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Book Review: *Samuel Johnson and the Culture of Property* by Kevin Hart

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Correspondence can be plumbed for facts and details about the writer's or addressee's life. We know, or think we know, what did or did not happen because it receives mention in a letter. Most of the essays in this volume, however, focus on another function of letter-writing: its role in constructing rather than reproducing reality. Ditz, for example, argues that "merchants' letters do not simply record or describe their surrounding economic and social reality (though they may well purport to do so); they 'inscribe' and 'rework' it" (61). This formulation could stand as a motto for nearly every essay in this volume. It is an approach to letters that makes this book interesting to any scholar of biography or history who has contemplated using relevant correspondence to reconstruct the reality of a particular person or event.

The contributions to *Epistolary Selves* range widely, covering letters from three continents and from every century from the seventeenth through the first half of the twentieth. To organize this diversity the editor, Rebecca Earle, has made a tripartite division: the Verneys and the immigrant letters make use of the "letter collection"; the letters of merchants, of George Bogle, and of the Swedish ironmaster belong to the nexus of "letters, the family and public life"; while the remaining four essays illuminate the relationship between "women and the letter form." To me, this division is perhaps the least felicitous aspect of a rich collection of essays. Many of the essays make use of letter collections, while of the pieces included in "women and the letter form" only Steedman's treats the issue in a consistent fashion. Finally, most of the essays could also have been placed in the second category. My own intuitive recategorization of the chapters would separate those that are "meta" in orientation, such as David Gerber's critique of the existing historiography of immigrants' letters, and Steedman's theoretical rehearsal of the issues surrounding women's writing, from those that focus on the letters of individuals such as Emily Dickinson, the Wolfs, and George Bogle, and also from those that delineate an entire network of epistolary correspondence, such as by the Verneys and friends, the Swedish bourgeoisie, Philadelphia merchants, or the mothers of World War Two. Perhaps the larger point is that these essays, like letters themselves, show a significant capacity for crossing boundaries.

Thomas O. Beebee

Hart, Kevin. *Samuel Johnson and the Culture of Property*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999. 244 pp. ISBN 0-521-65182-4, \$59.95.

Kevin Hart's *Samuel Johnson and the Culture of Property* sets a far more ambitious agenda than its title suggests. Hart's aim, broadly described, is to examine and assess Johnson's place both in his world and in the Anglo-American

cultural imagination. His observations take an extensive view of property, one that includes ownership of many kinds, such as land, literature, even life itself. The book is also as much about James Boswell as it is about Samuel Johnson. Boswell's biographical effort to transform Johnson into a "monument" led not only to the creation of a national icon but to the critical metanarrative of the English eighteenth century as the "Age of Johnson." Consequently, for all his rugged individualism, Johnson is inescapably the property of Boswell, and the English eighteenth century is inescapably the "Age of Johnson."

Hart locates his interest in what he calls the "economic acts" of Johnson's time—a period, he argues, that witnessed the "formation" of various kinds of property, often but not always "real, personal, or literary" (6). These "economic acts" involve a process of "appropriation" and "expropriation," the most salient of which is Boswell's "diverse appropriations of Johnson" and the consequent effort of some scholars to "expropriate Boswell from the reading of Johnson" (8). While Hart prefers the language of economics, the main issue he raises is epistemological: how do we know what we know about Johnson? In his view, our knowledge of Johnson cannot escape the mediating factors of his eighteenth-century *milieu* and its consequent critical reception. In this sense, we can never know the *essential* Johnson; he remains forever one kind of property or another.

Hart's opening chapter traces the tension between Boswell's desire to "monumentalize" Johnson and the tendency in Johnson's own writings to resist such "monumentalization." Here the *Dictionary* proves a case in point, but as Hart rightly argues, the same holds true for virtually all of Johnson's writings. Where Boswell's Johnson offers authoritative pronouncements with conclusive finality, Johnson the author is far more dialectical and nuanced, always sensitive to the fugitive nature of language and the complexity of moral judgment. This discussion leads neatly to Hart's second chapter, which addresses the result of Johnson's monumentalization, the idea of an "Age of Johnson." Here we find a label that marks the eighteenth century as Johnson's property, yet Hart acknowledges that the period includes so much that the label cannot contain, so much that isn't remotely "Johnsonian." Nonetheless, Hart's central contention in this chapter is that the persistence of the term "Age of Johnson" indicates largely a preference for Johnson the man to Johnson the writer, offering Carlyle's assessment in *On Heroes, Hero Worship, and the Heroic in History* as the *locus classicus* of this perspective. Hart's sensitivity to the epistemological difficulties posed by the idea of an "Age of Johnson" (which he compares to a *Goethezeit* for Goethe) leads him simply to remind his readers that any such unifying phrases represent "an imaginary social space" (65).

