Kentucky's First Poet

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Unlike Chaucer and Dante, there are many poets who fashion forgettable works. These aspiring men and women slip through time and space quickly, their poems soon forgotten, their books lost. But while many of these lesser talents are obscured almost completely, some few linger yet. One such minor versifier, possessed of wit, spirit, and at one time an amused public, was Thomas Johnson, Jr., Kentucky's first poet.

John Wilson Townsend, a venerable Lexington bookman of earlier days, assures us that "the first books in the literature of a people are always interesting."¹ Kentucky's first history was John Filson's The Discovery, Settlement, and Present State of Kentucke, published in Wilmington, Delaware in 1784, and then translated into French and German and reprinted in England, all before the end of the eighteenth century. Kentucky's first appearance in fiction was in Gilbert Imlay's novel, The Emigrants, &c. or the History of An Expatriated Family, being A Delineation of English Manners, Drawn From Real Characters, in three volumes, published in London in 1793. Less known, however, is Kentucky's first collection of poetry, Thomas Johnson, Jr.'s Kentucky Miscellany, first published in Lexington in 1789.

The Kentucky Miscellany has been chronicled as "the first book done in the west" and the "first book of poems published in Kentucky."² The poems were printed by John Bradford in Lexington at the Kentucky Gazette's press in the spring of 1789.³ This first edition of The Kentucky Miscellany appeared as a small duodecimo pamphlet and sold for "nine pence the copy."⁴ It was available in Lexington at Mr. Benjamin Beall's and in Danville at Gillespie, Birney & Company and at Gen. Wilkinson's stores.⁵ A brief notice advertised the second edition in the Kentucky Gazette on Saturday, 27 August 1796: "The Kentucky Miscellany, by Thomas Johnson jun. for sale at the office of the Kentucky Gazette."⁶

In all, four editions of Johnson's Miscellany were printed:

Almost every trace of these editions has vanished, except for two known remaining examples.

The Reverend Lyman W. Seely, a Frankfort Baptist, long possessed a dishevelled fourth edition of Johnson’s book. When he died, the copy passed on to his son, Dr. R. S. Seely, a Midway physician. This tattered specimen was subsequently bought, around 1898, by Col. Reuben Thomas Durrett, founder of Louisville’s Filson Club, but it left its native Commonwealth when the University of Chicago acquired Durrett’s collection “along with some of the Filson Club’s books.”

In 1949, John Wilson Townsend reproduced the text of *The Kentucky Miscellany* under the title *O Rare Tom Johnson*. This printing was based on the Seely-Durrett copy of the fourth edition held by the University of Chicago. The Chicago pamphlet is indeed in shambles, perhaps testimony to its former popularity. Words, phrases, even sentences are torn away; sometimes the remainder is barely readable. Townsend nevertheless declares that he reproduced the poetry “as closely as possible.”

