Gilbert Abbott à Beckett's *The Comic History of Rome* spans the period from the birth of Romulus and Remus to the death of Caesar and supremacy of Octavian. The rolling narrative is written with fluency and flair and will provide both the beginner and the expert with an entertaining version of Republican history. With simple word plays and dry sarcastic wit à Beckett easily blends narrative with humorous comments on Roman actions and culture. Even the sacred Oracle at Delphi is not safe:

'A prophet was in attendance to write down the pith of what the Pythia was supposed to say......' (182)

These word plays often comment in a rather cynical way on Roman policy:

'Flaminius, [sic: read Flamininus, here and elsewhere] therefore, while declaring, after his own fashion, the independence of Greece, stipulated that freedom should be restored by Antiochus to all the Greek cities in Asia,—an arrangement that would have left the cities at liberty to be made free with by Rome in her usual manner.' (196)

Fast paced pieces of battle narrative are often permeated with jibes at Roman appearance or custom. For instance at the return of Kaeso to Rome:

'The consuls sprang out of bed, and throwing about them the first substitute for
a toga that the bedclothes presented, they made at once for the walls of the city.' (71)

John Leech’s illustrations are a perfect compliment to à Beckett’s text. A cartoon at the beginning of the 27th chapter shows Caesar and Pompey as fighting-dogs, with the caption:

‘Caesar and Pompey very much alike, especially Pompey.’ (275)

Even a beginner will understand the dig at Pompey’s character upon reading the following chapter. The narrative is not just a sequence of events as many institutions and customs of ancient Rome are described, especially in the 13th chapter which is entitled:

‘On the peaceful occupations of the Romans. From scarcity of subject, necessarily a very short chapter.’ (129)

And it is.

Yet it is worth noting that this work also provides useful information. While à Beckett’s acerbic interpretations are meant to amuse, his narration of events is accurate and would provide the beginner with a very good idea of what happened, and of some major themes of Roman history such as growing opulence, the latifundia, Roman expansion and the rise of the warlords. His narration on cultural aspects is also informative. The reader is introduced to, for instance, the Via Appia, the aqueducts, political offices and religious institutions such as augury. The
Comic History of Rome provides a colourful and humorous narration for those who enjoy the lighter side of history. One wonders if a Beckett saw something of himself in his description of Cn. Flavius:

'This individual appears to have possessed the happy gift of investing dry subjects with the garb of popularity.' (130)

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BARRY BALDWIN The Latin and Greek Poems of Samuel Johnson: Text, Translations and Commentary (London, Duckworth, 1995); £55-00.

This is a remarkable book—replete with scholarship, crammed with various learning, sustained by an almost breathless enthusiasm for Johnson and his work. One's only reservation is that from time to time Professor Baldwin simply goes on too long. In his Bibliographical Survey and Register he quotes Johnson on contemporary book production—'this superfoetation, this teeming of the press', and superfoetation ('a superabundant or superfluous addition' QED 2b) is Professor Baldwin's weakness.

He opens with an eight page commentary on a six line student exercise on Pembroke's inferior beer in 1728-9, much of which is fascinating but not strictly relevant. In spite of his difficulties with Milton, Johnson would not have found Housman's snide comment that 'Malt does more than Milton can/To justify God's ways to man' particularly amusing. Though here, I suppose I am falling into the error that Professor Baldwin's book does a good deal to dispel, that of regarding Johnson as uniformly serious, a man who always spoke as if he were on oath. Boswell's portrait, while the great original, is constantly being modified,