously to challenge this form of social classification, throwing into doubt the adequacy of the old divisions. As Fielding observed, "nothing has wrought such an Alteration in this Order of People, as the Introduction of Trade. This hath indeed given a new Face to the Whole Nation, [and] hath in a great measure subverted the former State of Affairs."¹⁰ The major changes were occurring not at the top or the bottom, but at the middle of the social hierarchy. Interestingly, Fielding had trouble articulating this phenomenon: while he signals awareness of what he calls "the middle Rank,"¹¹ he generally lumps this ill-defined middling group into the "commonality." Hence, while noticing anxiously that society had begun to reconfigure itself along lines based on wealth rather than birth, he remained conceptually dependent on old categories founded on hereditary rank. Himself a legitimate "gentleman" by birth, particularly by virtue of noble blood on his father's side, Fielding was deeply discomforted

by the recognition that this old criterion for gentility was being widely challenged by men who claimed to be “gentlemen” not by birth, but on the basis of wealth and “luxury.” In Fielding’s view, this disruption, fomented by “trade,” had corrupted the whole social hierarchy: “while the Nobleman will emulate the Grandeur of a Prince; and the Gentleman will aspire to the proper State of the Nobleman; the Tradesman steps from behind his Counter into the vacant Place of the Gentleman. Nor doth the Confusion end here: It reaches the very Dregs of the People, who [aspire] still to a Degree beyond that which belongs to them.”¹²

What was threatened by this “Confusion” was a social order largely taken for granted a century before. Works of the early seventeenth century reject wealth as a foundation for gentility, depicting trade as inherently vulgar and degrading.¹³ The “gentleman,” as William Higford put it, was a “minor” nobleman,¹⁴ and should be educated to fill a post of leadership and to act as the exemplar of the highest accomplishments and virtues. For this reason, the mere pursuit of money was beneath his dignity, for the gentleman must have a refined and elevated soul, cleansed of “*self-love*, or *self-gaine*.”¹⁵ As Henry Peachum observed in *The Compleat Gentleman* (1634), “the exercise of Merchandize hath beene . . . accounted base, and much derogating from Nobility.”¹⁶ Opposing a practice already started, the purchasing of coats-of-arms, most writers insisted angrily that the right to wear a sword, symbol of the gentleman’s continuing role as defender of the nation’s glory, could only be bestowed by the King. The rejection of trade and commerce as sources of gentility reflects, as well, the conviction that intellectual labour was inherently superior to work performed with the hands. Professionals like lawyers and doctors could make some claim to the status of “gentlemen” by virtue of their superior learning, but those enriched by “Machanicall Arts and Artists, whosoever labour for their livelihood or gaine, have no share at all in Nobility or Gentry.”¹⁷

In the era after the Civil Wars, however, tracts on the gentleman are characterized by a profound change of tone, particularly an irreverent hostility against the upper ranks in general. There are several explanations for this tone of indignation. For many, the Civil Wars marked the failure of the nobility and gentry to fulfil their allotted roles as guardians and exemplars of the nation. Exiled gentlemen who had supported Charles I, such as John Evelyn, expressed profound dismay with the alleged vulgarity and passivity of the gentry that remained in England under Cromwell.¹⁸ Puritanism, moreover, had left its mark, stiffening popular disgust with the idleness and decadence of the upper ranks, a glaring feature of the Restoration court. “Idleness is become the badge, as it were, or distinguishing mark of

Gentility," complained William Ramsey in *The Gentleman's Companion* (1672), and he went on to denounce the gentry for excelling in consumption of drink rather than virtue or arms.¹⁹ This attack on the morals of gentlemen was not, however, exclusively "Puritan." The English Jesuit William Darrell declaimed similarly against the idleness and corruption of the gentry and nobility in *A Gentleman Instructed* (1704), observing bitterly that "many who hang at Tyburn, are often less Criminal, than some of those who stand Spectators of the Tragedy, or perchance who sate on the Bench."²⁰

From this kind of complaint arose the preoccupation with social inversion so typical of popular works of the early eighteenth century such as Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728). Gentlemen had become criminals; criminals had become gentlemen. In the context of this disillusionment, the increasingly wealthy community of merchants and traders could make a strong case that they were wrongly disparaged, and that they were just as qualified to claim the title of "gentleman" as those idle and drunken coxcombs who claimed superiority by birth. Defoe hated "the numerous party of old women (whether male or female)," who thought that birth should be considered more important than the intrinsic attributes of gentlemen, as celebrated in handbooks of genteel behavior.²¹ As Defoe complained, these traditional "gentlemen" by birth were failing to fulfil their true role as social exemplars, a function much better performed by virtuous, learned, and wealthy men of mean birth: "The son of a mean person furnish'd from Heaven with an original fund of wealth, wit, sence, courage, virtue, and good humour, and set apart by a liberal education for the service of his country . . . shews himself to be an accomplish'd gentleman, in every requisite article, that of birth and blood excepted."²² This statement contains a challenge far more radical than might at first appear. Anticipating the much later language of "class," Defoe was reimagining social hierarchy as based on money rather than rank, wondering, in privately underscored lines, whether mere wealth "*may at the Bottom be the essence of that Distinction*" between the gentleman and the mere commoner.²³