What follows next is a chapter called “Property Lines” that traces the various ways in which numerous nineteenth and twentieth century editors of Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* have filled in this space, from J. W. Croker’s “radical interpolations” (81) to G. B. Hill’s expansive, often digressive, footnotes. Hart then allows ample attention to the countertradition, exemplified most prodigiously by the work of Donald Greene, that attempts to rescue—or expropriate—Johnson from Boswell and his editors. Unlike Greene, Hart refuses to choose between Johnson and Boswell, arguing that however much we might seek to approach the two friends as “independent universes,” they will always remain “luminously passing through one another at their edges, apparently forever” (100).

Perhaps one of the most significant instances of the Johnson/Boswell interdependency can be found in their trip to Scotland in 1773. Hart devotes two chapters to this topic, as Boswell’s *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* charts not only a time of full daily access to his companion but also stands as a text that met with the pre-publication approval of Johnson, and hence cannot be charged with the distortions that scholars like Greene allege of the *Life*. The first of these chapters examines the politics of Scotland’s transition from an oral to a written culture, a situation that prompted an ambivalent response from Johnson, who deplored the loss of an older patriarchal culture but nonetheless celebrated the permanence of the written word and the opportunities that result from an acceptance of literature as property. The second of these chapters considers how fraud can be numbered among these literary opportunities, focusing on James Macpherson’s appropriation of Scottish national myth in the Ossian poems, and Johnson’s skeptical response. The book then concludes with a chapter called “Everyday Life in Johnson” that argues how no biography, not even the one that has often been called the greatest in the English language, can capture the elusive, ephemeral experience of day to day life. “The associations, feelings, habits and memories that made up Johnson’s life are no longer there,” Hart writes, though he adds that, more so than from the pen of Johnson’s other friends and biographers, “it is Boswell who gives us the impression of everyday life” (168, 172).

The strength of Hart’s study lies in its willingness to address the cultural conditions that contributed to the creation of an “Age of Johnson,” and the continued resonance so many find in the study of Johnson and Boswell. Hart’s understanding of what biography can and cannot accomplish makes this a worthy study not only for those who specialize in the eighteenth century, but for all scholars interested in the genre. In the end, though, it might be the Johnson scholars who find themselves least satisfied by the book, as

many of its conclusions are fairly commonplace. When Hart remarks “I have discussed how Johnson is and is not a monument, how his times are and are not ‘the Age of Johnson,’ and how Boswell and his editors are involved in both constructions,” he isn’t saying anything that William Dowling and Fredric Bogel haven’t said before (131–32). Yet even if Hart’s conclusions lack originality, many readers will find much new and rewarding in his highly detailed and richly researched attention to the genealogy of the Johnson and Boswell industry. Those who seek extended discussions of Johnson’s own writings might find themselves disappointed, as for the most part Hart sets his sights elsewhere. This omission strikes me as unfortunate in a book by an insightful scholar that places Johnson in its title, and treats the idea of biography with such seriousness, but ultimately says little about Johnson as biographer. The “Property Lines” chapter begins with the promise of a discussion of Johnson’s *Lives of the Poets*, but as we have seen, becomes a chapter on editing Boswell. While *Samuel Johnson and the Culture of Property* has much to teach about the ways that Boswell has transformed his subject into a kind of cultural property, it pays far less attention to the kinds of property formations that might be found in Johnson the biographer, whom Boswell described as having “excelled all mankind in writing the lives of others.”

Steven D. Scherwatzky

Carol Mavor. *Becoming: The Photographs of Clementina Viscountess Hawarden*. Durham: Duke UP, 1999. xxxii + 213 pp. 134 illus. ISBN 0-8223-2355-9, \$59.95 cloth; ISBN 0-8223-2389-3, \$19.95 paper.

Virginia Dodier. *Clementina, Lady Hawarden: Studies from Life, 1857–1864*. New York: Aperture, 1999. 128 pp.; 101 illus. ISBN 0-8935-1815-1, \$45.00.

Art history is rooted in biography. In a key article, J. R. R. Christie and Fred Orton outline art history’s biographical options between social history and the monograph: “One can simultaneously and non-contradictorily represent an individual in a society, a culture, a sub-culture, a country, a mode of production.” They argue for retaining biography as narrative but without its traditional “over-individualized accounts of artistic creation, and reductive explanations in terms of talent or genius, or incorrigible psychoanalytic interpretation” (558–59). Instead, they suggest opening up biographical narrative to poststructuralist insights that acknowledge multiple selves built of contradictory motives and interpellated by often conflicting cultural constructions of identities: