ON A LATIN SCHOOL EXERCISE BY SAMUEL JOHNSON

In Donald Greene’s anthology of Samuel Johnson’s prose and poetry (The Oxford Authors, 1984) we find a Latin school exercise in prose (p. 39). It was printed here for the first time. The original is in the Houghton Library of the Harvard College Library at Harvard University; the number is fms Kng 1386 (64).

Samuel Johnson was only 16 years old when he composed this piece, but the text as printed by Donald Greene contains some errors which cannot be ascribed even to such a young student. I have received a photocopy of the original from the Houghton Library, and with the help of it I make the following corrections:

Ut enim omnes se contemptos videntes deterrentur, sic, si factis dignas ferant mercedes, ad majora eodem transite ascendere conantur (so Greene). The word transite does not make sense in this context. The original has tramite.

Primis Romanae reipublicae aetatibus ... virtus quotidie increvit, moribus vero postea depravatis, vitia seculis venientibus obruta est. Instead of the nom./acc. plur. vitia we need an ablative, and the original has vitio; it has also, by the way, venientibus seculis instead of seculis venientibus.

One passage remains uncertain. Greene prints: Omnes fere artes professores deseritis cumulando propagatas fuisse constat. The word deseritis is strange; the original has at the beginning of one line meritis; at the end of the preceding line I read with hesitation doni<s> ‘with well deserved gifts’.

The young schoolboy is, however, guilty of one slightly ungrammatical construction: Omnes vero ad regum exempla sese conformant; si ab illo (instead of illis) spretae jacent musae, ab aliis ibidem contemnuntur. Such a change from a general plural to a general singular is rather frequent in Latin texts from all times, see Kühner & Stegmann, Ausführliche Grammatik der lateinischen Sprache, vol. 1, p. 64.

APPENDIX

Samuel Johnson’s school exercise as published for the first time in D. Greene’s

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A Latin School Exercise

Quis enim virtutem amplexcitur ipsam
Praemia si tollas?


Samuel Johnson

Bengt Löfstedt

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