

Johnson's Dictionary and Future Progress Vs. Preservation

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HIS 492 - Seminar in History

May 16, 2024

Before there was the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (first published in 1847) and the Oxford English Dictionary (originally published in 1884), one of the most influential and widely studied dictionaries of the English language was Samuel Johnson's *A Dictionary of the English Language*.¹ Often referred to as "Johnson's Dictionary," this dictionary was first published in 1755 and republished with a second edition in 1773. Johnson's Dictionary was not the first English dictionary nor the one with the most entries. That being said, Samuel Johnson and his dictionary remain as important parts of the history of lexicography, which Johnson defines as "The art or practice of writing dictionaries."² His attention to detail and dedication to his craft make him well-studied and well-respected in the field of lexicography.

Johnson's main legacy was in his definitions and the way that he gives multiple detailed definitions for each word with a literary quote as an example of how the word could be used. His way of defining was relatively new and unique, but in a way came with unforeseen consequences and effects. By choosing quotes from famous writers, thinkers, and works, Johnson created (intentionally or unintentionally) a canon. While English nationalism and identity was not at its peak in Johnson's time, he did contribute to it. Johnson had pride for his language and culture, as well as a deep love for his work, but eighteenth century culture and the beginnings of English nationalism and national identity can be seen in Johnson's work through who he decides to quote in his definitions as well as how a culture of politeness and chauvinism affected his outlook and worldview.

Johnson's Dictionary operates on multiple levels. On one level, it exists as a culmination of years of research. It was a passion project and a labor of love because Samuel Johnson's

¹ Samuel Johnson. *A Dictionary of the English Language*. 1755, 1773. Edited by Beth Rapp Young, Jack Lynch, William Dorner, Amy Larner Giroux, Carmen Faye Mathes, and Abigail Moreshead. 2021. <https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com>

² *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), s.v. "lexicography (n.s.)," accessed May 4, 2024. https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/1755/lexicography_ns

passion in life was words. His life and work revolved around them. Samuel Johnson was a writer himself: poetry and plays, but also critical essays on politics, religion, philosophy, literature, and words. Johnson wrote numerous essays for a magazine called the *Rambler*, the majority of which pertained to language and literature as well as about ethics and morality (mostly in regards to language and literature). For example, Johnson frequently wrote on Classic Greek and Latin works and the way that language was used in them.³ Aside from publishing his own works, Johnson also surrounded himself with like-minded thinkers. During the mid eighteenth century, he founded a group of naturalists, physicians, doctors, writers, etc. who met in a pub weekly to discuss, debate, and share writings on philosophy, politics, and various pieces of their own works and projects. One of the most important aspects of this club was its diversity. Not only were there several women who were part of it, Johnson had close female friends and a high respect for women.⁴ Johnson's club also did not only include people in the social science of humanities fields, but natural scientists and doctors as well. Samuel Johnson would want to befriend people outside of his own field, especially when he was in the midst of writing his dictionary. In some cases, he could look back at previous dictionaries and see what kind of scientific words they were including and how they chose to define them, but actually asking people who worked in those fields directly would ensure a more accurate definition, especially since the scientific fields were constantly changing. New things were always being discovered and old things were always being debunked, which also leads into why Johnson's club continued to grow to include people of so many different fields and passions. Johnson was also an avid debater, illustrating his natural

³ Henry Hitchings. *Defining the World : The Extraordinary Story of Dr. Johnson's Dictionary*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 115-116.

⁴ Leopold Damrosch. *The Club: Johnson, Boswell, and the Friends Who Shaped an Age*. (Yale University Press, 2019), 6-7.

curiosity and desire to become more knowledgeable on many different subjects.⁵ Dictionaries were becoming increasingly about education.

Johnson drew upon several previous incarnations such as John Kersey's *Dictionarium Anglo-Britannicum; or, A general English dictionary* published in 1708 and Nathan Bailey's *An Universal Etymological English Dictionary* from 1721. Johnson's Dictionary Online explains that what makes Johnson's Dictionary so unique for its time was that Johnson also added etymologies and that his definitions are so extensive that "Johnson has a reputation among modern lexicographers as an excellent definer."⁶ Previous dictionaries did not include as much in the way of etymology; instead, Johnson used his knowledge of Latin, Greek, and other languages such as Hebrew and Gaelic to connect words together and provide a basic idea of etymology. While some of Johnson's linguistic knowledge is now outdated, his dictionary provides an excellent look into how language was thought of and understood in the eighteenth century. Johnson's definitions are a great example. Instead of only providing a few words or sentences, Johnson included quotes per each definition to better illustrate how one would use the word in question. This particular dictionary represents "its age's passion for organization," as the mid-eighteenth century was the same period as Diderot's *Encyclopédie* and the founding of both the Royal Academy as well as the British Museum.⁷ The Encyclopedia Britannica was also first published in 1768.

Johnson's quotations come from famous writers and thinkers that he admired, such as Sir Francis Bacon, Sir Philip Sidney, and William Shakespeare.⁸ By coalescing various famous English writers into his dictionary, Johnson codifies a national identity and places certain English

⁵ Damrosch, *The Club*, 123-137.

