The English translation of Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives of the Greek and Romans* by Sir Thomas North (1579), itself taken from a French version by Jacques Amyot (1559), was widely read in England and had a significant influence, not only on Shakespeare, for whom it provided great inspiration. In the Seventeenth Century, North’s translation of Plutarch’s biographies served as a model for Izaak Walton’s *Lives* of John Donne (1641), George Herbert (1670), and others. In 1683, John Dryden introduced an English version of Plutarch’s *Lives*, and supplied an analysis of their style and structure in his *Life of Plutarch*, which was prefixed to the translations. It is noteworthy that Dryden’s *Life of Plutarch*, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, provides the very first instance in English literature of the term “biography” as “the history of the lives of individual men, as a branch of literature”.

However, Plutarch’s *Lives* were most widely celebrated throughout the eighteenth century as the ideal biographical model. The tradition of eighteenth century biography commenced with the publication in the 1740’s of many literary lives of Alexander Pope after his death in 1744. Some years later, the *Biographia Britannica* (1747–1766) began to publish the lives of eminent personalities of the English nation. The *magnum opus* of the time, however, is James Boswell’s *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791), particularly praised for its liveliness and intimacy. But Johnson himself provided a highly influential biographical work, to which I shall return: *The Lives of the English Poets* (1779–1781).

As a literary genre, biography soon became the subject of eighteenth century literary criticism. Yet in the early eighteenth century, biographical and autobiographical theory was mainly voiced in prefaces and reviews rather than in separate essays. Critical comments were further interspersed in criminal accounts, anecdotes, memoirs, legal documents, newspapers, and fictional biographies. Similarly, biography itself also interacts with other genres, like novels, diaries, and letters.
An early instance of discrete biographical criticism, however, was an essay by Joseph Addison in his political newspaper *The Freeholder* (1715–1716). Among other things, Addison’s text is remarkable in that it presents the first occurrence of the term “biographer” in English literature. The motto prefixed to this early eighteenth century essay (Freeholder No. 35) is significantly taken from Sallust, *Catilinae Coniuratio* 8.2–4, where Sallust deals with the relationship between historical facts and the way they are represented in historiography. It is evident from the choice of quotation that Addison regards biography as a species of history, *i.e.* the history of commendable men and their achievements. In the subsequent essay, the terms “biography” and “history” as well as “biographer” and “historian” are used interchangeably. Addison, in Freeholder Nr. 35, laments the absence of good historians in England and the poor quality of contemporary biography, which he thinks has mainly been written for commercial advantage. “These are Grub Street biographers”, he says,

who watch for the death of a great man, like so many undertakers, on purpose to make a penny of him. He is no sooner laid in his grave, but he falls into the hands of an historian; who, to swell a volume, ascribes to him works which he never wrote, and actions which he never performed; celebrates virtues which he was never famous for, and excuses faults which he was never guilty of.

To avert this kind of writing, Addison recommends impartiality, accurateness, and discretion. Yet all this he believes can only be realized if the biographer does not know the subject of a life personally. Moreover, he requires that there should have passed some time after the person’s death, before the biography of a great man should appear in public.

Addison’s essay for *The Freeholder* does certainly not apply to the later eighteenth century as far as the status of biography in England is concerned, but it anticipates some of the main issues in eighteenth century biographical criticism: truth and objectivity, the relationship between the biographer and his subject, the relative qualities of biography and autobiography. These were matters in which Samuel Johnson, almost half a century later, took a special interest and to which he made frequent contributions in his critical prose.

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3 “A writer of biographies or of the life of a particular person”, *OED* s.v. “biographer” 1).

4 “The Freeholder No. 35”, 167f.