Nevertheless, Defoe's reflections on the "gentleman" also contain significant and revealing ambiguities. If, on the one hand, he wished to redefine this status in economic terms, on the other he clearly coveted the honors and insignia attached to the hereditary gentry. "I am resolv'd . . . to give antiquity its due homage;" he wrote, "I shall worship the image call'd antient lineage as much as possible without idolatry."²⁴ The ideal of ancient dignity and inherited honor clearly attracted a man who appended the elegantly Norman "De" to his family name of "Foe." As we will see, this ambiguity persisted right through the evolution of the "gentleman" and its later

permutation, the middle class. The goal of the commercial middle class seemed, in many respects, to gain entrance into the traditional dignities of the gentry – to become, in effect, indistinguishable from the traditional elite. Yet it is doubtful that a full integration of the old and emergent elite ever occurred to the extent that Defoe liked sometimes to imagine, for the merchants and tradesmen, beginning with Defoe himself, developed pragmatic values antagonistic to the effete standards of the traditional gentry. As a result, the middle class emerged as an intensely conflicted group, socially and often politically divided between practical men of business and the professional or literary community represented by Samuel Johnson. Yet this band of English society, divided in values and manners, found common economic and political cause in opposing the agitations of the lower class and in their shared sense of separation from the traditional nobility.

This is not to deny that Georgian England *did* experience a historic transition in social standards that removed much of the stigma traditionally associated with self-interest and the pursuit of profit.²⁵ In 1674, Edmund Bolton complained harshly that, according to popular conceptions, “apprenticeship extinguisheth gentry” – that is, the children of gentlemen who went into trade were so sullied by its dishonor that they lost their genteel status.²⁶ Yet, to read Guy Miège’s account of the gentleman in 1707, one would think that merchants and traders had quickly overcome this barrier to acceptance by the gentry. “Formerly Trading degraded a Gentleman,” he observed, “but now a thriving Tradesman becomes a Gentleman by the happy Returns of his Trade, and Encrease of his Estate.” Miège’s work suggests that the title “gentleman” had come to describe not birth but rather merely “good Garb, genteel Air, or good Education,” largely *outward* qualities rather than the disinterestedness and elevation of soul demanded by the traditional ideal.²⁷ And indeed conduct books of the early eighteenth century aimed at newly prosperous merchants and traders suggest similarly that gentility referred to how one looked and behaved, not to one’s pedigree or even one’s learning and virtue. A late work in this genre, John Constable’s *The Conversation of Gentlemen* (1738), echoed the common advice that it was in fact highly impolite for a gentleman to refer to his “Advantage of a Family.”²⁸ It was also rude to speak Latin, dispute academic points, or display the kind of learning traditionally given to gentlemen: this behavior was “pedantry,” and broke the cardinal rule of merely blending in with the crowd of fashionable men distinguished by an elegant air and witty conversation.²⁹ As the distinguished settings of Constable’s dialogue imply (formal gardens, drawing rooms), wealth remained a prerequisite for the gentleman, for only the wealthy could afford the pleasures and estates

that defined a genteel life. Otherwise, however, the aim of Constable's book and others like it was to create a new ruling class that seamlessly melded the landed and monied elite through the medium of wealth and common manners.

That such a ruling class was forming in reality is evidenced, as social historians have noted, by the rising frequency of inter-marriage between the landed gentry and prosperous families in business.³⁰ Marrying into mercantile wealth was an attractive way to repair the damaged fortunes of the nobility. And it also became usual for the younger sons of noblemen to embark on a career in the City. This inter-penetration of the gentry and wealthy merchant community was increasingly regarded, indeed, as one of the distinguishing characteristics of English life. One of the most astute observers of British society at mid-century, Josiah Tucker, contrasted the rigid separation of the nobility and merchants in France with the mingling of these orders in England. In France, there were officially three "different Ranks, or Orders; The *Noblesse*, the *Bourgeois* [*sic*], and the *Paisans*"; trade was considered a disgrace, and bourgeois who bought their way into the nobility left the counting-house behind as quickly as possible.³¹ In England, by contrast, "the Profession of a *Merchant* is esteemed full as *honourable* as that of an *Officer*. And no man need leave off Trade, when he finds himself rich, in order to be respected as a Gentleman."³²

Yet there are also indications that the political and economic marriage between the gentry and the merchant community was not quite so peaceable and loving as Tucker and others suggested. Indeed, even Tucker would argue in a later work that only the *landed* classes could be trusted to keep the nation's general interest foremost in their thoughts; as important as it was to the economy, the monied classes could not be relied on in political decisions about, for example, the war with America.³³ Moreover, as the merchant community grew in wealth and power, it increasingly moved away from the ideals of behavior and manners inherited from the gentry. Consider the developing theory and practice of education during the eighteenth century: a marked trend in education was the decline of the classical grammar school, the institution established in the English Renaissance to train the aristocracy and gentry. Increasingly, rich merchants and tradesmen questioned the value of sending their sons to school to learn Latin, Greek, and classical poetry. They wanted their heirs to learn to count, to write clear English with a good hand, and to know enough of geography, history, and politics to compete economically on both the national and world stages. Hence, the number of schools designed for non-classical education multiplied by two-and-half times during the eighteenth century. The classics in general

suffered a serious decline in English schools until the nineteenth century.³⁴ The following rhetorical questions posed in James Barclay's *A Treatise of Education* (1743) echo widely expressed attitudes in educational treatises of Johnson's era:

