

## Johnson's *Rasselas*

To the Editor:

In his article entitled "The Biblical Context of Johnson's *Rasselas*" (*PMLA*, 84, March 1969, 274–81), Thomas R. Preston notes two Christian schools of interpreting Ecclesiastes: one stresses that man should "despise and reject this world to contemplate the world to come"; the other, a "reformed" school of interpretation, argues that Ecclesiastes "taught us not to despise the pleasures of this world but to enjoy them" (p. 274). Elaborating upon the "reformed" interpretation of Ecclesiastes, Mr. Preston says: ". . . once man realizes his inability to find perfect happiness in this world, he can and should enjoy to the fullest the limited joys it offers. As Bishop Patrick claims, the Preacher is paradoxically saying, 'excite thyself, by the remembrance of death, to a cheerful enjoyment of those good things present'" (p. 279). Mr. Preston then attempts to demonstrate that the "reformed" reading of Ecclesiastes permeates *Rasselas*.

This reader finds it difficult to accept Mr. Preston's argument. While I agree that *Rasselas* does not preach a message of despair and contempt for the world, I remain unconvinced that Johnson, in the manner of the "reformed" interpreters of Ecclesiastes, exhorts us to a "cheerful enjoyment of those good things present." There seems to be little evidence of a philosophy of enjoyment in *Rasselas*. Nekayah, the prince's sister, does not reveal any particular capacity to enjoy life. Nor does she exhibit a positive attitude toward the world. Mr. Preston maintains that she does, citing her speech in which she quotes Imlac's statement "that nature sets her gifts on the right hand and on the left" (Ch. xxix). According to Mr. Preston, Nekayah's speech "explicitly sets forth a positive attitude toward the goods of this world" (p. 281). This seems overstated. Nekayah is only momentarily positive: more often she is pessimistic and negative, at least throughout the section in which this speech occurs—the discussion of family life and the debate on marriage (Chs. xxv–xxix). (She concludes, for example, that "marriage has many pains, but celibacy has no pleasures" in Ch. xxvi.)

*Rasselas* himself does not reveal a gift for enjoying life. He is too preoccupied with his search for happiness to enjoy the moment at hand. As Imlac wisely observes, "while you are making the choice of life, you neglect to live" (Ch. xxx). Mr. Preston cites this line as evidence of what he calls the "commitment-to-life" theme (p. 281) in *Rasselas*—a theme which he

claims supports the thesis that the work is shaped by the "reformed" reading of Ecclesiastes. A commitment-to-life theme is certainly evident in *Rasselas*, but it is presented in such an ambiguous manner by Johnson that it adds little to Mr. Preston's argument. One source of ambiguity is the passiveness inherent in Imlac's character. A passage which Mr. Preston offers as evidence of Imlac's commitment to life reads: "Imlac and the astronomer were contented to be driven along the stream of life without directing their course to any particular port." The verb "driven" connotes a lack of control over one's destiny, and the phrase "without directing their course" suggests a sense of Imlac's passivity, not purposiveness. Imlac earlier reveals his passiveness in the episode concerned with ridding the astronomer of the delusion that he can control the weather. It is *Rasselas*, not Imlac, who first thinks of "restoring his [the astronomer's] benefactions to mankind, or his peace to himself" (Ch. xlvi). Imlac does not initiate his cure; thus he is slow to respond to this opportunity to practice his commitment-to-life philosophy.

Another source of ambiguity in Johnson's treatment of the commitment-to-life theme is the structure of the work itself. As it has been often noted, the structure of *Rasselas* is circular, and whether the party at the end returns to the Happy Valley or only to Abyssinia (a problem which has vexed critics), the work lacks a clear sense of forward movement, direction, or purpose other than to direct our attention to the next world. The title of the final chapter, "The Conclusion, in Which Nothing Is Concluded," also undermines any positive reading of *Rasselas*. Here Imlac's companions "diverted themselves . . . with various schemes of happiness which each of them had formed." "Diverted themselves" suggests idle conversation, not positive activity or deep commitment to anything in particular. The penultimate sentence in the work ("Of these wishes that they had formed they well knew that none could be obtained.") closes *Rasselas* on an ironic, not a positive or cheerful, note.

As to the matter of who articulates the philosophy of enjoyment claimed to be present in *Rasselas*, Imlac is the only remaining possibility. Imlac's devastating statement, "Human life is every where a state in which much is to be endured, and little to be enjoyed" (Ch. xi) answers the question quite simply. This is by no means Imlac's only negative observation. His positiveness, when it does appear, is usually muted and low-keyed. For example, Imlac's answer to *Rasselas*' question as

to whether he is content in the Happy Valley is qualified and cool: "I am less unhappy than the rest, because I have a mind replete with images" (Ch. xii). Imlac does not reveal himself as one who, to use Mr. Preston's words, "enjoy[s] to the fullest the limited joys" of the world (p. 279).

Mr. Preston also indirectly raises the question of world-weariness in Johnson's work by quoting William Sherlock, a "reformed" interpreter of Ecclesiastes: ". . . the Design of the whole Book of *Ecclesiastes* is not to put us out of Conceit with Life . . . not to make us weary of Life" (p. 280). While I agree that *Rasselas* does not "put us out of Conceit with Life," I would argue that it contains an undeniable note of lassitude in passages such as the following: "Imlac, though very joyful at his escape [from the Happy Valley], had less expectation of pleasure in the world, which he had before tried, and of which he had been weary" (Ch. xiv). The old man of learning, whom the prince and his party encounter, is tired of the world and of knowledge, and he leaves "his audience not much elated with the hope of long life" (Ch. xlv). This episode thus undercuts both intellectualism as a possible value in *Rasselas* and the commitment-to-life theme as well as illustrating weariness of life.

For these reasons, I have serious reservations about accepting Mr. Preston's thesis that *Rasselas* was influenced by the "reformed" school of interpreting Ecclesiastes which he describes.

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A reply by Professor Preston will appear in the March *PMLA*.

#### "Real English Evidence": Stoicism and the English Essay Tradition

To the Editor:

That Professor Earl Miner based his recent *PMLA* essay on an inaccurate assessment of the popularity of Stoic works in England during the Renaissance and the Restoration has been convincingly argued by Professors Freehafer and Williams.<sup>1</sup> There is yet another area in which Miner's study is misleading: he confuses the general popularity of a work with its degree of influence on writers. The "real English evidence" of Stoicism's influence (or lack of influence) on English writers between 1530 and 1700 lies not in a tabulation of publication data, but in the pages of English books written during that time. Professors Croll and Williamson have traced in detail the stylistic influence of Stoic writings on English prose, and their conclusions need no defense of mine. What has not been studied as comprehensively is the influence of Stoicism as a philosophy on English writers of the

sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Such an examination is, of course, beyond the scope of the space allowed here; but a brief look at one important genre which flourished during the period that Miner considers can provide enough evidence to cast doubt on his conclusions.

Because it made its first appearance in English and grew into maturity during the period critical to Miner's argument, and because it is particularly susceptible to philosophical influences, the essay (with its associated forms, the meditation, the vow, and the resolve) is a good barometer of attitudes toward Stoicism in the late Renaissance and the Restoration. The first pieces in English that might be called essays, the anonymous *Remedies against Discontentment* (1596), are most of them Christian Stoic contemplations: "How wee ought to prepare our selues against passions," "Of vanitie," "Of aduersitie," "Of the affliction of good men," etc. Following this little book came such wholly or partially Stoic collections as Sir William Cornwallis' *Essayes* (1600–01); the *Meditations and Vowes, Divine and Morall* (1606, augmented 1609) of the "English Senec" Bishop Joseph Hall; Daniel Tuvill's *Essayes, Moral and Theological* (1609, augmented as *Vade Mecum*, 1631); Owen Felltham's *Resolves: Divine, Morall, Politicall* (1623, augmented 1628, revised 1661); and the essay passages in Ben Jonson's *Timber* (published posthumously 1640–41). Among the major essayists of the earlier seventeenth century, only Sir Francis Bacon failed to be much influenced by Stoic thought. And in the years following the Restoration, only Abraham Cowley, in his *Several Discourses by Way of Essays* (published posthumously 1668), exhibits any fondness for Stoic ideas, and he only occasionally and partially. English publishers may have issued relatively few books by Epictetus, Seneca the Younger, Tacitus, Aurelius, and Lipsius during the first six decades of the seventeenth century; but English essayists show a distinct reliance on Stoic thought during those same sixty years.

Because its ideas and sentiments are so typical of its period, and because its various parts were written over a span of thirty-eight years, Felltham's *Resolves* is a particularly good single work against which to test Miner's thesis.<sup>2</sup> In the 100 brief pieces of the first edition (1623), the eighteen-year-old Felltham sees the world to be in its decline, with goodness and justice at their lowest ebb; and he finds Christian Stoicism helpful in fortifying himself to live in such a world. In the longer pieces added in 1628, he considers and resolves Stoically such problems as "Of sodain Prosperitie" (i), "Of Resolution" (ii), "Of the losse of things loued" (xxxI), "Of the vncertainty of life" (xxxii), and "Of the temper of Affections" (Lxii). In "Of Fate" (Lxxix), he reconciles the classical Stoic concept of Fate, as illustrated by a quotation from Seneca's