

So What's Wrong with "Buxom"?

Samuel Johnson, Poetical Language, and Semantics

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Johnson's lexicographical work, not surprisingly, informed his famous literary criticism. By incorporating quotations taken from past writers into his *Dictionary*, and generating its lemmas, definitions and notes on usage, in most cases, from these quotations, the *Dictionary* can be said to comprise an extended effort of literary/linguistic commentary. When Johnson, under each lemma, sets the semantic delimitations of a word or phrase in passages he quotes from literary writers, he is involved in a critique or reading of literary language. Johnson was indirectly engaged in literary and linguistic criticism while working on the *Dictionary* in its various editions (beginning in 1755 and extending beyond the heavily-revised fourth edition of 1773 to the end of his life in 1784), yet his *magnum opus* of criticism appeared in 1779 and 1781 as *The Lives of the English Poets*, originally written as prefaces to authors' works. Along with his edition of Shakespeare published in 1765, *The Lives* contains the richest collection of Johnsonian critical commentary. His discussion of poetical language, both in his criticism of particular poets and in his general attitudes towards poetical language as reflected in the *Dictionary*, represents a totality of approach often overlooked by commentators and critics. In Johnson's own time, commentators found the authority in his *Dictionary* for his famous critical comments present in the explicitly literary-critical writing, or found evidence supporting *Dictionary* entries and definitions in his critique of poetry. More frequently, however, Johnson's critics pored through his lexicon in the hope of finding contradictions, material they could use to ridicule and illustrate the circularity, illogicality, or simple error of Johnson's comments on the poets. Surprisingly, it would appear that the attention given to Johnson's definitions and notes on usage in his *Dictionary* as relevant to his comments elsewhere on poetical language has decreased in modern times. This paper offers an attempt at restoring the connection.

I will focus on Johnson's often notorious comments on poetic language in his "Life of Thomas Gray." Gray was a popular darling, not only among general readers, but among artistic and literary figures in Johnson's acquaintance like Joshua Reynolds, Joseph and Thomas Warton, James Boswell, and others. He had died only ten years before the "Life" appeared in 1781 in Johnson's *Prefaces*. Gray was seen as a new and exciting poet, breaking new ground with what many considered passionate, exciting obscurity and a kind of synesthesia of imagery and expression. Johnson refuses to flow with the changing tides of critical taste in the "Life of Gray," and his criticism disturbed many readers who considered it not only wrongheaded but even malignant. Hester Thrale notes on 5 Oct. 1780—when the "Life" was completed but not yet published—that Johnson's "criticism of Gray offends many people" and mentioned Joshua Reynolds in particular (Balderston 1951: i. 459; Lonsdale 2006: iv. 477). James Boswell acknowledged that Johnson's opinion of Gray's poetry "was widely different from mine, and I believe from that of most men of taste, by whom it is with justice highly admired" (Hill and Powell 1934-50: i. 404; Lonsdale 2006: iv. 479). Johnson's sworn enemy, Percival Stockdale, would later refer to his "crude, and invenomed strictures against Gray" (Stockdale 1807: 540). Many (unlike Stockdale) who embraced the criticism in the *Lives* more generally were repulsed by Johnson's comments in "Gray." William FitzThomas objects: "He is with Gray more verbal, logical, and minute, where these critical niceties ought, in reason, least of all to be practiced" (Boulton 1971: 291). Why did Johnson object so ostentatiously to Gray's poetical practice?¹

¹ Johnson's objections did not extend to Gray's famous "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," which he contrasted favorably with his obscure *Odes*. See Lonsdale 2006, iv. 184.

Johnson's criticisms coalesce around Gray's distinctive (Johnson would say careless and precious) use of poetic language. Gray asserted a right as a poet to use words in unusual ways reserved for poetry; against this view, at least as practiced by Gray, both Johnson and Wordsworth a few years later would be allied in their criticisms.

Johnson responds to previous reactions to Gray's poems, unimpressed with their enthusiasms. Two of his poems excite particular linguistic energy from Johnson; in turn, Johnson's comments were fiercely attacked by Gray's defenders. The first example is from his comments on Gray's "Ode on Spring," which begin: "His ode on *Spring* has something poetical, both in the language and the thought; but the language is too luxuriant, and the thoughts have nothing new" (Lonsdale 2006: iv.180). "Luxuriant" for Johnson means "Exuberant; superfluously plenteous," as he defines it in his *Dictionary*, quoting Pope's line in *The Imitations of Horace, Epistle II.ii*, ll 174-75: "Prune the *luxuriant*, the uncouth refine, / But show no mercy to an empty line." He notes in his "Life of Thomson" that "[Thomson's] diction is in the highest degree florid and luxuriant, such as may be said to be to his images and thoughts *both their luster and their shade*; such as invests them with splendour, through which perhaps they are not always easily discerned" (IV.104). Johnson continues his comments on Gray's language in the poem as follows: "There has of late arisen a practice of giving to adjectives, derived from substantives, the termination of participles; such as the *cultured* plain, the *daisied* bank; but I was sorry to see, in the lines of a scholar like Gray, the *honied* Spring" (Lonsdale 2006: iv.180). The lines in question are the following:

The insect-youth are on the wing,
Eager to taste the honied spring
And float amid the liquid noon: (ll. 25-27)

Johnson's insistence on precision of diction, ensuring clarity and discernment, recurs in his comments on poets including Milton, Thomson, and especially Gray. What makes their language, which shades or obscures their thoughts, vague or in need of pruning? That language is productive of meaning is self-evident, yet Johnson insists on a particularly strict delimitation of language measured by semantics and semantic derivation. Stockdale called Johnson's strictures "pedantic," meaning that they are indebted to strict "scholarly" criteria of derivation, narrowly circumscribed, as to what is allowed in poetical (or presumably other) contexts. Johnson is clearly not very enthusiastic about the recent practice—associated with Miltonic imitators such as James Thomson—of making such "-ed" adjectives out of nouns. They imitate past participles, though they are not past participles: "daisied bank" is simply a bank covered in daisies; despite the fact that there is no verb, "to daisy," in the language, the description is at least imaginable. Yet "honied" implies a verb, "To honey," which Johnson defines in the *Dictionary* merely as "To talk fondly," with one example from *Hamlet* ("honeying and making love/Over the nasty sty."). Logically, analogous to the other cases, "honied" breaks the rules about logical lexical/semantic derivation/formation. Johnson would say it requires a metaphorical understanding beyond logical semantic development. It is imprecise to imagine what "honied" means in this context, and, if we think of it literally, it makes no sense at all. Each example is a different kind of fake, one kind more egregious than the others.²

His next contentious comments, on "The Prospect of Eton College," proceed as follows:

His epithet, *buxom health* is not elegant; he seems not to understand the word. Gray thought his language more poetical as it was more remote from common use: finding in Dryden *honey redolent of Spring*, an expression that reaches the utmost limits of our language, Gray drove it a little more beyond common apprehension, by making *gales* to be *redolent of joy and mirth* (iv. 181).

To begin with the second part of Johnson's objection first, the lines from Gray's poem read as follows:

² I have not included in this analysis Johnson's criticism of Gray's use of "many-twinkling" as "not analogical" in "The Progress of Poesy," although it could be fruitfully examined along similar lines; see Lonsdale 2006: iv. 182 and 495 n.

I feel the Gales, that from ye blow,
 A momentary Bliss bestow,
 As waving fresh their gladsome Wing,
 My weary Soul they seem to sooth,
 And, redolent of Joy and youth,
 To breathe a second Spring (ll. 15-20).

Here are Dryden's lines to which Johnson refers: "But kine to pails distended udders bring, / And bees their honey redolent of spring" (trans. of Ovid, *Epistles*, Bk xv, ll. 109-110). ("Redolent" means, of course, "smelling of," or, in Johnson's *Dictionary*, "Sweet of scent.") One could *just* imagine, Johnson seems to allow, Dryden's honey smelling of spring (the bees having produced honey from the flowers, the honey retaining the flowers' odor); but "gales" smelling (sweetly?) of "Joy and youth" stretches the limits of understanding ("drove [the conceit] a little more beyond common apprehension"). What *precisely* does it mean? Which scents, how recovered and transmitted?