The merchant, after five or six years study, hath he neither time or [*sic*] inclination to enjoy the reward of his labours in a narrow review of the classicks? Would he not rather wish so many leisure-hours had been employed in a greater practice of writing and arithmetick, the knowledge of history, antiquity, geography, the several branches of trade, and other things which are often the subject of conversation?³⁵

This trend in education was also reflected in the century's book-market and press, as evidenced by *The Gentleman, Tradesman, and Traveller's Pocket Library* (1753). Written by "a Gentleman of the Bank of England," and published by the book-selling entrepreneur John Newberry, this one-volume encyclopedia gives a very different impression of what is expected of a "gentleman" than we find in the writings of Ramsey, Darrell, or even an older generation of "gentleman-merchants" like Defoe: its contents are entirely confined to practical, political, and commercial subjects – "a Short System of Geography," "the Political History of Europe," a "History and Rationale of the Stocks or Public Funds." There is not a hint of classicism in this book, and it reveals no interest in emulating the life and manners of the nobility or gentry.

It was during this age of transition in English society that Samuel Johnson emerged from relative obscurity as a teacher and later a journalist for *The Gentleman's Magazine* to become one of the great arbiters of taste and morals in the age. The collected *Rambler* essays, as Paul Korshin has noted, reached twenty editions by the end of the century;³⁶ they would continue to be standard reading for middle-class people throughout the nineteenth century. As we have already considered, moreover, Johnson would come virtually to epitomize the blunt common sense of the conservative bourgeois Englishman, a "John Bull" figure who helped to define a middle-class sensibility. How then did Johnson react and contribute to the evolution of the social values that I have described?

To tackle this question is to confront directly the paradoxes and tensions that we have considered in the transition from "rank" to "class." On the one hand, Johnson often seems to deserve his reputation among many modern historians as the truculent defender of the old order, "an enthusiastic supporter," as a recent historian writes, "of rank and hierarchy."³⁷ This impression cannot be ascribed, as has been sometimes suggested, merely to the biased portrait of Johnson by the elitist Boswell. Johnson's repeated

advocacy of "subordination" in the *Life* is, if anything, *less* passionately conservative than the furious attacks on "low-born railers" and "the desire of levelling" (10:341–2) that fill his political writings of the same era. This impression is also corroborated by Johnson's ardent classicism, which reveals his self-conscious loyalty to the tradition of the Renaissance grammar school for "gentlemen." In starting his school at Edial, near Lichfield, in early 1736, he defied the overwhelming educational trend of his era towards non-classical schools profiting from merchants and tradesmen. Here is the advertisement that he placed in *The Gentleman's Magazine* in June 1736: "AT EDIAL, near *Lichfield* in *Staffordshire*, Young Gentlemen are Boarded, and Taught the *Latin* and *Greek* Language, by SAMUEL JOHNSON."³⁸ His plan of education was not quite so conservative as this advertisement suggests: a careful examination of his handwritten "Scheme for the Classes of a Grammar School," reproduced by Boswell, suggests that he generally followed the revised classical curriculum outlined by a moderate reformer of education, John Clarke.³⁹ It is hardly surprising, however, that Johnson's effort to buck the educational trends of his age failed, and his school was abandoned after less than a year. Even this failure did not lessen Johnson's loyalty to the classical grammar school, for he never gave more than qualified and lukewarm support for the new schools that reduced or eliminated the classics. As he said of a school established by Johnson's friend and admirer James Elphinston, "I would not put a boy to him, whom I intended for a man of learning. But for the sons of citizens, who are to learn a little, get good morals, and then go to trade, he may do very well."⁴⁰

Striking and typical in this statement is Johnson's willingness to give "gentlemen" and "tradesmen" different kinds of education, and to treat them as essentially different groups. Johnson by no means opposed a practical education for merchants and tradesman, and indeed showed a personal interest in the world of business. Yet Johnson's essays show considerable scorn for merchants and tradesmen who, in the tradition of Defoe, attempt to emulate the fashions and manners of the gentry. A typical example is Misocapelus in *Rambler* No. 123, who makes a fortune as a haberdasher, but is mortified to discover that his conversation is scorned by gentlemen. In an attempt to gain the respect due to rank, Misocapelus dresses in high fashion and attempts to join the literary talk at genteel coffee-houses – but all for nought, as he is always "detected in trade" and ridiculed as "Tape the critick" (4:293–4). The *Idler* is filled with satiric sketches of tradesmen who attempt to behave like gentlemen, such as Sam Softly the wealthy sugar-baker, who buys a splendid chaise, fine clothes and tours fashionable estates. In Johnson's eyes, the punishment for Sam's vanity is utter

absurdity: “Misapplied genius most commonly proves ridiculous. Had Sam, as nature intended, contentedly continued in the calmer and less conspicuous pursuits of sugar-baking, he might have been a respectable and useful character” (2:289). And the same absurd incongruity of status and pretension characterizes a gallery of figures in the *Idler* – Tim Ranger, Dick Shifter, Dick Minim – all tradesmen who in their various ways have “turned gentlemen” (2:287).