A second copy, however, of *The Kentucky Miscellany* also exists. This copy, too, is a fourth edition, but its contents are happily intact. Little is known of its provenance. In 1920, a Mr. Charles J. Barnes owned this uncut copy of the fourth edition, and it was sold by him, rebound in leather, at an Anderson Gallery auction in New York City on 13 October 1920. Dr. A. S. W. Rosenbach, the famous Philadelphia bookseller, purchased the copy at the Anderson Gallery sale for thirty dollars and, having tucked it away, mused to inquirers that he had forgotten to whom he had resold it. For many years, this copy rested out of view until, finally, it appeared in the library of the Philip H. & A. S. W. Rosenbach Foundation in Philadelphia. With the emergence of this copy, readers are able at last to enjoy Thomas Johnson’s poetry in its complete text.
Kentucky's first poet was born in Virginia about 1760. Lewis Collins, in his History of Kentucky, records that Johnson crossed the mountains into Kentucky in 1786, although Townsend sets his arrival at Danville at "about 1785." Johnson was about twenty-five years old, obviously well-educated, and possessed of a certain genius when he arrived. Frontier Danville was the then-West, populated by God-fearing, hard-working nation builders. Still, Townsend asserts that the age in many ways was a vulgar and coarse one, and he commends us to contemporary newspaper anecdotes to judge for ourselves. Johnson, in this respect, appears to have been representative of his time and place. Like many Danvillians, Johnson probably knew the higher and lower stimuli of both church and tavern. He clearly preferred the tavern. He slipped into inveterate drunkenness and in this state recorded in poetry his ironic perceptions. Townsend later crowned Johnson "Pioneer Kentucky's Peerless Pasquinader." The Reverend Mr. Robert Davidson, a Presbyterian chronicler of the mid-1800s refers to Johnson as "a drunken poet, who amused himself and his tipsy companions, in the taverns of Danville, by letting off his spleen in doggerel satires, generally of the octosyllabic measure." The same commentator notes that Johnson's poems "were very popular in their day," and that "hypocrisy was not one of his sins." He earned the sobriquet the "Drunken Poet of Danville." It has been speculated that Johnson "was buried in the graveyard through which the students at Centre College daily pass," but because streets have widened, fences have receded into the cemetery, and many of the headstones once set have been removed, it is now impossible to find his grave. By 1830, apparently only Johnson's poetry remained. In sum, Tom Johnson's "little pamphlet of doggerel satires" is all that is left of the poet-tippler. Townsend describes The Kentucky Miscellany as "a miniature Spoon River Anthology indeed of the tough hombres that established Danville and fondly called it 'Little Britain.'" The tough, free-wheeling "hombres" of Danville populate the Miscellany. The subject of Johnson's satirical wit in "A Grace Extempore" is Erasmus Gill, a tavern keeper. Johnson's wit also memorializes a minister who refuses to perform worship services; lawyers, doctors, and politicians emerge tarnished by the poet's wit. Danville itself is vilified. Kentuckians en groupe are satirized. Among women, some fare much better in the poetry than others.
The poet characterizes the Mercer County election of 1787 as an election which was as ruinous as any; a dancing master and a young lady experience the pangs of conflict and resolution; even Danville’s animals are satirized. Finally, the collection closes with several candid epitaphs for the citizens of “Little Britain,” the most notable being the poet’s own:

*The Author’s Own Epitaph*  
Underneath this marble tomb,  
In endless shades lies drunken Tom;  
Here safely moor’d, dead as a log,  
Who got his death by drinking grog—  
By whiskey grog he lost his breath,  
Who would not die so sweet a death.

By 1789, Thomas Johnson, Jr. had completed the thirty-seven poems in *The Kentucky Miscellany* and published the first edition. The *Miscellany* evidently represents the entire preserved output of Kentucky’s first collected poet, for no fugitive verses have since come to light, either in print or in manuscript. In his vibrant poetry, Johnson succeeds where other poets fail and fails where other poets succeed. The *Miscellany* is no *Lycidas*, though it is verse; nor is it *A Modest Proposal*, though it is satire. The collection is pungent and decidedly down to earth. Perhaps the proof of Johnson’s ready craftsmanship is that his poems were obviously both popular and marketable.

Johnson’s subject matter is invariably topical. He deals with what he knows: Danville and Kentucky. Some lines may echo universal truths, but these truths are always grounded in the poet’s local context. He writes of love, politics, beloved friends, detested enemies, assorted animals, and himself. Miss Polly Armstead is the object of his most devoted affections; lawyer Michie is the ugliest man God ever made; Jesse Paine is an honest judge; and curse old Gill! Dr. Fields heals the poet’s illness; McDowell, Jouett, and Taylor run a ragged race for political office; and McCrackin’s lost horse, as Johnson describes it, should easily be found.

A very human Tom Johnson, characterized by the poet himself, lives in the *Miscellany*. He loves, and he satirizes love; sometimes love provokes him. He lets us follow his feelings. “Ah, Miss Polly,” he might have mused, leaning back in a sturdy chair. “Thou heavenly maid, celestial fair,” he may have sighed, turning
to a companion:

You saw her in her infant prime,
Before the rip'ning hand of time
Had form'd her shape with so much grace,
And strew'd the lilies on her face—
Added bright lustre to her eye,
And ting'd her lips with coral dye. . . .