About Dryden, Johnson had asserted memorably in the "Life of Dryden" that

next to argument, his delight was in wild and daring sallies of sentiment, in the irregular and excentrick violence of wit. He delighted to tread upon the brink of meaning, where light and darkness begin to mingle; to approach the precipice of absurdity, and hover over the abyss of unideal vacancy. This inclination sometimes produced nonsense, which he knew ... And sometimes it issued in absurdities, of which perhaps he was not conscious ... his endeavour after the grand and the new produced many sentiments either great or bulky, and many images either just or splendid (Lonsdale 2006: ii. 149-50).

Johnson's brilliant characterization of Dryden's language (as it constructs sentiments and images) as daring, even reckless, reminds us of how radical Dryden's poetry was when it first appeared just after the mid-point of the 17th century. Johnson's dramatic reference to "unideal vacancy"—apparently meaning, as Roger Lonsdale, the modern editor of Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*, notes, "expressing or conveying no idea," with "ideal" defined in Johnson's *Dictionary* as "Mental; intellectual; not perceived by the senses" (Lonsdale 2006: i. 407)—re-inscribes the responsibility (semantic, rhetorical) of the poet to make sense, not as the primary activity, but as a priority. It all begins with semantics for Johnson, and semantics are determined by the logical derivation from an etymological root. Yet for Johnson, a poet like Dryden was great because he took verbal chances, even though he sometimes hovered over the "unideal" abyss, and his meanings were sometimes darkling; he was greater than Pope, in Johnson's eyes, because his risks brought higher triumphs.

Gray's risks, on the other hand, bring only obscurity and debasement of poetical language. A later critical commentator, William Wordsworth, singled out Gray for criticism for using language that is overtly poetical, artificial, obscure, and distanced from the common speech of men, what he calls the language of prose. "Honey redolent of spring" would not be understandable for Wordsworth: it is a clear example of poetic diction, artificial for both Johnson and Wordsworth, for similar, if not identical, reasons. Wordsworth was, of course, against poetical artifice in his "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" and in his other commentary, and he felt Gray's borrowing from Dryden to be ostentatious. Despite Gray's reputation as a sort of proto-romantic poet, employing what many have called "Romantic" language and imagery—what Johnson terms "luxuriousness"—Wordsworth appears to share Johnson's concerns over Gray's poetic language and obscurity and his "driving" words and phrases "beyond common apprehension."³ Johnson is hesitant to accept language reserved for poets: in his discussion of definitions in the *Plan of the Dictionary of the English Language*, Johnson lists "the use of a word by a poet" as a late and collateral meaning he would accept, right down the list of legitimate usages (Kolb

³ For a useful discussion of Wordsworth's attitudes, especially concerning Gray's poetry, see Swearingen 1974: esp. 491 and 503. In a Johnsonian poetic/linguistic vein, Wordsworth criticizes Gray's use of the word "fruitless" for "fruitlessly" in the following line from his sonnet on West: "I fruitless mourn to him that cannot hear" (Butler and Green 1992: 749; Swearingen 1974: 503).

and DeMaria 2005: 48). He was also particularly critical, as we can see in his comments, of a certain kind of expansion of inherited tropes and usages from other writers.

To return now to “buxom”: so what *is* wrong with “buxom”? Johnson writes that “*buxom health* is not elegant; he seems not to understand the word.” Here are the lines in question, the poet speaking of the young boys of Eton College:

Theirs buxom Health of rosy Hue,
Wild Wit, Invention ever-new,
And lively Chear of Vigour born (ll. 45-47).

In the words of Roger Lonsdale, “SJ was particularly exercised by ‘Buxom’” (iv. 493). Back in 1747, in his *Plan of the Dictionary of the English Language*, Johnson had used the word as an example of words that undergo contingent semantic change:

In explaining such meanings as seem accidental and adventitious, I shall endeavour to give an account of the means by which they were introduced. . . . *buxom*, which means only *obedient*, is now made, in familiar phrases, to stand for *wanton*; because in an ancient form of marriage, before the Reformation, the bride promised complaisance and obedience, in these terms: “I will be bonair and *buxom* in bed and at board” (Kolb and DeMaria 2005: 51).

Johnson insists, accurately, that these words originally meant “complaisant,” from OF “good” and “obedient,” or “pliant.” In his note in the *Dictionary* under the entry *Buxom*, Johnson points out that “It originally signified *obedient*” and refers to “an old form of marriage, used before the reformation, [in which] the bride promised to be *obedient and buxom in bed and at board*; from which expression, not well understood, its present meaning [‘wanton’] seems to be derived.” He concedes elsewhere in the *Plan of the Dictionary*, however, that Milton’s use of the word in this original sense—obedient, obsequious—is now obsolete in the following passage: “———He with broad sails / Winnow’d the *buxom* air.———” He alleges that Milton was the writer “who last admitted” this obsolete usage (Kolb and DeMaria 2005: 56).