⁶ Jack Lynch. "About Johnson's Dictionary." Johnson's Dictionary Online, 2021. Accessed April 14, 2024. <https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/blog/about-johnsons-dictionary/>

⁷ Hitchings, *Defining the World*, 4.

⁸ Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 7.

writers as the forefront and backbone of English language and culture. He included so many famous thinkers and writers, since he was already so familiar with their works. He saw himself as following in the footsteps of their tradition. As a lover of words himself, Johnson sought to create a dictionary that would encompass both his passion for the subject and parts of language that he loved so much. But Johnson was building on a tradition that was already there.

Dictionaries that translated other languages such as Latin into English had been around since the fifteenth century, but the first dictionary that was only in English was published in 1604: Robert Cawdrey's *Table Alphabeticall*. This text only included 2,449 entries as opposed to Johnson's Dictionary which has approximately 42,000. Cawdrey's work was based mostly on Edmund Coote's sixteenth century work, *English School-Master*. Both Cawdrey and Coote were schoolmasters. Schoolmasters created many sixteenth century monolingual English dictionaries. We know that Cawdrey used Coote's work because much of Cawdrey's Dedicatorie and many definitions are almost verbatim from Coote. Cawdrey almost verbatim lifted definitions and entries from other works such as a 1588 Latin-English dictionary. As English dictionaries progress through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, we see a trend of experimentation in format, especially with how definitions are thought of and written. In 1616, the publication of John Bullokar's *An English Expositor* gave more detailed definitions to words of foreign origins than Cawdrey had, though still copied much of his work among others. Bullokar also defined each word as part of a discipline or subject. For example, the definition of "epicycle" was "A terme used in Astronomy. It signifieth a lesser circle, whose center or middle part is in the circumference of a greater circle...."⁹ However, *An English Expositor* was not using quotes from

⁹ Starnes, DeWitt T., Gertrude E. Noyes, and Gabriele Stein. *The English Dictionary from Cawdrey to Johnson, 1604-1755; New Edition with an Introduction and a Selected Bibliography by Gabriele Stein*. New edition. (Amsterdam; J. Benjamins Pub. Co., 1991), 22.

famous works as part of the definitions, which would be seen in many eighteenth century dictionaries.

The first work to actually refer to itself as a dictionary would be *The English Dictionarie; or, An Interpreter of hard English Words* of 1623 by Henry Cockeram. Unsurprisingly, Cockeram also based his work on Cawdrey and Bullokar. The major changes that Cockeram brought in were mainly to definitions by expanding them or contracting them more succinctly, though he would continue to expand previously contracted definitions in later editions. The most interesting aspect that Cockeram added to the history of dictionaries was historical and mythological descriptions for fantastical and actual animals or people. Cockeram also included more entries in his work, which was another trend of the dictionary progression.¹⁰ Thomas Blount's *Glossographia*, published in 1656, described itself as including "Terms of Divinity, Law, Physick, Mathematicks, Heraldry, Anatomy, War, Musick, Architecture; and of several other Arts and Sciences Explicated. With Etymologies, Definitions, and Historical Observations on the same."¹¹ Blount got much of his information (sometimes verbatim) from previous dictionaries, but the definitions are still longer and more thorough instead of one or two words like many early dictionaries had. Blount's largest contribution was his inclusion of a more thorough etymology. In 1702, J.K. (possibly John Kersey, but no one knows for sure) published the *New English Dictionary*, whose main contribution to the progression of dictionaries was the focus on difficult words. Most dictionaries prior to the *New English Dictionary* prioritized and emphasized difficult and obscure words including archaic words that people were not familiar with or using anymore. J.K's contributions were an important step because even though "Spelling books and elementary grammars meanwhile had carried lists of ordinary words, though

¹⁰ Starnes, Noyes, and Stein, *The English Dictionary from Cawdrey to Johnson*, 28, 34.

¹¹ Starnes, Noyes, and Stein, *The English Dictionary from Cawdrey to Johnson*, 37.

without definitions except for an occasional distinction between easily confused words,” dictionaries focused on a seemingly higher form of language that was not as accessible or useful to an average person. That being said, definitions were still lacking. They were only a few words and not descriptive. For example, a goat was “a beast” and that was the entire definition.¹²

We do know that John Kersey, the possible J.K. of the *New English Dictionary*, published two dictionaries during the early eighteenth century. In 1706, he published a revised version of Edward Phillips’ 1658 *The New World of English Words* while in 1708 he published his own *Dictionarium Anglo-Britannicum*. In Kersey’s revision of *The New World of English Words*, he provides more entries (38,000), but also includes more scientific and technical definitions of words instead of describing more mythical and magical creatures or figures, which also signals the general shift towards more “scientific” ways of thinking and less “magical” ones. Kersey also expanded many of Phillips’ definitions to include multiple definitions of the same word. For example, Kersey wrote the definition for confess as “to acknowledge, own, or allow; to hear the Confession of a Penitent, to declare one’s Sins in Order to Absolution” instead of just the religious sense of the word. The *Dictionarium Anglo-Britannicum* was essentially a smaller and more reduced version of Kersey’s revision of *The New World of English Words*. There are fewer entries and the definitions are either shorter or copied verbatim. For example, *The New World of English Words*’s definition of “digit” was “the quantity of an Inch in Measure: In Astronomy, a twelfth part of the Diameter of the Sun or Moon, a Measure which is us’d to express the quantity of an Eclipse. In Arithmitick a Character that denotes- a Figure.- As V is put for 5, X fur 10, L for 50, &c.”¹³ While the definition for “digit” found in the *Dictionarium Anglo-Britannicum* was almost exactly the same, reading “the quantity of an Inch in Measure: In Astronomy, a twelfth

¹² Starnes, Noyes, and Stein, *The English Dictionary from Cawdrey to Johnson*, 71; 73.

