

On the Death of Dr. Robert Levet Introduction & Bibliography

This poem is an elegy commemorating Samuel Johnson's late friend, Dr. Robert Levet, which celebrates his dedication to medical service. Upon the poem's completion Johnson did not seek to publish the piece. Instead, his friends circulated it amongst themselves and eventually placing it into the hands of a prominent publication of the time, *The Gentleman's Magazine*. The magazine's first version, published in August 1783, is the source we use here on this website for the poem.

"On the Death of Dr. Robert Levet" is written in ballad verse, and it is separated into 9 stanzas of 4 lines each. A ballad verse is an informal and personal type of poetry; this is not a format that Johnson would write for the public, such as "The Vanity of Human Wishes", or "London." The alternating line rhyme scheme lends a musical quality to the oral reading of this poem.

According to James Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, Johnson filled his home with all sorts of people in order to avoid loneliness after his wife passed away. One of these characters was Levet, whose source of income was working as a waiter at the local coffeeshop (a place where ideas, stories, and even stocks or shares in companies were exchanged). There Levet's conversations with multiple doctors led to his accumulation of medical knowledge, which he then used to start his own unofficial practice. Because the field of medicine was itself so undeveloped at this time, Levet's lack of official credentials was of no consequence to his efficacy as a healer of the sick. He worked on poor patients in the most desperate neighborhoods, accepting little in exchange. In the *Life of Johnson*, Boswell describes Levet as "an obscure practiser in

physic amongst the lower people, his fees being sometimes very small sums, sometimes whatever provisions his patients could afford him." Johnson had much respect for this commitment and selflessness, and saw it in contrast to much of the pompous nature of society and academia's elite at the time with whom he often interacted.

Works Cited:

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