The Creators of Information in Eighteenth-Century Britain

by

Melissa Patterson

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English
University of Toronto

© Copyright by Melissa Patterson 2015
The Creators of Information in Eighteenth-Century Britain

Melissa Patterson

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English
University of Toronto

2015

Abstract

In twenty-first-century accounts of how knowledge was transmitted at second hand in the early modern period and the eighteenth century, the idea of information has played a crucial role. “Information” refers to the content that was compiled and stored on paper and shared in reference books and periodical sheets. My thesis argues that eighteenth-century Britons understood printed information through the lens of cultural discourses that privileged engagements with books that we would now call “literary.” By re-thinking the transmission of information as a textual object in eighteenth-century Britain, I argue, we can better understand the complex ways in which information was credited, acquired, and shared. I show how the author-function played a role in the public sharing of information in Samuel Johnson’s Dictionary of the English Language (1755). Johnson’s rhetoric of personal sacrifice in the “Preface” and Plan of an English Dictionary (1747), I argue, should be contrasted with the methods of Johnson’s rival, Nathan Bailey. Bailey’s Universal Etymological English Dictionary (1721-1802) offers an example of the failure of compiled information to gain cultural authority without authorial control. I argue that Jonathan Swift’s satires on textual criticism, cryptanalysis, and scientific languages can be seen as critiques of mechanical reading “devices” that extracted information from texts. A direct challenge to informational uses of language was offered at the end of the eighteenth century in the work of Johnson’s friend, Hester Lynch Piozzi. Piozzi’s English-language reference work, British Synonymy (1794), showed how direct engagement with the “redundant” material of language
provided a knowledge of texts that was difficult to communicate but necessary to observe. I suggest that the mediation of public information in eighteenth-century Britain was balanced in important ways by literary discourses that argued for the importance of the specific ways in which knowledge was credited, acquired, and shared through language.
Acknowledgments

I thank Deidre Lynch, my supervisor, for her support, generosity, and enlivening conversation, for sharing her formidable insight and knowledge, and for opening new avenues to me. I thank my committee members Carol Percy and Heather Jackson for their incisive feedback and conversations that helped me to discern my project, their encouraging comments and keen recommendations, and the way they fostered my research with generosity and spirit.

I am grateful to Heather Jackson for taking steps to ensure that I was supported during my precarious career as an international student and to Deidre Lynch for providing me with the means to attend conferences as far away as other countries. I am also grateful to Deidre Lynch and Carol Percy for seeking out support for me throughout my studies, bringing me to conferences and finding scholarships and other opportunities for me.

My work has benefited from the Warren N. Cordell Research Fellowship and the Ruth E. and the Harry E. Carter Ontario Graduate Scholarship.

I am lucky to have benefited from conversations with John Baird, Simon Dickie, Darryl Domingo, Alan Galey, Emma Gorst, Lindsey Eckert, Tony Fong, Alexandra Howard, Thomas Keymer, Marie Korey, Richard Landon, Randall McCleod, Erin Parker, Michael Raby, Jay Rajiva, Alpen Razy, Janet Sorensen, Morgan Vanek and many others I have not named.
# Table of Contents

Table of Contents..............................................................................................................................................v
List of Appendices .................................................................................................................................................. vii
Introduction..........................................................................................................................................................1

Chapter 1: Bailey’s *Dictionary*: Reading Information.........................................................................................16
Bailey’s Dictionaries and Johnson’s *Plan* ..........................................................................................................20
The Dictionary as “Storehouse” of Words and Author’s Work ...........................................................................26
Johnson’s Use of Bailey’s *Dictionary* and the Bookseller’s Use of Both .........................................................34
Readers of the Bailey *Dictionary*: Information and “the School of the People” .......................................41

Chapter 2: Johnson’s *Dictionary*: Authoring Information ..................................................................................57
How to Read the First English Dictionary .........................................................................................................66
How to Plan the First English Dictionary .........................................................................................................77
How to Read Johnson’s *Dictionary* ....................................................................................................................87

Chapter 3: Swift’s Reading Devices: Imagining Information ..............................................................................101
Pope and Swift’s Ciphers ...................................................................................................................................106
The Ancient versus the Virtual Text ....................................................................................................................111
The Mathematical Computer...................................................................................................................................118
Communication versus Rhetoric........................................................................................................................124
Reading with the Lagado Computer ..................................................................................................................132

Chapter 4: Piozzi’s *British Synonymy*: Appreciating English ........................................................................140
The Virtue of Periodical Essays.........................................................................................................................145
The Error of Synonymy and the Use of Synonyms ............................................................................................151
Vacuous Writing.....................................................................................................................................................156

*British Synonymy* and Obscurity....................................................................................................................160
The Medium of Amplified Language .................................................................167
Touching the Medium ..................................................................................172
Conclusion ......................................................................................................175
Works Consulted ...........................................................................................177
Appendix: Bibliography of Nathan Bailey Dictionaries ..............................189
List of Appendices