¹³ Edward Phillips. John Kersey, ed. *The New World of English Words*, (London: J. Phillips. 1708), 221.

part of the Diameter of the Sun or Moon: In Arithmitick a Character that denotes- a Figure.- As V is put for 5, X fur 10, L for 50, &c.”¹⁴ These minor changes align with general revisions and edits that were typical for dictionaries with multiple editions, but it also points to growing development in the accessibility of dictionaries.

Another major dictionary work prior to Johnson’s Dictionary was Nathan Bailey’s *An Universal Etymological English Dictionary* first published in 1721. Bailey has a long history of lexicography and publishing dictionaries throughout the 1720s and 1730s. *An Universal Etymological English Dictionary* boasted approximately 40,000 words that bills itself as:

A Large Collection and Explication of Words and Phrases us’d in our Ancient Statutes, Charters, Writs, and Old Records, and Processes at Law; and the Etymology and Interpretation of the Proper Names of Men, Women, and Remarkable Places in Great Britain: also the Dialects of our Different Counties.¹⁵

This demonstrates an increasing focus on etymology as a central part of dictionaries and teaching as well as expanding ideas of what dictionaries can and can be used for. As seen with Kersey, dictionaries were beginning to become more accessible to wider audiences. Bailey was explicitly in favor of this, illustrated when he says that this dictionary was “for the Entertainment of the Curious, as the Information of the Ignorant, and for the Benefit of young Students, Artificers, Tradesmen and Foreigners, who are desirous thoroughly to understand what they Speak, Read, or Write.”¹⁶ Bailey’s motivation here was clear, a strong passion for education, which harkens back to the schoolmaster roots of the dictionary genre. But as one of the most major and influential dictionaries prior to Johnson, it does call into question what Johnson himself’s motivations were.

By incorporating this larger history of dictionaries, we can understand that Johnson’s work did not exist in a vacuum. On another level, Johnson established a “canon.” He

¹⁴John Kersey. *Dictionarium Anglo-Britannicum*. (London: J. Wilde. 1708), 206.

¹⁵Nathan Bailey. *An Etymological Universal Dictionary*. (London: E. Bell, J. Darby, A. Bettesworth, F. Fayram, J. Pemberton, J. Hooke, C. Rivington, F. Clay, J. Batley, and E. Simon. 1721), 1.

¹⁶Bailey, *An Etymological Universal Dictionary*, 1.

standardized a language system. While he was not the first to do this, he published his dictionary as part of a literary tradition. The eighteenth century was also the beginning of critical literary theory and analysis, which Johnson also participated in. Finally, Johnson and dictionary efforts can be looked at through a nationalistic lens. Johnson makes references throughout the front matter of his dictionary as well as his *Plan of a Dictionary of the English Language* about the greatness of the English language. For example, Johnson expresses:

as every language has a time of rudeness antecedent to perfection, as well as of false refinement and declension, I have been cautious lest my zeal for antiquity might drive me into times too remote, and crowd my book with words now no longer understood. I have fixed *Sidney's* work for the boundary, beyond which I make few excursions. From the authours which rose in the time of *Elizabeth*, a speech might be formed adequate to all the purposes of use and elegance. If the language of theology were extracted from *Hooker* and the translation of the Bible; the terms of natural knowledge from *Bacon*; the phrases of policy, war, and navigation from *Raleigh*; the dialect of poetry and fiction from *Spenser* and *Sidney*; and the diction of common life from *Shakespeare*, few ideas would be lost to mankind, for want of *English* words, in which they might be expressed.¹⁷

Meaning that, Johnson believes if he can truly standardize speech, then he can also standardize a truly English culture and sense of identity through famous writers. Johnson used quotations from approximately 375 different authors or texts. Not all of these authors were English or even from the British Isles, but they still were part of the same English/Western standard culture and curriculum, such as Homer. Johnson ratified integral parts of the Western canon by including them in his dictionary.