These essays suggest a determined effort to make a clear separation between mere wealth and the knowledge and conduct required of the “gentleman.” Nonetheless, we are on thin ice in assuming that he wished merely to reinforce an old system of social hierarchy, for this assumption seems, indeed, entirely inconsistent with his own background and conduct. As Johnson’s early biographers often noted, Johnson’s father signed himself “Michael Johnson, gent.” in the registry of his eldest son’s baptism at St. Mary’s Church, Lichfield.⁴¹ Michael’s pretension to the title of “gentleman” could be partly justified by his status as sheriff of Lichfield, and by his modest prestige as a (still) prosperous book-seller (traditionally considered the most “genteel” of trades on account of its demand for some learning).⁴² In 1709, however, calling oneself a gentleman was a daring and even defiant act by a man of such lowly birth as Michael, the son of a field-laborer. In other words, Johnson’s own father is a good example of the kind of ambitious, lower-order man who was challenging the old hierarchical divisions. This fact was not lost on the effete Boswell, son of a Scotch laird. “The truth is,” he sniffed, “that the appellation Gentleman, though now lost in the indiscriminate assumption of *Esquire*, was commonly taken by those who could not boast of gentility.”⁴³ Yet Boswell’s own subject seems to have harbored some of his father’s pretensions, an interesting possibility tucked away in a note appended by the biographer to his record of Johnson’s doctoral diploma:

I once observed on his table a letter directed to him with the addition of *Esquire*, and objected to it as being a designation inferiour to that of Doctor; but he checked me, and seemed pleased with it, because, as I conjectured, he liked to be sometimes taken out of the class of literary men, and to be merely *genteel*, – *un gentilhomme comme un autre*.⁴⁴

The famous “Doctor Johnson,” it would seem, actually preferred to be called “Samuel Johnson, *Esquire*.” And in this respect he resembled both his upwardly mobile father and another new-style gentleman, the man who gave Johnson his break into the London literary scene, Edward Cave, editor of *The Gentleman’s Magazine*. *The Gentleman’s Magazine* was, indeed, the

literary vanguard of the defiant new concept of the gentleman as a man not of birth but of knowledge and civilized manners. Its eclectic contents mirror a readership of men (and even women, who were employed by Cave) with an appetite for a vast range of subjects from politics to natural science, geography to history, literary criticism to the occasional Latin poem. Nor is commerce entirely omitted from the subjects of this journal, though "getting money" evidently played only a secondary role in this new ideal. As for Cave himself, he epitomized the middle-class gentleman who was challenging the domination of this status by the old landed gentry. As described in Johnson's warm biography of Cave, he was a self-made man who, rather like Johnson, spent much of his early life struggling for a career. In his early days as a printer's apprentice he stood clearly as an advocate for the underdog, "a tenacious maintainer though not a clamorous demander, of his right."⁴⁵ The same insistence on his "right" evidently inspired the determination of this ambitious but socially graceless man to link his name closely with a new idea of the gentleman. He even designed a coat-of-arms for himself (showing his offices at St. John's Gate), which he displayed on the door of his newly purchased carriage.⁴⁶

Unlike Cave, Johnson himself did not affect the trappings or manners of gentility, a practice he satirizes in his essays. Yet his essays often express considerable contempt for the traditional nobility and gentry. A large number of his periodical essays are devoted wholly or in part to attacks on the ignorance, vanity, hedonism, and uselessness of the upper classes. In *Rambler* No. 39, he portrays "Cotylus, the younger brother of a duke, a man without elegance of mien, beauty of person, or force of understanding" (3:215). *Rambler* No. 132 describes the vain efforts of a tutor to educate a young nobleman to become "a wise and useful counsellor to the state" (4:337): spoiled and pampered by his mother, the tutor's charge instead becomes an idle rogue who knows nothing but "the rules of visiting," and "the names and faces of persons of rank" (*Rambler* No. 194, 5:249). The fashionable lady Peggy Heartless, in *Idler* No. 86, summarizes much that Johnson evidently thought about the polite inhabitants of Westminster: "Our fortune is large, our minds are vacant, our dispositions gay, our acquaintance numerous, and our relations splendid" (2:267). In his scathing portraits of upper-class mindlessness and triviality, Johnson seems to echo the satire of the traditional elite which characterized the conduct books of Ramsey, Darrell, Defoe, and others who promoted access to the privileges previously confined to those of proper birth.