His companion may well have nodded in agreement, visions of
dulcinean beauty gliding through their minds. But Johnson's
problem is that Miss Polly could not have cared less about him.
Nevertheless, convinced he would have her eventually, he wishes
her well:

But kind heaven forbid that she should know,
Pains like mine or feel such scenes of woe.
What e'er my fate may be, may bliss be thine,
And still be guarded by the pow'rs Divine.

Love's pain strikes the poet severely, night and day. Doctors cure
headaches and simple discomforts, not the soulful complexities of
romantic frustration. The cruel curse of unrequited love
overwhelms "Tom" Johnson, as he speaks familiarly of himself to
his readers.

Miss Polly never gives the poet a glance. In desperation, he
turns to whiskey. Love drives Tom "for refuge to the bowl." The
consolation of whiskey, however, proves temporary, the
devastation of love perpetual.

But soon is quenched the pleasing flame;
And Pain and Grief their empire claim.

Thus, Tom drinks more—and more. Eventually, he acquires, not
Miss Polly, but a nickname, "The Drunken Poet of Danville."
Apparently both Polly and sobriety elude Tom the rest of his life.
The poet relates his bedtime routine:

And quietly crept into bed;
The whiskey bottle standing by,
To take a drink, should I be dry.
Love, alas, has driven him to drink, night as well as day.

But he keeps on writing, despite pain and frustration. He even musters sufficient poetic detachment to satirize an amorous adventure. Johnson's collection triumphed, but with poems like "The Wedding Night," the way was narrow. The Danville laureate brashly records the nuptial bereavement of a mismatched couple: an elderly minister and a comely maiden. As the poet explicitly narrates, the old deacon cannot perform and finally resigns himself to the truth.

The Parson tried, 'twas all the same—
"Ah! faith and troth, 'tis worse and worse,
I'll keep thee, Betty, for a nurse. . . ."

If the story is true, Tom tells it well. If it is not, the narrator is writing amusing doggerel, nonetheless.

Worse than the woes of the parson, however, are local politics. Judge James Mulligan, the author of "In Kentucky," advises that politics are "the damndest in Kentucky," and Johnson prefigures Mulligan's point by commenting on the "grand election" of 1787 in Mercer County.

*M'Dowell, Jouett, Taylor, take their place,  
With panting breast each anxious for the race.  
Soon Jouett mounts his Pegassus on high,  
And Taylor's ragged ruffians rush him nigh:  
In sullen gloom, M'Dowell moves along. . . ."

We can easily appreciate Johnson's talent in lines like these, reminiscent of John Dryden's "Mac Flecknoe," Alexander Pope's *Dunciad*, and other literary satires of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Johnson introduces the principals directly, yet characterizes them metaphorically. And he not only magnifies the prominent character of his subjects; he also offers some insight into the campaign methodology of each. Taylor sweeps the election, and Tom concludes that the foolish voters in Mercer County elected a fit representative—a fool and a knave. Of course, elections held few surprises for a poet and classical scholar acquainted, as his allusions show him to be, with the lunatic of Ephesus: if Herostratus, in 356 B.C., could set fire to the Temple of Diana in order to immortalize himself—successfully, then
politicians could all the more easily compromise their own integrity for a handful of votes. Both Herostratus and the local politicians of Danville were equally damned to fame.

Around the time of the Mercer County elections, the first half of the War for Independence comes to a close. Johnson is cautious not to let the romance of the times overwhelm his intellect. Like the farmers' sons who fought, he too shows an unusual outlook.

What could brave soldiers wish for more?
We are now independent sure!
Our cash and chattels being gone,
We've nothing to depend upon.

Johnson's view was realistic, not romantic. The government had promised land to the soldiers but had reneged. Little people, as usual, bore the war's expense.

There were few enough honest men in Danville with whom the poet could drink. Johnson might count them on two hands. But he especially admired a pair of skilled professional men. One rescued Tom from the agony of gravel, and the other Johnson regarded as a genuine rarity of his times—an honest judge. After illustrating his physical agony with an apt Promethean metaphor, the poet acclaims Dr. Fields's efficient surgery.

