

London Introduction

London, published in 1738, represents Johnson's attempt to satirize the grubby world of London and also to rise above it. The poem is an "imitation" of the Third Satire of the Roman poet Juvenal, who imagines a friend, named Umbricius, who is sick and tired of the city of Rome and is leaving for the countryside for good. In doing an imitation of his classical source, Johnson is not simply *translating* Juvenal's poem (a modern translation of which is included here for purposes of comparison), but updating it, finding modern correlations to the Latin original. Here, London stands in for Rome, "Thales" stands in for Juvenal's Umbricius, and the Tuscan countryside to which Umbricius was headed becomes Wales. Exhausted by the filth, crowds, noise of London, and the difficulty of making a living as a writer, Thales (believed by some scholars to refer to Richard Savage, another hack writer who had become a friend of Johnson's) in some ways expresses Johnson's own frustrations. But *London* itself, published in a handsome folio edition, written in the heroic couplet form that to readers of the 1730s identified the high style of serious poetry, using the form of the imitation to signify its neoclassical aspirations, and hyped in the pages of the *Gentleman's Magazine* (which published ads for the poem, and also excerpted it), is clearly an attempt to Johnson to get out of hackdom as soon as possible, to become a poet like Alexander Pope, making a good living independent of the whims and tight fists of the booksellers and magazine editors. In this, it is clear that Johnson failed. *London* seems to have sold reasonably well, but it was a dead end, and Johnson had to continue to grind out work for hire for another decade and a half. It was not until he achieved fame in the 1750s, first as the author of a *Spectator*-like series of journalistic essays called *The Rambler* and then as the editor of the *Dictionary of the English Language*, which made him a kind of national treasure, since he had single-handedly accomplished for English what it

had taken large teams of scholars to do for other European languages. Here, let's read Johnson as Grub Street's finest product—and its most perceptive critic.