Johnson belonged, that is, not merely to a genteel "elite," but to an emergent middle-class "push" into the lower levels of the gentry. "Middle-class"

seems, indeed, *almost* the appropriate term, for men like Michael and Samuel Johnson or Edward Cave were carving out an identity based on knowledge, virtue, and financial independence, a social status that cannot be conflated with the values and expectations of the nobility or traditional gentry. We must also keep in mind, however, that members of the new middle class were fond, to varying degrees, of emulating the fashions and traditions of the elite: to a large degree, the gentry continued to furnish the models of “symbolic capital,” Pierre Bourdieu’s useful term for the currency of social prestige only indirectly related to economic status and advancement.⁴⁷ Johnson the teacher, as we have seen, remained loyal to the traditional gentleman’s education, and often reacted with scorn to the awkward efforts of merchants and tradesmen to emulate the gentry. Hence, in examining this era of social transition, we inevitably confront the paradoxes exemplified by Johnson, a man who can seem alternately the social “rebel” described by Donald Greene and, especially later in life, a vocal ally of the traditional hierarchy crowned by the nobility and gentry. How can we explain these apparent contradictions?

What does seem certain is that Johnson was no believer in a “natural” hierarchy inscribed in the “Great Chain of Being.” That he adhered to such a doctrine has, indeed, been widely affirmed by historians who apparently know little of his thought except what they have gathered from a shallow reading of Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*. To link Johnson with the Chain of Being is indeed astonishing, for this was the writer whose review of Soame Jenyns’s *Free Inquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil* (1757) represents the century’s most powerful attack on the logical and religious soundness of this very doctrine. Among other concerns in this review, Johnson excoriates Jenyns’s glib and self-serving assumption that God had wisely allotted the poor a fixed place at the bottom of the scale of social rank, a disadvantage allegedly compensated by the ignorance of the poor about what they were missing. As Johnson objected, however, “to entail irreversible poverty upon generation after generation, only because the ancestor happened to be poor, is, in itself cruel, if not unjust.” Such a restriction on social movement would, in any event, contradict “the maxims of a commercial nation, which always suppose and promote a rotation of property, and offer every individual a chance of mending his condition by his diligence.”⁴⁸

This is only one of many places in Johnson’s writing and conversation where, despite his snipes at merchants and tradesmen, he recognizes the liberating and civilizing impact of commerce on society. During his travels with Boswell in the Scottish Highlands, for example, he often welcomed the first incursion of commerce into a feudal society that he disdained, in

some important respects, as backward and barbaric: he complains about the drafty buildings, the miserable huts and even the lack of shops on the Isle of Skye. Yet his reactions to this living process of historical change were not simple. It is significant that the transition from a society based on hereditary rank to one that respected only wealth left him with divided emotions:

When the power of birth and station ceases, no hope remains but from the prevalence of money. Power and wealth supply the place of each other. Power confers the ability of gratifying our desire without the consent of others. Wealth enables us to obtain the consent of others to our gratification. Power, simply considered, whatever it confers on one, must take from another. Wealth enables its owner to give to others, by taking only from himself. Power pleases the violent and the proud; wealth delights the placid and the timorous. Youth therefore flies at power, and age grovels after riches. (9:94)

This is a generally balanced analysis of the phenomenon that a Marxist historian might call the early stages of capitalism in a feudal economy: whereas most of the passage seems to favour the benefits of "wealth" over "power," the final reference to "age" groveling after riches is hardly uplifting. This ambiguity reveals Johnson's conflicting emotions at the loss and gain entailed by the historical process driven by commerce. On the one hand, he was certainly no indiscriminate admirer of the feudal charm of the Highlands, which he often compares unfavorably with the modernity and convenience of modern England. As I will argue at length in a later chapter on Johnson's nationalism, however, historians have been quite wrong to conclude that he merely despised Highland culture, for he admitted, more than once, to feeling the tug of the old heroic spirit of the ancient clan: "To lose this spirit, is to lose what no small advantage will compensate" (9:91). What *A Journey to the Western Isles of Scotland* (1775) shows, in fact, is Johnson's conviction that the historical changes occurring in the Highlands and, at a later stage of development, in England and Lowland Scotland entailed social readjustments that were both irresistible and morally ambivalent. By no means did he think that some "natural" order of hereditary rank was being destroyed by the evils of wealth. Rather, he regarded the increasing authority of wealth at the expense of rank as a necessary part of the modernization of society.

In thus treating this change as an essentially historical phenomenon, Johnson was perfectly in step with the thought of contemporary thinkers like John Millar, whose *Observations concerning the Distinction of Ranks in Society* (1771) can be called, without much qualification, the first British

work devoted primarily to the issue of social hierarchy and its history. That Millar's history should appear so late is an indication of how intellectuals of Johnson's time were awakening for the first time to "class" in ways that no longer took the traditional hierarchy for granted. A Lowland Scot who viewed the Highlands largely from the perspective of the British and Continental Enlightenment, Millar shared Johnson's ambivalent feelings about the passing of birth and family as the primary bases of authority and prestige. In past times, Millar argued, social prestige was bestowed for military heroism. This form of honor was not only, by its nature, an unstable and transient basis for social order, but also promoted various evils such as, particularly, the denigration of women and children – the alleged characteristic of "primitive" societies such as the indigenous cultures of America. Only wealth, principally in the stable form of land, could lend continuity to the social order, raising the importance and prestige of women, whose virtue ensured the proper transfer of properties and titles. Yet riches also create disruptions of a new kind. Millar finally riveted on the following paradox of his own times: traders and artisans, newly empowered by wealth, felt increasingly impatient with the authority of the hereditary monarch, whose power, in turn, had been augmented by his control of a standing army paid from public funds. In Millar's view, in short, contemporary society teetered precariously between two possible disasters, civil insurrection on the one side and regal tyranny on the other.

In these observations on the increasing dissatisfaction and restlessness of traders and shop-keepers, Millar's anxieties echo Johnson's of precisely the same period – the period, significantly, when Wilkes was inflaming the agitation of mobs consisting largely of precisely these groups. As Johnson wrote in *The False Alarm* (1770), "we once had a rebellion of clowns, we have now an opposition of the pedlars" (10:341). Such a remark may well strike us as very curious coming from a man who once helped his father peddle books in the markets of Uttoxeter and Derby. Yet, like Fielding, Johnson is concerned that the opportunities for social and political advancement made possible by trade were theoretically without limit: if his father or Edward Cave could claim the privileges of being "gentlemen" without the advantage of birth, why should the same claim be denied the well-to-do sugar-baker or mercer? Unlike Fielding, however, Johnson was not merely hanging on to the hereditary privileges of the past era. Himself the benefactor of a changing social order, Johnson evidently supported "subordination" and the maintenance of traditional rights as an essentially *arbitrary* curb on the disruptive effects of a commercial society, changes that he nonetheless regards as historically inevitable. It is this conviction in the

need for traditional buffers against modern change, and *not* veneration for the upper classes or belief in a "natural" order, that informs his arguments for subordination in Boswell's *Life*. Respect for "old families," he said to Boswell, is only "a matter of opinion." Nevertheless,

it is a matter of opinion, very necessary to keep society together. What is it but opinion, by which we have a respect for authority, that prevents us, who are the rabble, from rising up and pulling down you who are gentleman from your places, and saying "We will be gentlemen in our turn"? Now, Sir, what respect for authority is much more easily granted to a man whose father has had it, than to an upstart, and so Society is more easily supported.⁴⁹

In Johnson's view, it is more easy to grant authority to inherited rank because it is *accidental* and, for this reason, not open to competition and envy. As he is recorded saying in Boswell's *London Journal*, the "fixed, invariable rules of distinction of rank . . . create no jealousy," for "they are allowed to be accidental."⁵⁰ It is significant that in the passage above Johnson speaks *not* as a "gentleman" but as a member of the "rabble" addressing Boswell, the "gentleman" by birth. In other words, he implicitly includes himself in the feelings of envy for mere "upstarts," an emotion that he consistently regarded as natural and inevitable to some degree. Living in what he recognized to be a time of profound social transformation, Johnson favored the maintenance of traditional hierarchy and the political authority of the upper gentry as means of controlling natural, yet profoundly unsettling, ambitions released by a commercial society.

In remaining loyal to some aspects of the older social system, however, Johnson aimed to do more than merely control the forces of change also described by Fielding and Millar. Johnson was also anxious about the general degradation of social manners caused by the worship of money. Johnson's opening paragraph in *Idler* No. 73, published in September 1759, may almost be taken as summarizing the major theme in his essays written in 1750s. "In a nation like ours, in which commerce has kindled an universal emulation of wealth . . . money receives all the honours which are the proper right of knowledge and virtue" (2:227). The same theme underlies the many stories in the *Rambler*, *Adventurer*, and *Idler* that follow a strikingly consistent pattern: men and women of respectable pedigree, but little money, wander with naive optimism into a society in which, finally, wealth counts far more than rank. In *Rambler* No. 12, Zosima, "the daughter of a country gentleman," is left penniless and must search for a job as a servant: her claims of genteel birth are consistently scorned by the rich women she approaches for employment: "Such gentlewomen!" exclaims "the great

silk-mercantile lady,” “people should set their children to good trades, and keep them off the parish . . . Pray, Mrs. gentlewoman, troop down stairs” (3:63–4). Constantius in *Rambler* No. 192 is “the son of a gentleman, whose ancestors, for many ages, held the first rank in the county” (5:239). Constantius is nonetheless left poor by the neglect and luxury of his predecessors, and is accepted as a suitor for the hand of Flavia only so long as it is believed that he will inherit a fortune from his uncle, a wealthy merchant. In these essays, Johnson paints a world where all values seem extinguished except greed for wealth. It is a world without, to cite one of his favorite words, “reverence” (“Veneration; respect; awful regard”). Time and again in his writings and conversation, Johnson laments decline of the “reverence” for the social institutions and religion that preserve peace and order. “He that encourages irreverence, in himself or others,” he instructed in Sermon 24, “weakens all the human securities of peace, and all the corroborations of virtue” (14:259).⁵¹

This anxiety to deter the erosion of “reverence,” of non-mercenary and disinterested values, helped to motivate Johnson’s continuing and loyal support for classical learning and the traditional education of gentlemen. Indeed, it is hardly an exaggeration to claim that Johnson’s *Rambler* essays are dedicated, above all, to the defence of traditional learning and virtues in a society that increasingly finds dignity and merit only in riches. To this extent, Johnson does sound very like an advocate for the values preached in seventeenth-century conduct books, with their disdain for avarice and their glorification of scholarship and military valour. As Johnson writes in *Rambler* No. 118, “The man whose whole wish is to accumulate money, has no other care than to collect interest, to estimate securities, and to enquire for mortgages.” Among such narrow and ignorant men, “The adventures of valour, and the discoveries of science, will find a cold reception” (4:268). Against authors like John Constable, who advised his “gentlemen” to avoid any show of learning, and simply to conform with those around them, Johnson indignantly defends “pedantry,” “a censure which every man incurs, who has at any time the misfortune to talk to those who cannot understand him” (*Rambler* No. 173, 5:151). And if he seems often a partisan of “polite” society, it is usually because he believes that, at least here, people still have some value for “wit,” an accomplishment utterly contemptible to the man who “never had any other desire than to fill a chest with money” (*Rambler* No. 128, 4:318). For Johnson, however, this is more than just an issue of social manners or the protection of those learned achievements that he valued in himself. He repeatedly associates a failure of generosity, compassion, and social responsibility with a narrow obsession with money.

A good example is Squire Bluster in *Rambler* No. 142: descended from an "ancient family" that exhibited the traditional gentry virtues of benevolent care for their tenants and neighbors, Bluster is brought up by his grandmother, who teaches him to care only about saving and wealth. As the result, Bluster becomes a tyrant, indulging constantly "in a contentious and a spiteful vindication of the privileges of his manors, and a rigorous and relentless prosecution of every man that presumed to violate his game" (4:392). He comes to embody "the depravity of mind" characteristic of a mercantile age, becoming a man who "has birth without alliance, and influence without dignity" (4:393).

In these essays, Johnson may seem only an advocate for the passing values of the traditional gentry, a man vainly attempting to buttress society against a capitalist order that was threatening to engulf all of society. Yet Johnson was in fact more a man of the "future" than he is usually credited with being. Significantly, he was defending ideals that would be integral to the formation of a self-conscious middle class late in the century. During the last quarter of the century, there was an important resurgence of the belief that classical education was indispensable in the formation of the true gentleman. This resurgence was led not by the aristocracy or the very wealthy. Rather, the ideal of the traditional gentleman's education was expounded by educators of the middle ranks such as Vicesimus Knox, a writer of conduct books and master of Tunbridge School: "But I will venture to assert, that classical learning tends most directly to form the true gentleman . . . it is not a fashionable dress, nor a few external decencies of behaviour, which constitute the true gentleman. It is a liberal and an embellished mind."⁵² The same ideal of "liberal education" was expounded by contemporaries of Knox such as James Beattie, Joseph Cornish, and Percival Stockdale.⁵³ This ideal of a liberal education was not meant to challenge or even emulate the upper classes. Intended for the children of the middling ranks, this education promoted the belief that mere practical training was insufficient, and that the child must be endowed with "a susceptible and feeling heart," "a fine imagination and acquaintance with the world,"⁵⁴ in order to fulfil his or her duties in society. This idea of education would lead to the historic revival of classical education in English public schools of the nineteenth century, and the widespread belief in the value of literary education that lasted until the end of the twentieth century.⁵⁵

Even within the middle classes, this notion of education did not go unchallenged. The merchant community was never, as we have noted, completely at home with the genteel values traditionally associated with

wealth and power. Near the end of the eighteenth century, City authors such as the surveyor William Stevenson were still insisting that “classical learning has no connection with the primary object of a good education: the knowledge of facts and habits of reasoning.”⁵⁶ And this prejudice against the classics extended to *belles-lettres*, which seemed of little use to many practical people of business, as Johnson had observed. Stevenson’s attitudes reveal a persistent fault line in the middle classes between the commercial and professional/literary communities. Particularly in the latter group, however, there was wide consensus that respect for the traditional manners and attributes of rank, including a heart and mind shaped by liberal education, constituted an essential and unifying basis for middle-class consciousness. The first author to use the term “middle-class” in any systematic way, Thomas Gisborne, was strongly critical of the narrowing influence of avarice on the community of merchants and traders. “Of all the professions which are in the hands of the higher and middle classes of society,” he wrote, “none perhaps lead more directly to contracted ideas than those which consist in buying and selling, in casting up accounts, in calculating pecuniary risks and advantages, and in the uniform transactions of the counting-house and the shop.” Gisborne then went on to expound the principles of a liberal education. “To guard the youth destined for such a situation from falling into the trammels of prejudice, and habituating himself to partial and confined views of things, it is peculiarly desirable that his mind should be cultivated, his faculties expanded, and his ideas taught to expatiate in a wide and ample range, by a liberal and learned education.”⁵⁷

It cannot be stressed too much that Gisborne’s version of a traditional gentleman’s education, based on the classics and *belles-lettres*, virtue and good manners, does not represent merely an adulation of the landed gentry or a nostalgia for a past order. His underlying assumption was rather that the political interests of the middle class were best preserved by the status quo. The nobility offered a buttress against the common threat of the “swinish multitude,” as Burke famously labeled the lower orders in *Reflections on the Late Revolution in France* (1790). Aristocratic tradition also provided a useful social example to preserve unity and coherence within the middle class itself, minting a common currency of symbolic capital that could be exchanged between merchants and the literary/professional community. Keeping the merchant community loyal was indeed a high priority during the 1790s, as their alienation was seen as a central source of the disruptions in France.