“Buxom” was clearly heading inexorably towards an association unwished for by Johnson and other poets with physicality, wantonness (which Johnson acknowledges as its third meaning in the *Dictionary*); its alliance with “bonnie,” as the word “bonair” became, only made this tendency more likely. As Johnson noted under his entry for *Bonny*, sense 3, “It seems to be generally used in conversation for *plump*.”

In this light, Johnson’s comment that Gray’s “buxom health” is inelegant, and furthermore that he does not seem to know what the word means, is cuttingly ironic. Gray’s apologists would claim that Gray is using the word in a manner that accords with Johnson’s own sense 2 of *Buxom*: “Gay; lively; brisk.” But the fit is not very neat, and Johnson’s outspoken objections obviate that possibility. Neither its “correct” etymological, original sense—“pliant, obedient, obsequious,” Johnson’s sense number 1—nor its tertiary, more modern *misuse* of the word—“wanton, jolly”—is quite right in this context. There seems to be more here in Johnson’s dig than meets the eye, especially when we see that Johnson defines “jolly” as “2. Plump; like one in high health,” illustrated by a lurid passage from Robert South on jolly apples of Sodom.

Johnson’s criticism seemingly takes two directions, hoisting Gray on two petards. First, he accuses Gray of not using the expression in accordance with its traditionally understood meaning, its primary and etymological sense; therefore, it is incoherent (especially unfortunate in a “scholar,” as Johnson puts it, that is, one who professes the classics, as Gray does). Secondly, Johnson proceeds in the opposite direction, and suggests that the word “buxom,” inevitably in this age, carries a physicality, a “wantonness,” and therefore a vulgar and sexual sense, that Gray is too removed from life and common discourse to understand. Johnson’s “Life of Gray” in its biographical section had already suggested that Gray was not quite right as a man, priggish, asocial, and effeminate, outside of the stream of life (it has been understood in our own times that Gray was homosexual, which Johnson hints at); thus Johnson’s

comment strikes one as a dig at Gray's "manliness," already having come under suspicion.⁴ And applied to boys, this newer sense of "buxom" is faintly ridiculous. Gray's unfortunate use of the phrase "buxom health" is therefore "inelegant," as Johnson calls it, in two ways.

Johnson not only routinely criticizes improper poetic diction, here and elsewhere, for its failures in the poetry specifically: he also explicitly remarks on poetry's potentially detrimental effect on the language itself. "The tropes of poetry," he writes in the "Preface to the Dictionary," "will make hourly encroachments [upon the language], and the metaphorical will become the current sense ... illiterate writers will at one time or other, by public infatuation, rise into renown, who, not knowing the original import of words, will use them with colloquial licentiousness, confound distinction, and forget propriety" (Kolb and DeMaria 2005: 107). Clearly Gray is not "illiterate," but he is the object of infatuation, and he uses expressions so metaphorical that they are "beyond common apprehension." Yet with familiarity, they will become commonly understood and [mis]used, Johnson implies. Johnson's concerns, then, are not limited to the effect of such language usage on poetry. Understandably, as the author of the *Dictionary*, he must account for language change, specifically its deviation from etymological derivation from the root and original meaning. While regretting the "encroachments," he at least partially accepts such usage in the *Dictionary* as a metaphorical extension found in writers in English.

As Johnson might have predicted, the word "buxom" became inescapably corpulent in coming decades, writers and other users "forget[ing] propriety," as Johnson would say, with "buxom" also receiving pressure from the word "bosom." In the early nineteenth century, Lord Byron, perhaps not surprisingly, acknowledges the shift in meaning: he weighs in on "Buxom," in fact defending Gray's poetic expression, while simultaneously taking it out of context and reading it contrary to what Gray would have intended (making it refer to women, that is, rather than boys), but close to what Johnson suggests is connotated by the word.