Samuel Johnson reckons with English ideas of politeness, civility, and chauvinism when writing his dictionary. One only needs to look at the definitions for various words relating to these ideas in Johnson's Dictionary. For example, the definitions for "barbarous" are "Stranger to civility; savage; uncivilized," "Ignorant; unacquainted with arts," and "Cruel; inhuman," which

¹⁷ Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 7.

begs the question of what was civility and who gets to determine what that is.¹⁸ If we are to go with Johnson's definition, then civility was "Freedom from barbarity; the state of being civilised," "Politeness; complaisance; elegance of behaviour," "Rule of decency; practise of politeness."¹⁹ Politeness comes up twice and was an interesting choice of words. He calls "politeness," "Elegance of manners; gentility; good breeding."²⁰ The notion of "politeness" was a political as well as social notion dating back to Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third earl of Shaftesbury in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries who popularized and argued for these ideas. Historian Lawrence E. Klein argues that "politeness represented an alternative to the picture of the English gentleman as a denizen of the country attached with fierce loyalty to his economic independence, his moral autonomy and his virtuous simplicity."²¹ Klein's way of framing politeness incorporates Johnson's way of thinking about it, even if Klein did not quote Johnson directly. Johnson breaks politeness down into three distinct features, all of which are inherently connected to class and race. He was not explicitly saying that wealthy white men can be considered more polite than poorer men or men of color, but that was a true facet of eighteenth century British society. So, politeness and gentility both become a political and economic identity. Johnson was similarly using that sense of upper class righteousness (despite not actually being upper class himself) to bolster his dictionary. In it, language was being used to argue that gentility was correct by using certain writers' quotations and deciding which words or writers can be admitted as part of his dictionary. We also know that Johnson's dictionary endeavor was being sponsored by Lord Philip Dormer, Earl of Chesterfield because his original

¹⁸ *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), s.v. "barbarous (adj.)," accessed May 4, 2024. https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/1755/barbarous_adj

¹⁹ *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), s.v. "civility (n.s)," accessed May 4, 2024. https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/1755/civility_ns

²⁰ *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), s.v. "politeness (n.s)," accessed May 4, 2024. https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/1755/politeness_ns

²¹ Lawrence E. Klein, "Liberty, Manners, and Politeness in Early Eighteenth-Century England." *The Historical journal* 32, no. 3 (1989): 588.

schematic for his dictionary addressed to him in the title: The plan of a dictionary of the English language; addressed to the Right Honourable Philip Dormer, Earl of Chesterfield,.... First, the fact that Johnson was addressing a Lord in his writing indicates another party involved in the project who was above Johnson. By having a nobleman sponsoring his work, the nobleman would likely have sway over what kinds of words, definitions, and thoughts that Johnson could put into his work. Promoting a more “polite” agenda could be achieved through Johnson’s work, which is not to say that Johnson did not necessarily agree with promoting politeness, but it is important to bring up.

By looking at Johnson’s Dictionary through these lenses, we can understand how language was thought of during the eighteenth century. Given that Johnson quotes approximately 375 different authors or texts, there is no way to look at all of them nor would it be productive to analyze his use of every single one. To delve into what Johnson was trying to do efficiently and effectively, we can look at one particular writer: William Shakespeare. In our contemporary world, Shakespeare is taught in schools globally and is studied in academia as well as praised as one of England’s greatest writers. In Samuel Johnson’s time, Shakespearean study and criticism was just getting started. Johnson had his own copy of Shakespeare’s folio and made extensive notes on it. He quoted Shakespeare thousands of times in his dictionary in both the 1755 and 1773 editions, illustrating the admiration that Shakespeare was beginning to accrue during this century. To understand what Johnson and many other lexicographers, writers, and philologists saw in Shakespeare, we must establish both the Shakespearean scholarly scene as well as what the Bard’s general cultural presence was in the eighteenth century.

The first folio of Shakespeare’s works was published posthumously in 1623, seven years after his death by two of Shakespeare’s friends and fellow members of his troupe, the King’s

Men, John Heminge and Henry Condell. Only some of Shakespeare's plays were previously published in quarto editions. The majority were not, which was why this first folio was so significant. There are also some discrepancies between quarto and folio versions, especially since there were many unofficial quarto versions. In many ways, the folio version is usually viewed as the most correct and whole version of the plays. According to the Folger Shakespeare Library, "About half of Shakespeare's plays had never previously appeared in print, including *As You Like It*, *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, *The Tempest*, and many more. Without the First Folio, 18 plays might have been lost forever."²² After the publishing of the First Folio, there would be three more editions published in 1632, 1663, and 1685. These editions made many edits and corrections such as names of various Greek and Roman origin characters. A different publisher obtained the rights and published the first multi-volume comprehensive collected Shakespeare works with a named editor, Nicholas Rowe.²³ The next major editor came in the 1720s in Alexander Pope, a poet well known for his translation of *The Odyssey*. Pope viewed Shakespeare as "a writer worth reading for his moral instruction as well as his poetic beauties, a storehouse of both thoughts and images... 'of all English Poets . . . the fairest and fullest subject for Criticism', the distinctive representative of English culture, to be judged by English laws, and not by 'Aristotle's rules'." Pope took it upon himself as the editor "to present his English cultural and poetic hero at his best, nor would he have thought his editorial approach odd in his own historical moment."²⁴ Whether or not Samuel Johnson specifically used a Pope edited version of Shakespeare, Pope's ideas and outlooks on Shakespeare (while criticized) did have an impact on the Englishization and nationalism that began to take hold in the idea of Shakespeare's work and legacy. Johnson

²² "Shakespeare First Folio: Folger Shakespeare Library," Shakespeare First Folio | Folger Shakespeare Library, accessed April 17, 2024, <https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeare-in-print/first-folio/>.