The work was in a moment done,
If possible without a groan;
So swift thy hand, I scarce could feel
The progress of the cutting steel.

This graphically describes the surgery that removed sand from Johnson's bladder, and thus, Dr. Fields's skill receives a tribute in verse.

Judge Jesse Paine did not need Johnson's praise, but he earned it posthumously, for Danville's drunken laureate wrote an elegy upon the magistrate's demise. Imagine, Johnson reflects, an honest judge among all those lawyers! The judge's integrity, pens the elegist, could not be bought with a kingdom. The poem explores a more metaphysical aspect of decency in Kentucky.

But cruel nature, by severe decree,
Who order'd nothing here should perfect be,
For fear he should that great design invert
Has laid our dear lov’d Jesse in the dirt.

As the poet observes, perfection never remains for very long.

Although Thomas Johnson respects Dr. Fields and Jesse Paine, he hates almost everyone else with a fierce venom. If there is power in his pen, he turns it against a horde of victims. His most detested enemies are cheaters, speculators, lawyers, tavern keepers, drunken Yankees, and organized religion. Further still, he hates fops, powder’d beaus, whores, prudes, and coquettes. Whenever Tom mentions these people, he tends to employ his favorite expletives: “Fools!” or “Stupid Dunce!” Every man in trade impresses Johnson as a speculator who will sooner have money than honesty. And he makes no differentiation between a rogue and a villain. The whole of Danville abounds with two-faced cheaters who now pray to God only later to steal their neighbor’s money. Johnson especially indicts lawyers for acting like little children, or like dogs. Either way, or both, he caricatures their money-hungry antics:

And babbling lawyers impudently bawl:
Poor needy wretches, who for petty pence,
Distend their throats, and yelp their little sense.

Tavern keepers are like lawyers: malicious, greedy, unfeeling, though less verbose. As Johnson tells it, barkeeps lie in wait for thirsty men, plunder them, then turn these souls away impoverished.

Worse than any of the above, however, are Yankees. If anything goes wrong, Tom and the rest of Danville agree on one thing:

A drunken Yankee, that’s enough,
And well accounts for blackguard stuff.

In Johnson’s view, churches are close behind. Who ever collected so much hypocrisy together in one place as in a church? He merely abides until explicit duplicity emerges from the religious community. When the perfect example finally arrives, he inks his pen. The story goes that “Father” Rice, who was one of the Presbyterian founders of Centre College, had purchased some real
estate with the understanding that his congregation would pay for it. The congregation, however, deferred payment until the sheriff was about to imprison "Father" Rice for debt. Rice then refused to hold further church services until the debt was paid. Johnson comments:

Tis no more than I expected,
The meeting house is now neglected—
All trades are subject to this chance,
No longer pipe, no longer dance.

Johnson's point is made, that the church revolves around business more than holiness. In another verse Tom curses the whole town.

ACCURSED Danville, vile, detested spot,
Where knaves inhabit, and where fools resort—
Thy roguish cunning, and thy deep design,
Would shame a Blackbeard or an Algerine.

If Johnson exaggerates to frame those lines, it is the technique of satire. By depicting the enterprising people around him as knaves, worse than history's worst, and by comparing them with pirates, the poet hopes others better understand his townsmen's true natures.

Thomas Johnson is aware of his situation, however, and admits he is the least of the lot. He listens to no one, follows no one's rules; yet he stays on to humor those around him. The poet devotes many lines to himself. And it is this self-centered humanness that distinguishes Johnson's poetry from the speculative abstractions haunting, for example, lyrical poetry. His own character comes alive in his rhymed couplets.

That Johnson is no hypocrite is obvious from his verse. If he hates almost everyone else, he hates himself more. If he is frustrated in love and turns to drinking, he admits it. He is intrinsically honest. Johnson's candor is apparent in his two epitaphs for Maurice Nagle. The first declares that Nagle never paid a debt except the ultimate obligation of death. In the second, written after he has discovered that Nagle had settled accounts before the end, Johnson admits "a poet lied," and corrects his earlier misinformation.

Johnson is a child of poverty, and he allies poverty with
honesty. Dishonest people kiss their friends for gain; some win and some lose. The poet kisses himself for nought. Yet, even in the midst of material poverty, Johnson believes he possesses one enduring asset: "the ease of cursing" in verse. One day, even this illusion is shattered.

But here a fool to vent his spite,
Has stolen the folly that I write... 

Someone has plagiarized Johnson's lines, and he is astonished. He could have sworn his fellow citizens had picked him clean already.

As are most satirists, Johnson is a philosopher as well, and his poems exhibit the didacticism common to the narratives of his time. His genius for seeing beneath the surface of things permits him to disclose their moral significance. For instance, he observes the sparkling eyes of a coquette and concludes that she is "neither chaste nor other wise." She flirts, yes, but she only flirts. Sometimes this rhyming sage adorns his verse with familiar platiitudes, appropriately chosen to make his points, to delight and to teach.

To great and noble things a transient date,
And sudden downfall, is decreed by fate—
and
But see the fate of human things,
How sorrow from ambition springs!
and
Claiming the specious old pretext,
That impotence best guards the sex.

Johnson repeats such well-known ancient half-verities again and again, so that his readers have ample opportunity to grasp their meanings.

As poet-philosopher, Johnson expounds virtue. He contrasts good and evil, and their contrary states are illustrated in a short epitaph for a dog.

HERE lies the corpse of Little Cue,
Whose heart was honest, good, and true,
Why not preserve her mem'ry then,
Who never yet like faithless men,
Conceal'd in smiles a mortal spite,
Nor fawn'd on them she meant to bite.

More than "Little Cue," however, Johnson praises God. The poet is able to maintain a sharp distinction between his God and organized religion. When the poet recalls Dr. Fields's miraculous surgery, he acknowledges God's mercy, and adores

th' unseen above,
In whom I live, and whom I love,
And pay the reverential praise
For all the blessings of my days.

Release from pain is sufficient to unite him with God, and, when it does, Johnson is grateful for God's bounty. He shows his gratitude with rhymes.

Through rhyme, Johnson not only reveals his own feelings, but also reveals his poetic art. As do Butler in his Hudibras and Pope in his Essay of Criticism, this self-aware poet speaks first and ironically of his own skills. He possesses a "limber pen" and "polite brains," and he is better versed in filthy language than anyone he knows. Johnson compares his talent for judging decent people to a hog evaluating chinaware. His genius for wit and his puns, he confesses, stem chiefly from alcoholic inspiration.

Johnson explains his poetic method by telling how he uses these materials. Although he occasionally glimpses decency, he professes never to side with virtue. Essentially, Johnson admits, he calls all men rogues and women whores, generally attacking them in a low fashion. No secrets are safe with him, he says, because he repeats every shred of gossip he hears, even that concerning friends. His purpose is to gain applause, just as Herostratus had boldly plotted immortality. If truth ever fails, he states, he exaggerates or falsifies until something more interesting emerges. When lies fail, his next step is simple: he pleases his listeners with an attack against churches. When even that fails, he turns fully obscene. Therefore, Johnson concludes, he amazes people, because none profanes so deeply as he.

As for those who object to his declared source of inspiration, he offers a responsive couplet, saying he

Calls each a bigot that don't think,
The spirit is deriv'd from drink—

Tom views his final product as "folly," "nonsense," "low burlesque," and "dirty." He declares, alluding to Samuel Butler's seventeenth-century satiric poem, that his poetry invariably emerges "a Hudibras," of which Tom Johnson himself is always sure to be the hero. Epic subjects, he states, are always reduced to pitiful "dog'rel strains" in his lines.

This phrase, "dog'rel strains," is significant in considering Johnson's rollicking poetry. The few who have commented on the Miscellany unanimously agree that the collection amounts to the crude, rough stuff of doggerel. Doubters can compare the Miscellany to the very poem Johnson points out—Hudibras. Butler's Hudibras, first published in 1680, is delivered in a cunning doggerel, and there is a literary tradition of such verse as early as John Skelton's Skeltonics. It is revealing of Johnson's cultural awareness that he identifies himself with a landmark composition such as Hudibras.

There is more to be admired in Johnson's lines, however, than the facility with which he creates doggerel. Johnson was poetically self-aware. He refers to his own prosody, his "numbers," and "discordant lines." Whether he deprecates or lauds his verse, he understands conventional rhetoric and techniques of composition. He counts meter; he grasps rhythm; his rhymes are strong and rich. Typical of the eighteenth-century poets, he holds his rhythm to a single form: iambic. Usually, he relies upon tetrameter, a foot short of the stately pentameter, and makes good use of the short strains best suited to the comic posture of his own muse. Only occasionally does he resort to pentameter. With one exception, each poem is composed of rhymed couplets. (The short "On Mr. John Hughes" is a single ballad stanza, rhyming abab.) Other than this single instance, the form is consistent in every poem. It is iambic, whether tetrameter or pentameter, and always in rhymed couplets. Variations, when they occur, are internal to individual poems.

"The Author's Hatred to Kentucky in General" begins with his characteristic iambic tetrameter.

\[\text{I HATE ŊętıćųVy, cúrse the pláče,}\\ \text{Änd áll hér víłe änd míscréànt rácé!}\\ \text{Who mäke ŋrélígíøn's sáčred tìe,}\\ \]
Within this constant formal framework, Johnson employs a wide variety of poetic devices. Real contemporary people and places come to life through personification, allusion, and contrast. Rich metaphors abound. Personifications of Grief, Pain, and Liberty enliven the depiction of agonies and aspirations of both the poet and others. Allusions drawn from classical literature embellish poetic imagery. Prometheus, Apollo, and Jove flash through pioneer Kentucky. Homer himself appears. These ancient names once recalled familiar images for a generation schooled in Latin and Greek, and today they swiftly inform our sense of Danville life. For instance,

Proteus could not change his shape,
Nor Jupiter commit a rape,
With half the ease these villains can,
Send prayers to God and cheat their man.

Johnson employs the classics to flavor his poetic statements—high and low alike. In one poem, he writes that Jove should abandon his interest in the woes of Troy to descend Mount Ida’s peak and observe the more absorbing antics of Danville’s fools. In another, the poet beseeches Hymen to assist the newlyweds on their “Wedding Night.” Through a clever inversion Tom contrasts a wife-murderer with Orpheus: Orpheus went to Hell for a wife, Tom rhymes, while the wife-murderer went “to Hell to be without.” Johnson contrasts a dancing master’s material poverty with his wealth of love, saying that the combination so overcomes a young lady’s reticence that the two finally marry. Other foils, frequently drawn from classical sources, enliven Johnson’s narratives and descriptions.

When the poet wants to create a metaphor, he does so surprisingly well. One appealing example appears in his tribute to Judge Paine. Johnson likens the subject’s virtuous life to a diamond:

But where shall I begin or what to say?
How from the di’mond single out each ray,
Which beaming brightly with its blended hues,
Doth one illuminating blaze diffuse.
The judge's very life is radiant. No poet could have fashioned a finer tribute.

Thus, though the forms of Johnson's poetry are consistent, as was true for most poets of his era, his content is enlivened through various poetic techniques. No aspect of the poems is so bold as their satiric wit. For with the exceptions of the elegy to Jesse Paine, a few complimentary epitaphs, and Johnson's warm admiration for Miss Polly Armstead and Dr. Fields, the Miscellany embodies every vigor ever possessed by venomous satire. Satire was the main thrust of Tom Johnson's poetry. And it is through satire that the poems acquire variation in tone, from one extreme of mild humor to another extreme of the forwardly coarse.

Johnson's milder humor appears in his epitaph "On Lawyer Michie." It is not fellow lawyers who mourn Michie's death, writes Johnson, but "vintners all," because the deceased was a confirmed dipsomaniac. His death means diminished liquor sales and leaves enormous unpaid debts for bartenders.

Potential in many poems, and fully realized in several, is Tom's more obscene indecency. Johnson responds in the following terms, for example, to an anonymous satire written against William McDowell:

This stuff to fame can never reach,  
Nor fit to wipe M'Dowell's b----h;  
Then take it home, till wiser grown,  
Twill serve perhaps to wipe your own.

In another poem, Tom describes the missing "William Pettit's Mare, for the Low Wits."

No obvious brand denotes the mare,  
Owning but that which all mares wear;  
And if of that the curious doubt,  
Lift but the tail, they'll find it out.

Although Johnson's raw, crass humor emerges again and again in the Miscellany, in most poems the tone rests somewhere between benign, good-humored risibility and his bolder ribaldry. One thing to be remembered as a context for considering Johnson's work is the literary spirit of his time. Johnson's literary background was a rugged, masculine, and forthright one, not the...
era of Romantic Victorian idealism that was later to emerge in the nineteenth century. By 1834, when Victoria was about to begin her reign, a critic could exclaim..."I never felt decency more outraged than when [Johnson's Miscellany] was handed to me to read by mine landlady! My stars!" But in Johnson's own day, forty years before, such a collection was inevitable.

It is no secret that Thomas Johnson's humor offended many of his nonliterary contemporaries. They found his satire too direct and were blinded to his skill. Some scandalized targets attempted to suppress the popular Miscellany. But there are redeeming features in Johnson's poetry. Certainly Miss Polly was flattered by Tom's poetic skill. Dr. Fields must have appreciated the poetic respect for his surgical skill. And the gentlemen at Gill's Tavern undoubtedly had many a happy chuckle over the clever book printed for Johnson at Lexington. Because the Miscellany really was popular entertainment, an impressive four editions were printed in all. The poems are artfully drafted, and they possess a sense of earthy humanity lacking in too many collections. Johnson's imagery and metaphor, and his obvious erudition, cannot be denied. Every poem is interesting, in one way or another. Still, some local critics objected because the poems were too coarse and too topical. Even Johnson himself admitted that his muse abandoned him somewhere between the first poem and the last.

Thomas Johnson was only too well aware of what he included in The Kentucky Miscellany, and, with his tongue firmly against his cheek, he could not have cared less what others thought. He did not aspire to write verse of literary sublimity. He enjoyed laughing drunkenly at the human foibles around him, and he shared what he liked. He was content in the gadfly's role. That he did not develop artistically did not concern him. That his poems did not develop subtle abstractions of love, war, and virtue offered no reproach to his gift. Johnson's poems invariably displayed a very human man in the midst of a bustling Kentucky humanity. Johnson had neither despairs nor hopes; he revealed himself and his art. Poetically, he might have done more to satisfy polite social ideals, but humanly, he communicated more than many poets ever attempt. Although Thomas Johnson, Jr.'s poetic salvation rests on the fact that he produced the first volume of poetry printed in Kentucky, his humanity still lives today, a fit monument for the man of amusing vitality he must have been. The poems of The...
Kentucky Miscellany are his triumph.

NOTES

3 Townsend, “Exasperating Aside,” in *O Rare Tom Johnson*.
6 *Kentucky Gazette*, 27 August 1796.
11 Dr. Jacqueline Bull, Special Collections Department of the University of Kentucky Library, Lexington, Kentucky, 23 February 1971.
12 Townsend, *O Rare Tom Johnson*, front cover.
15 Townsend, *Kentuckians in History and Literature*, 93.
16 Townsend, *O Rare Tom Johnson*, front cover.
18 Ibid., 69.
20 Thomas Johnson, the Drunken Poet of Danville,” *The Cento*, Central University of Kentucky and Centre College, Danville, Kentucky, January 1907.
23 Townsend, “Exasperating Aside,” in *O Rare Tom Johnson*.
24 In Johnson’s day, Mercer County was larger and included what is now Boyle County.
25 “Thomas Johnson, the Drunken Poet of Danville,” *The Cento*.
26 *Lexington Intelligencer*, 28 January 1834.