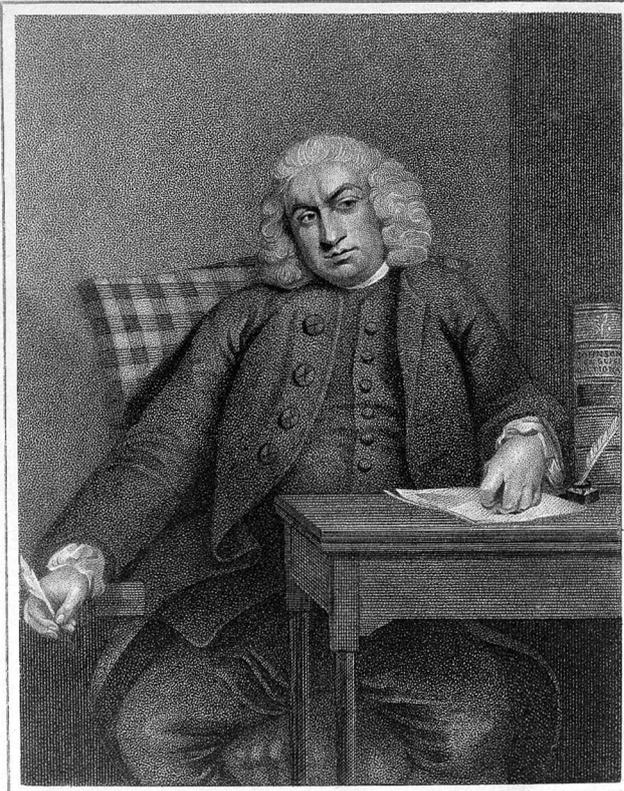


# BJPpsych

The British Journal of Psychiatry



SAMUEL JOHNSON, L.L.D.

*Engraved by W. T. Fry, from the original Picture, by  
Sir Joshua Reynolds.*

*in the Possession of James Boswell, Esq.*

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**The COVID-19 pandemic should be last orders for poor care of people with neurodevelopmental disorders**

Strydom et al

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O'Connor et al

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Frontispiece of *The life of Samuel Johnson, L.L.D.* Comprehending an account of his studies, and numerous works, in chronological order : a series of his epistolary correspondence and conversations with many eminent persons and various original pieces of his composition, never before published / by James Boswell. Credit: Wellcome Collection. Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0)



Samuel Johnson (1709–1784) was an eminent 18th-century literary figure. An essayist, poet, dramatist and critic, he was responsible for the famous *Dictionary* which appeared in 1755. His novel *The History of Rasselas* (1759) examined the quest for happiness and concluded it was an illusory undertaking. In 1775 he published *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, a tour he had undertaken with James Boswell, the Edinburgh lawyer and his biographer. In 1779 he published *Lives of the Eminent English Poets*, a book that greatly impressed Robert Burns, who was moved by Johnson's depiction of the poet, benighted by madness, melancholy and poverty.

Johnson was beset with physical and mental troubles throughout his life. Scarred from birth by scrofula, big-boned and clumsy, with peculiar physical mannerisms, Johnson cut a strange and forbidding figure. He claimed he had inherited from his father 'a vile melancholy' which 'made him mad all his life, at least not sober'. He suffered from recurrent bouts of melancholy. Boswell's descriptions of Johnson's unusual behaviour in the *Life of Samuel Johnson* have convinced many commentators that Johnson had what we would now call obsessive-compulsive disorder and Tourette syndrome. Boswell suggested that Johnson had St Vitus' Dance and quoted the authority of Dr Thomas Sydenham, an eminent British physician. St Vitus' Dance, also known as Sydenham's chorea, is characterised by rapid, uncoordinated jerking movements. The diagnosis was questioned by Johnson's friend, the painter Sir Joshua Reynolds, who felt that Johnson's odd movements were psychological in origin. Reynolds concluded that Johnson's 'convulsions' were the outward manifestation of disturbed thoughts.

Text by Allan Beveridge

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