²³ Fiona Ritchie and Peter Sabor, eds. *Shakespeare in the Eighteenth Century*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 21-41.

²⁴ Ritchie and Sabor, eds, *Shakespeare in the Eighteenth Century*, 25.

actually expresses similar notions to Pope about Shakespeare as a literary genius in his own 1765 edition of Shakespeare's works.²⁵ In 1733, a version edited by Lewis Theobald included numerous annotations and footnotes that "justified textual choices and provided semantic explanation, pointed out allusions and borrowings, explained words and ideas, and adduced parallel passages."²⁶ This concept and format are fairly similar to modern editions of Shakespeare, so Theobald's work clearly had some kind of impact on Shakespearean studies. Johnson likely read Theobald's 1733 edition because of a mention in *Shakespeare in the Eighteenth Century* that "In 1745 Jacob Tonson III effectively warned Edward Cave off printing a projected edition by Samuel Johnson."²⁷ This means that Johnson was probably already working on his Shakespeare edition by this point, meaning that he likely did not use Hanmer's 1744 or Warburton's 1747 editions. Johnson's edition also has the same footnote style as Theobald's edition. Johnson likely used the original First Folio and aspects of Theobald's edition to develop his own arguments and interpretations.²⁸

Now that we have established where Johnson was getting his Shakespearean information from, we can begin to explore how Johnson himself was understanding Shakespeare. This gives a solid foundation for Johnson as a general scholar, which can be used for specifically analyzing Johnson's Dictionary and its use of Shakespearean quotes in its definitions and how that transfers to a sense of English nationalism. Johnson makes his feelings on Shakespeare clear in his preface of his own edition of Shakespeare's plays. Johnson says "Shakespeare is above all writers, as least above all modern writers, the poet of nature," but the most interesting part was when

²⁵William Shakespeare. The plays of William Shakespeare: in eight volumes /with the corrections and illustrations of various commentators ; to which are added notes by Sam. Johnson. (London : Printed for J. and R. Tonson, H. Woodfall, J. Rivington ... [and 9 others], 1765), Harvard University Library and New York Public Library. <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/004128368>. (Accessed April 17, 2024)

²⁶ Ritchie and Sabor, eds. *Shakespeare in the Eighteenth Century*, 27.

²⁷ Ritchie and Sabor, eds. *Shakespeare in the Eighteenth Century*, 28.

²⁸ Ritchie and Sabor, eds. *Shakespeare in the Eighteenth Century*, 30.

Johnson describes him as “the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirroure of manners and of life.”²⁹ Johnson views Shakespeare (and literature in general) as having an inherent moral quality to it; or one should not read Shakespeare simply out of interest or for entertainment, but to gain a moral lesson from it. This quote was also an indication of the idolization of Shakespeare that began in this period and will continue on. Shakespeare was not put on a pedestal in the same way that he was beginning to be during the eighteenth century. He was famous during his own time, but his plays were equally for common people as they were for the upper class and nobility. There was no obligation to study his works in the same way that there would be in the eighteenth century and beyond. Johnson was definitely not the first person to assume that all literature must be didactic, nor was he the first person to (directly or indirectly) label Shakespeare as England’s greatest writer. That being said, Samuel Johnson’s position as a major figure in Shakespearean scholarship with such a firm stance on how literature should be read is important.

Johnson’s stance on Shakespeare extends into his dictionary. According to Johnson’s Dictionary Online, where entries can be browsed by quoted authors, there are a large number of quotes for each play. Each play, with the exception of *Henry IV Part I*, was quoted at least one hundred times. There was a clear bias in quotations as history plays and tragedies tend to be quoted more than the comedies are, though there were still exceptions to this such as *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* surprisingly having 603 and 574 attributed quotes, respectively, beating out several histories and tragedies for most quoted play. The most quoted plays actually are *King Lear* with 1,320 and *Macbeth* with 1,303 attributed quotes. One would expect *Hamlet* to be the most quoted, but it only has approximately half of the number of quotations that *King Lear* and *Macbeth*. Johnson actually published his own notes and criticism

²⁹ Johnson, ed. *The plays of William Shakespeare: in eight volumes*, 14.

on *Macbeth* in 1765, so the reason for the numerous *Macbeth* quotes may be Johnson's own personal preference for the play coming through. It should be noted that there are another 6,380 entries that are considered "still to be classified" and are from "unidentified sources," which is confusing because for some of these quotes Johnson does identify the specific play where these quotes come from, but others simply say "Shakespeare" and that is all. There is not much of a point in going through every single "still to be classified" entry because there are over six thousand entries. With such a large number of entries, it would be a waste of time and would likely not show anything different from the entries that have been classified. The likelihood would be that histories and tragedies would be the most quoted, specifically *Macbeth* and *King Lear*. Also of note was that no quote seems to be attributed to any of the sonnets, which was curious and interesting. Considering that the sonnets were published by this point (originally being published in the early seventeenth century), there are several possibilities for this. One possibility was that Johnson and other scholars were not as interested in the sonnets as they were in the plays. Johnson actually does not include the sonnets in his eight volume edition of Shakespeare's works. It was also possible that there are some quotes from the sonnets, but Johnson's Dictionary Online filed those entries under the "still to be classified" section instead of a specific sonnets section, making these entries more difficult to find. However, the former possibility was likely the correct one as