It is this sense that the most famous conservative document of this era, Burke’s *Reflections*, also represents a signal document in the history of an

English middle-class revolution. For those familiar only with the *Reflections*, such a claim will probably seem obtuse or paradoxical: Burke's treatise is rightly famous for its aggressively revisionist celebration of inherited rank and monarchy over "upstart insolence" and "dealers in stocks and funds," the groups he blames for leading the uprising against the throne, nobility, and church in France.⁵⁸ Like other English writers of his era, however, Burke was most intent on showing that the interests of the middle class, that testy union of the commercial and professional/literary communities, were best preserved by accepting the existence of a strong and privileged nobility, guardians of taste, learning and virtue. Burke customarily positioned himself among the "middle sort of men . . . who, by the spirit of that middle station, are the fittest for preventing things from running to excess."⁵⁹ This "middling" perspective is visually invoked in some of the most memorable passages in this work. We will recall, for example, Burke's lyrical reminiscence of Marie Antoinette shining "just above the horizon, decorating and cheering the elevated sphere she just began to move in,"⁶⁰ a resonant passage written, not accidentally, from the perspective of someone in an audience looking *up* from "just" below the horizon. Indeed, "horizon" seems a quintessentially middle-class image, locating Burke's precisely at his familiar, lifelong position *below* the balcony of power, the untitled advocate for middle-order interests and opinions. No wonder Tom Paine was surprised that Burke had written the *Reflections*: further "left" than Johnson himself, Burke had been among a handful of MP's who had opposed Wilkes's expulsion from parliament in 1769. Yet even the *Reflections* is very much a defense of the middle-class revolution that had already taken place in England over a long period of time. Burke's historically compelling diagnosis of the cause of the French Revolution echoes the views of Josiah Tucker almost half a century before: France had not permitted the intermixing of the noble and commercial sectors that might have diffused the pressure that finally exploded in France:

Those of the commons, who approached to or exceeded many of the nobility in point of wealth, were not fully admitted to the rank and estimation which wealth, in reason and good policy, ought to bestow in every country; though I think not equally with that of other nobility . . . This separation, as I have already taken the liberty of suggesting to you, I conceive to be one principal cause of the destruction of the old nobility.⁶¹

Burke echoes a highly liberal and even "Whiggish" opinion: the French nobility, like the English, should have relaxed its demand for high birth to accommodate the social and political aspirations of the *nouveaux riches*.

As so often in his later writing, Burke speaks as a “new man,” someone who argues not to defend his own hereditary privilege, but as someone of the untitled ranks who believes in a traditional social order because it is *theoretically* in the national interest. The brogue of Burke the upstart Irishman can always be heard just beneath the surface of his impassioned and patriotic prose. While hardly obvious in the *Reflections*, the indignation of a man insulted for his undignified origins and lack of title burns throughout *Letter to a Noble Lord* (1796), a work that virtually defines a distinctively middle-class conservatism.

English middle-class consciousness, that is, was marked by its trust in the inherently stabilizing ballast of traditionally aristocratic manners and education in a society increasingly propelled by the headwind of commercial wealth. That the structure of this society was more and more founded on wealth, not birth, is implicit rather than obvious in Burke’s *Reflections*, but this observation is front and center in other conservative works of the same era. Alarmed by the insurgence of *sans-culottes* in the French Revolution, middle-class authors of this era were anxious to find economic and political justifications for existing political and social inequalities, and the standard justification was not reliant on traditional ranking but rather *economics*. The lower classes were told that their own welfare depended on the prosperity of the upper and middle classes. This argument implied a vision of society dominated by the relations of employment and labour. As maintained by Sir Frederic M. Eden in *The State of the Poor: or, an History of the Labouring Classes in England* (1797), “it is not the possession of land, or of money, but the command of labour, which the various circumstances of society place more or less within their disposal, that distinguishes the opulent from the labouring part of the community.”⁶² In other words, people formed a single class as a result of their performing a particular kind of *work*. The same understanding of the social hierarchy characterizes a more famous book of the same era, Thomas Malthus’s *An Essay on the Principle of Population, as it Affects the Future Improvement of Society* (1798). According to Malthus’s chillingly utilitarian defense of the free market, the lower classes had to be kept poor and struggling, their weakest and most idle members culled by the competition for survival, in order to facilitate their utilization by the higher classes as a cheap and pliable corpus of labor. Attempts to erect a Utopian society based on abstract principles of compassion and justice, such as proposed by William Godwin, would ultimately settle back towards the natural and inevitable division of economic roles, “I mean, a society divided into a class of proprietors, and a class of labourers, and with self-love for the main-spring of the great machine.”⁶³