Sentimentalists may despise "buxom health, with rosy hue," which has something dairy-maid like, I confess, in the sound, . . . for buxom, however one may like the reality, is not euphonious, but I have the association of plumpness, rosy hue, good spirits and good humour, all brought before me in the homely phrase; and all these united give me a better idea of beauty than lanky languor ... (Blessington 1833: 316).

Years later, in the June 2, 1866 issue of *The Spectator*, an anonymous critic, while ridiculing a new book of poems by Lord Stratford de Redcliffe (*Shadows of the Past. In verse*), wittily quotes lines from the poem that implicitly link the words "bosom" and "buxom," encouraging a connection in the mind of the reader, elaborating as follows:

Thus in the regular kind of thing about ... the wild-eyed young woman of simple innocence, who has "Eyes where a world might enter,/Though soft their fawn-like gaze,"—and other attributes to match, we have one word quite new in its application, at least as far as our memory serves us, and that word is, poetically speaking, the worst in the poem:

"Ye talk of pain and sorrow,
Of bosoms made to sigh;
Come! read a golden morrow
In yonder golden sky.

The farm, the vine-clad mountain,
Are oft a source of care;
Be mine you bubbling fountain,
And mine the buxom air."

⁴ For discussions of Gray's sexuality, see, among others, Gleckner 1997 and Mack 2000.

“Buxom,” the reviewer continues,

“etymologically means what Lord Stratford intends, ‘bending,’ ‘pliant,’ ‘yielding,’ like the German *Biegsam*. And it has been so used in the old poets. But the whole essence of the word has been spoiled by its constant modern application to a certain smart and jolly species of female handsomeness, —a handsomeness founded on cheery *embonpoint* [the condition of being plump; stoutness], and specially valuable to barmaids. How the word may have acquired its etymologically secondary, but now principal, meaning, we do not know—perhaps through the too great pliancy of that species of beauty; but anyhow it is utterly spoiled as an epithet of the air” (609-10).

The reviewer insists that the current physical meaning has completely usurped the etymological, original (in this case Miltonic) usage, and perhaps confirms the trend that Johnson seemed to sense back in his versions of the *Dictionary* from 1755-1773.

It is worth noting, however, that dictionaries subsequent to Johnson’s career not only did not sanctify such a tendency in usage for this word, they do not even appear to have acknowledged it. Noah Webster’s revised edition of *An American Dictionary of the English Language* of 1846, for example, simply copies Johnson’s definitions for BUXOM, as well as its derivatives, BUXOMLY, and BUXOMNESS—but adds as the first (obs.) meaning “Obediently” to BUXOMLY and “Meekness; obedience” to BUXOMNESS. Johnson had written “Wantonly; amorously” and “Wantonness; amorousness,” respectively. This identifies Webster’s attitude, at least, as more conservative than Johnson’s in its adherence to the etymologically closest meaning, and for not acknowledging the inevitable shift in usage which had occurred.

It is hard to say with conviction precisely when “buxom” began to mean “big-breasted,” as opposed to “large more generally”—I have made only a few attempts to trace it precisely, and doubtlessly its semantic shift varied throughout the English-speaking world. It appears to have been used in this way in the US before the UK. Eric Partridge warns in *Words, Words, Words!* that “*buxom* is ‘pliant, wanton, merry’, and it reminds us that it is extremely unwise in the United States to describe a woman as ‘buxom’” (110). I personally have never been aware of it, in common currency, meaning anything else but “big-breasted, applied to a woman or girl.” Its sole meaning today, except for certain regional exceptions, is the one given by the *Cambridge Learner’s Dictionary* (2007) as the only possible interpretation of the word in use: “**buxom** /bAksam/ adjective A **buxom** woman has large breasts.”

To return to our discussion of Johnson’s comments on poetry and language, what, if anything, we should ask, can we conclude from these investigations that would shed light on Johnson’s practice and preoccupations? Always at play in Johnson’s criticism is a tension between, on the one hand, a fairly narrow and strict understanding (in both lexicography and poetry) of semantics, word-formation and derivation, and related word usage, and its relation to developments of meaning preceding from the etymological origins; and, on the other hand, the meanings of words in current, even colloquial, usage. He holds a recent poet to more exacting standards of actuality, while still insisting he retain a “scholar’s” consistency of semantic derivation and meaning. For Johnson, Gray was caught between, and failed according to both criteria. And the effects of such failures are to be seen not only in the poetry, but in the evolving language itself.

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