We need to remind ourselves that in this period he is chiefly valued as a playwright rather than a writer of poems. What feed directly into eighteenth-century poetry are the speeches and songs from the plays rather than *Venus and Adonis*, *The Rape of Lucrece* or the sonnets, which were unregarded and little known.

and that the sonnets "were deemed outmoded and even awkward."³⁰ Personally, I would have included the sonnets, but for some bizarre reason Samuel Johnson did not ask me what I thought.

³⁰ Ritchie and Sabor, eds. *Shakespeare in the Eighteenth Century*, 100; 5.

Basically, Johnson made it a habit of picking and choosing which particular works get to be celebrated and which are better left forgotten, which is ultimately disappointing but surprising and surprisingly complicated. Disappointing that works less quoted or left out entirely still have value and merit. On the one hand, Johnson's cherry picking tendencies feel like a precursor to Victorian era scholarship which also ignores or changes works and history that it deems immoral or unacceptable for whatever reason. Though there is a small bit of surprise because one would assume that if Johnson was so enamored with Shakespeare's works that he would be taken with all of them, especially considering Johnson's own background as a poet.

Most other historians have not pointed out that Johnson does not include the sonnets. Fiona Ritchie and Peter Sabor do more generally in *Shakespeare in the Eighteenth Century* by pointing out that no one cared about the sonnets, but even authors that are specifically looking at Johnson's Shakespearean criticism do not note the sonnets or Johnson's lack of them. Yes, even Samuel Johnson was allowed to like and dislike pieces of literature. And many historians would probably throw up their hands and leave it at that because it does not matter. But it does matter because it was weird that Johnson left out a major body of work from a writer that he idolizes and it was weird that no one else seems to have noticed or cared. However, J.A. Smith does raise a good point in "Shakespeare Ancient and Modern: The 1750s Reception" when they say that "The 1750s' project of making Shakespeare modern also took place in a context in which, paradoxically, he was also becoming increasingly 'ancient': in the specific sense of being historically distant, linguistically alien, a voice from another time."³¹ Therefore, Johnson was not just part of a nationalizing effort, but a modernizing one as well; and that they were actually the same movement, which is where many of our concepts here intersect: the lack of sonnets, the

³¹ Smith, J. A. "Shakespeare Ancient and Modern: The 1750s Reception." *The Review of English studies* 68, no. 285 (2017): 567.

history of publishing and editing Shakespeare, and Johnson's Dictionary as part of a nationalistic effort.

The realization that Johnson left out the sonnets is as much a side tangent as it is another way in of looking at Johnson and the historiography around him. Johnson historiography is generally positive. Even historians that do analyze Johnson's work from a nationalistic perspective seem to hold him in high regard and see that nationalism as a positive. The dictionary was not this piece of nationalistic propaganda, but it has undertones and even moments where Johnson clearly had feelings about England and the English language in comparison to other languages or peoples. In the preface to his dictionary, Johnson described his process for deciding what types of words can or cannot be allowed in. Some of his reasoning was logical, such as his decision to not include "all words which have relation to proper names; such as *Arian, Socinian, Calvinist, Benedictine, Mahometan*."³² Other times, Johnson was more confusing. For example,

The words which our authours have introduced by their knowledge of foreign languages, or ignorance of their own, by vanity or wantonness, by compliance with fashion, or lust of innovation, I have registred as they occurred, though commonly only to censure them, and warn others against the folly of naturalizing useless foreigners to the injury of the natives.³³

What Johnson said makes sense on a surface level. Words that are distinctly foreign or seem are not included. However, there was also a sense of English pride and superiority. Johnson's distaste for words of foreign origin was also a small testament to his outdatedness in terms of linguistic knowledge. Striking all words of foreign origin would lead to striking vast quantities of words in English because of how languages develop and spread. They are always being influenced by other languages. Still, there was that sense of English identity, as though it wa a solid and distinct

³² Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 4.

³³ Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 6.

entity. Johnson also seems to think that his dictionary was in some way cutting off the threat of a foreign invasion of language by not including these kinds of words.

Johnson refers to his use of and love for many famous English writers such as Shakespeare or Bacon or Sidney as a “zeal for antiquity,” which was ironic because these authors are not part of antiquity and the periods that these writers were working in were not that long ago compared to when Johnson was writing, especially considering the vast and long history of England.³⁴ This is similar to when someone refers to Elizabethan English as “old English” when it is not that at all and is much closer to modern English than actual Old English. While the latter idea is usually more out of ignorance of what Old English is and how the English language developed, it similarly carries the same modern egotism that Johnson holds when he refers to early modern writers as “antiquity.” Johnson says as much here:

As language was at its beginning merely oral, all words of necessary or common use were spoken before they were written; and while they were unfixed by any visible signs, must have been spoken with great diversity, as we now observe those who cannot read to catch sounds imperfectly, and utter them negligently. When this wild and barbarous jargon was first reduced to an alphabet, every penman endeavoured to express, as he could, the sounds which he was accustomed to pronounce or to receive, and vitiated in writing such words as were already vitiated in speech. The powers of the letters, when they were applied to a new language, must have been vague and unsettled, and therefore different hands would exhibit the same sound by different combinations.³⁵

Johnson carries a vision of progress; humans are constantly progressing and striving to be better, more civilized, and sophisticated than they were before, but Johnson was applying this idea to language. Language and literature began orally, but humans have progressed and the majority of our literature was written down, which was seen as more civilized. So, Shakespeare’s sonnets are dropped from the dictionary and eighteenth century literary canon because they are considered

³⁴ Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 7.

