Comic History of Rome provides a colourful and humorous narration for those who enjoy the lighter side of history. One wonders if à 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,
particularly his view of the younger Johnson—problematic and complex, as Richard Holme's brilliant Dr Johnson and Mr Savage suggests.

Professor Baldwin's difficulty is that he seems to have a desperate need for complete inclusiveness, to cover all possibilities. On Johnson's translation of Pope's Messiah he seems, at first, to lean towards Hector's suggestion that Johnson was ordered to translate Pope into Latin by the Master of Pembroke who found him idling in the quad, because Johnson was naturally indolent. Later however he appears to accept the view that Jorden asked Johnson to put Pope's Messiah into Latin verse as a result of his skill in writing the Somnium. In these matters W.J. Bate is the most convincing: 'It was not as has been sometimes said a task imposed on him for idleness, or as Hawkins claimed, for "absenting himself from early prayers", Johnson himself made this plain.' (Samuel Johnson, 92). In Bate's view Johnson hoped to make his name by translating Pope, as Addison by his Latin verses had come to the knowledge of Dr Lancaster and consequently been elected to Magdalen as a foundation scholar. Johnson's rage at his father's presumed sending of the work to Pope without his son's knowledge is then easily understood. I am surprised that Professor Baldwin did not use Johnson's 'Life of Cave' in his discussion of 'Ad Urbanum'. The considered public tribute, while written some years later, accords well with the youthful Latin poem. Johnson could easily identify with Cave: he had to struggle against poverty, was cast down by the malice of a patron, and married a widow. Like Johnson he was bulky, large and very strong. Johnson no doubt hoped for sympathy and employment from the subject of his elegantly turned lines.

But these are trifles; this is a real treasure trove of a book, filled with arcane and curious lore, with references ranging from Alpheius (a first century BC epigrammatist from Mytilene) to Zosima (the subject of an epigram by Damascius) and from Boethius to the Beatles (the indexes are by no means complete). The annotations are particularly rewarding for they demonstrate
the way in which Johnson had completely assimilated the work of the great writers of Latin literature—Horace, Juvenal, Ovid, Virgil. Particularly Horace (it is no surprise that Horace far outnumbers other writers in providing epigraphs for The Rambler; of the 208 issues the most frequently used authors are: Horace 69, Juvenal 31, Ovid 22, Martial 22, Virgil 12) whose diction is found in almost every piece of Johnsonian Latin verse from the slightest epigram to the most heartfelt prayer. One is reminded of Milton and his use of Pagan myth. As Douglas Bush has pointed out (Pagan Myth and Christian Tradition in English Poetry), Milton includes an image of 'Mighty Pan' as a type of Christ at the heart of his profoundly Christian poem On The Morning of Christ's Nativity. Johnson's Christianity, while it differed from Milton's, was equally powerful in its conviction, and both men seem to have totally integrated their classical learning into their experience.

Finally, Baldwin's commentary shows a constant verbal play at work in Johnson's Latin and Greek poems that frequently spills over into outright puns. It is most agreeable to find that the man who took Shakespeare so savagely to task for his love of quibbles: ('A Quibble poor and barren as it is, gave him such delight, that he was content to purchase it by the sacrifice of reason propriety and truth. A quibble was to him the fatal Cleopatra for which he lost the world and was content to lose it.') could also find pleasure in a poor paronomasia.

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