

Vanity of Human Wishes

Introduction

“The Vanity of Human Wishes” has been considered to be a challenging poem ever since it was first published in 1749. Like “London,” “The Vanity of Human Wishes” is an *imitation* of one of the *Satires* of the Roman poet Juvenal, whose works date to the first and second centuries. And as was the case with “London,” by an *imitation* Johnson means a poem that is not a translation but something looser. In this case, Johnson is building his poem on the framework provided by Juvenal’s tenth Satire, a poem about the futility of human aspirations in the face of the indifference of nature and the gods. Both poems present a sequence of people who desire something—power, glory, fame, a long life—but who then inevitably discover that their wishes are hollow. Where “London” was more or less a political poem taking a stance in opposition to the Walpole government and its corruption, “The Vanity of Human Wishes” is more moralistic and philosophical, pondering the place of desire in human life.

In this poem, Johnson replaces the particular examples that Juvenal uses with his own. Often these are examples of people drawn from English history, like Cardinal Wolsey, or contemporary European figures, like Charles XII, the Swedish king who fought several wars against Russia early in the eighteenth century. In other cases, Johnson uses examples from antiquity, like Xerxes or Alexander the Great. Throughout, though, “The Vanity of Human Wishes” creates a dense web of allusions to historical figures, and even the educated among Johnson’s contemporary readers would have had difficulty identifying all of them. In this edition, these allusions have been annotated to enable modern readers to follow the course of Johnson’s argument.

In adapting a poem by a Roman author, Johnson is also trying

to translate Juvenal's pagan morality to a Christian context. Johnson was a devout member of the Church of England, and one of the challenges he must have faced was reconciling the Latin poem's fatalism with a Christian sense of redemption. At the same time, Johnson has clearly made the decision not to be explicit about this—he does not invoke the Christian god in any direct way. To get a sense of how Johnson attempted to give a sense of optimism, pay attention to the end of the poem, where the figure of “celestial Wisdom”—which has no parallel in Juvenal—appears. What *are* we supposed to do? what are we supposed to wish for? what kind of moral universe does Johnson imagine here?

Johnson seems to have liked this poem. Later, he recalled that he composed the first seventy lines or so in his head, all at once, while taking a walk in the garden. And, unlike “London,” his name appears on the title page. This is probably a sign of Johnson's pride in the work. It is also a sign that Johnson, after more than a decade of anonymous writing, much of it for the *Gentleman's Magazine*, was in a position to assert his authorship more publicly. And this poem was written when Johnson was hard at work at the book that would bring him fame, the *Dictionary of the English Language*, which was published in 1755.

But “The Vanity of Human Wishes” does not seem to have been a huge commercial success in its day. Compared to “London,” which went through multiple editions, this poem was not reprinted in Johnson's lifetime. The difficulty of the poem—its allusiveness and the dense texture of Johnson's heroic couplets—surely accounts for a lot of this. David Garrick, Johnson's friend and former student, and the most famous actor of the eighteenth century, joked that “The Vanity of Human Wishes” was “as hard as Greek.” In the last few decades, though, critics have returned to this poem, and many rate it as a masterpiece, one of the most powerful long poems of the eighteenth century.