³⁵ Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 1.

too ancient. Lawrence E. Klein similarly brings up the thinker Andrew Fletcher whose reframing of the Italian Renaissance as:

a turning point in the history of manners: a point at which Italians, and subsequently all Europeans, turned from 'their frugal and military way of living' to 'the pursuit of refined and expensive pleasures', to 'vicious appetite', to 'prodigious expence', to 'an expensive way of living', and, in a word, to 'luxury'. Whereas Fletcher attributed the new pattern of European manners to, among other things, the revival of learning, particularly the renewed exposure to classical culture which prompted modern emulation of its most luxurious aspects, he ascribed the older pattern to medieval Europe's feudal, indeed Gothic, origins.³⁶

tracks with how Johnson as well as other English writers and thinkers were thinking about the English Renaissance and Elizabethan age. On one hand, it is the distant past of backwards thinking and more magical beliefs, but in the eighteenth century it began to be seen for its immense cultural impact with the start of Shakespearean studies being the most notable example.

Yet, Johnson does not allow us to analyze him that easily or simply. Towards the end of the preface Johnson concedes a reluctant acceptance to where he believes his dictionary will find its place in the world and the future of language, expressing that while he was proud of what he has created, his dictionary may be a somewhat futile attempt to preserve language.

When we see men grow old and die at a certain time one after another, from century to century, we laugh at the elixir that promises to prolong life to a thousand years; and with equal justice may the lexicographer be derided, who being able to produce no example of a nation that has preserved their words and phrases from mutability, shall imagine that his dictionary can embalm his language, and secure it from corruption and decay, that it is in his power to change sublunary nature, and clear the world at once from folly, vanity, and affectation.³⁷

Johnson's decision to include this meditation, both at the beginning of his dictionary and in general, is interesting. The previous preface pages give off the impression that Johnson was an elitist stick in the mud who does want to see a preservation of the English language as he knows

³⁶ Klein, "Liberty, Manners, and Politeness," 594.

³⁷ Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 9.

it, but this paragraph and the following one where he criticizes the academy institutions that several other European entities have established for this very purpose.

With this hope, however, academies have been instituted, to guard the avenues of their languages, to retain fugitives, and repulse intruders; but their vigilance and activity have hitherto been vain; sounds are too volatile and subtile for legal restraints; to enchain syllables, and to lash the wind, are equally the undertakings of pride, unwilling to measure its desires by its strength. The *French* language has visibly changed under the inspection of the academy.³⁸

The Académie française was first established in 1635, while the Florentine Accademia della Crusca was founded in 1582. Both academies created dictionaries to “improve the language.” English dictionaries soon followed. It took them decades as opposed to Johnson’s thirteen years to create his dictionary.³⁹ Johnson was still judgemental and clearly mocking these institutions by saying, “the stile of *Amelot*’s translation of father *Paul* is observed by *Le Courayer* to be *un peu passé*; and no *Italian* will maintain, that the diction of any modern writer is not perceptibly different from that of *Boccace*, *Machiavel*, or *Caro*.” He implies that languages such as French and Italian are inherently lesser than English precisely because they have felt the need to stop themselves in time and pass laws about how they can develop.

If Johnson was so vehemently opposed to creating legal code to control language, then, aside from not having any legal backing, how was his dictionary any different? Johnson believes that the institutions policing language through “vigilance and activity have hitherto been vain,” and admits that his own dictionary has “indulged expectation which neither reason nor experience can justify.”⁴⁰ Johnson was remarkably and surprisingly self-aware in his final pages of the preface, but it only brings in more confusion and complexity about Johnson’s motivation and personal beliefs regarding language and his work. On page ten, the final page, of the preface

³⁸ Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 9.

³⁹ Hitchings, *Defining the World*, 51.

⁴⁰ Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 9.

of Johnson's Dictionary, Johnson gives a somewhat reluctant acceptance to the passage of time and the changing of language:

If the changes that we fear be thus irresistible, what remains but to acquiesce with silence, as in the other insurmountable distresses of humanity? it remains that we retard what we cannot repel, that we palliate what we cannot cure. Life may be lengthened by care, though death cannot be ultimately defeated: tongues, like governments, have a natural tendency to degeneration; we have long preserved our constitution, let us make some struggles for our language.⁴¹

Here, Johnson gave a pretty depressing view on the passage of time and the changing of language. He understood that there was no way to stop either of these things, nor did he necessarily seem to want to as he called "The language most likely to continue long without alteration, would be that of a nation raised a little, and but a little, above barbarity, secluded from strangers, and totally employed in procuring the conveniencies of life...."⁴² In fact, when he said, "it remains that we retard what we cannot repel, that we palliate what we cannot cure,"⁴³ He presented us with why he created his dictionary in the first place. If language and culture are always changing and will always change, then there is no sense in trying to stop it. Johnson's Dictionary was not a prevention of change nor a preservation of the language as it was when Johnson was creating it. It even took him twelve years to publish it ("publish" and not "complete" as Johnson did not seem to believe that it was complete after it was published) and even in that time language can change. There would not be dramatic changes, but new meanings or senses of words could develop and gain popularity. Johnson understood that his work was never going to be an iron grip on language. It was intended to act more as a snapshot of language during the mid eighteenth century, but even then it was never going to capture every word and aspect of language perfectly no matter how hard he tried. Johnson was in a strange gray area

⁴¹ Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 10.

⁴² Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 9.

⁴³ Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 10.

where he wanted to depict language as it was, but simultaneously understood that the beauty of language is that it will always change.

Even in 1717 in his *The Plan of a Dictionary of the English Language*, published eight years before the actual dictionary was published, Johnson warned his publishers and patrons about his project's limitations:

I here lay before your Lordship the plan of my undertaking, that more may not be demanded than I intend, and that before it is too far advanced to be thrown into a new method, I may be advertised of its defects or superfluities. Such informations I may justly hope from the emulation with which those who desire the praise of elegance or discernment must contend in the promotion of a design that you, my Lord, have not thought unworthy to share your attention with treaties and with wars.⁴⁴

He was already thinking about legacy and reception even before the actual dictionary was published. He downplays his own work when addressing his sponsor directly, almost as though he is unsure of how successful or useful his dictionary will really be, or was already expressing doubts about if one truly could purify an entire language by way of a single dictionary, or if compiling an entire language was even possible. The following passage demonstrates that when compared with what he would later write in his dictionary, Johnson's feelings on preserving language changed somewhat.

It was not easy to determine by what rule of distinction the words of this dictionary were to be chosen. The chief intent of it is to preserve the purity and ascertain the meaning of our English idiom; and this seems to require nothing more than that our language be considered so far as it is our own; that the words and phrases used in the general intercourse of life, or found in the works of those whom we commonly stile polite writers, be selected, without including the terms of particular professions, since, with the arts to which they relate, they are generally derived from other nations...the value of a work must be estimated by its use: it is not enough that a dictionary lights the critic, unless at the same time it instructs the learner; as it is to little purpose, that an engine amuses the philosopher by the subtilty of its mechanism, if it requires so much knowledge in its application, as to be of no advantage to the common workman.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Samuel Johnson, *The plan of a dictionary of the English language; addressed to the Right Honourable Philip Dormer, Earl of Chesterfield, One of his Majesty's Principal Secretaries of State*, (London: 1747), 4.

⁴⁵ Samuel Johnson, *The plan of a dictionary of the English language; addressed to the Right Honourable Philip Dormer, Earl of Chesterfield*, (London: 1747), 4-5.

Both in his *Plan* and his preface for his dictionary, Johnson had difficulty categorizing and justifying his choices for which words to include and which words to not. There were similar reasons given in both such as excluding words considered too foreign. The line, “The chief intent of it is to preserve the purity and ascertain the meaning of our English idiom; and this seems to require nothing more than that our language be considered so far as it is our own” is particularly interesting because Johnson viewed the English language as perfect as it was, disregarding how it got there or the possibility of it changing. Johnson here expressed purist and English language superiority sentiments; whereas in his dictionary, he somewhat challenged these notions. He agreed that English was superior to other languages, but took on a more viable understanding of what dictionaries actually do. Teaching remained as one of the primary goals of his dictionary, but after eight long years of research and compiling, he realized that his original goal of purity was wrong. He still worked on preserving, but preserving what language was rather than what language should always be.

I originally went into this viewing Samuel Johnson as an eighteenth century English nationalist who combined his genuine love of words with a desire to rule language with an iron fist. This, however, is a simplistic, naive, and not wholly accurate portrayal of Samuel Johnson. First, Johnson did not come from wealth nor did he gain an exuberant amount of wealth over the course of his life. He also seemed to suffer from multiple undiagnosed mental illnesses or neurological disorders as well as perpetually ailing physical health and disabilities. He was prone to bouts of depression and melancholy. Johnson’s personal life and health issues seem to explain why he was always looking towards the future. Even in his own dictionary, he was concerned with how it would be read by future generations. He was prepared that people would be likely to read the absence of many words as intentional omissions, but acknowledged that there was no

way that he could record every single word ever used. His outlook on what would become probably his most famous work was surprisingly practical. There were notions of classism and judgements of those less educated than him. There was a budding sense of English superiority; not quite a nationalistic identity, since it was too early in English history for that to really take hold, but Johnson does hold pride for his language and culture. He would not have chosen to undertake this project or quote so many famous English writers and thinkers or be part of the beginnings of English academia and scholarship if he did not truly love it.

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