1. Bibliography of Nathan Bailey Dictionaries
Introduction

This thesis began when I undertook a bibliography of eighteenth-century lexicographer Nathan Bailey’s little-known English dictionaries, *An Universal Etymological English Dictionary* (1721-1802), and the illustrated, expanded, *Dictionarium Britannicum* (1730, 1736). Bailey’s *An Universal Etymological English Dictionary*, though used by more Britons than any English dictionary before it, was eclipsed in popular consciousness by Samuel Johnson’s *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755). Johnson had the official backing of the nation’s learned and polite for undertaking a new English-language codifying project that would vie with France’s *Dictionnaire de L’Academie française*. Johnson’s supporters expected the lexicographer to undertake an original work by prescribing limits to the contents of the *Dictionary*, determining which words counted as proper English. By contrast, Bailey’s dictionaries were an inclusive form of database. In Peter Stallybrass’s discussion of early-modern writing as database, he argues that writers copied from commonplace books and printed inventories of knowledge, housing collections of other texts within their own compositions. Benefitting from what Simon Stern has called “a flourishing public domain” and the “limited scope of legal protection” of authors in the eighteenth century, Bailey compiled dictionaries that were collections of other English dictionaries, reference books, and glossaries published prior to (and during) the early eighteenth century in London. Bailey collected “hard words” for his inclusive list of terms, Latin and technical words that allowed his dictionary to double as a general reference book or “dictionary” of arts and sciences. Bailey’s *Dictionary* might be said to have shared information, information in the modern sense that Geoffrey Nunberg discusses in his essay “Farewell to the Information Age”: Nunberg argues that “information” is now a substance that has no proper speaker or form, a

---

quantity that is dispensed by channels or mediums of communication, rather than a specific communication of knowledge that is interpreted or articulated by a subject.²

As I located fifty-two editions of Bailey dictionaries published in the years from 1721 to 1800, I began to wonder why Bailey’s database had been forgotten. Booksellers and retailers from London to Calcutta circulated both Johnson and Bailey dictionaries until the end of the century. But the English dictionary used by most dictionary readers during the eighteenth century sparked little discussion. Bailey’s book was no ordinary title, but rather what William Warner and Clifford Siskin have called a “cardinal mediation” of the Enlightenment: a genre or format for extending “the reach of print” in the sense that it was “regularly published” and provided “much of the content that circulated through the new infrastructure” of the press during the eighteenth century.³ Bailey’s book was a tool for unlearned readers, re-producing the contents of a number of contemporary reference books, presenting itself as a means of gaining access to meanings with which they were “unacquainted.” Bailey’s dictionary stood in place of “the necessary Furniture of learning” as a medium of popular instruction, a book offered in place of other books, of university instruction, and, apparently, of polite conversation.⁴ The alphabetical arrangement of English words in Bailey’s “storehouse” book indexed the information required to do more difficult polite reading: readers of John Milton’s poetry, for instance, could look up information on Greek and Roman mythology referenced in Milton’s texts. As such, the Bailey Dictionary should have been discussed widely by a reading public that fashioned itself as generally improved or broadly Enlightened: Bailey’s database should have been “enabling in a fundamental way”

---

² See “Farewell to the Information Age,” in The Future of the Book, ed. Geoffrey Nunberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 103-138. “Information” in the modern sense—“the content of books from which instruction is derived”—replaced older senses of “information” in use as late as the nineteenth century: “the instruction derived from books” (113), an “aggregation of particular propositions” (111), or a particular “communication” that had been written by someone (114).

³ Clifford Siskin and William Warner, 12.

⁴ Blount mentions that etymological dictionaries such as Bailey’s stood in place of the “Furniture of learning” to substitute for “Money” and social support: see Thomas Blount’s Glossographia Anglicana Nova (London, 1719) (n.p.).
according to Warner and Siskin’s description of “cardinal mediations”—“mediat[ing] a fundamental change in readers—leading them to behave as writers.”

Eighteenth-century information—information in the sense of content or material that was compiled, stored, and shared with the reading public—circulated apparently without making an impact on the polite readers who determined what counted as legitimate knowledge. Moreover, the use of Bailey’s dictionary by readers attempting to write was offset by the discursive re-assessment of what it meant to be a writer. Thus, while Bailey’s dictionary was mentioned in the introduction to working-class poet Stephen Duck’s Poems on Several Subjects (1730) (where the introducer casually suggested that his writing was enabled by the dictionary) Johnson responded in The Adventurer by raising the bar, issuing the prediction that if Duck was a writer, then “the ambition of writing must necessarily cease” altogether.

The Bailey dictionary, by all counts a medium of shared textual material, has a complicated reception history that requires us to re-think the relationship between “information” in the sense of public knowledge and “information” in the sense of shared “content” or “material.” In The Renaissance Computer, Neil Rhodes and Jonathan Sawday discuss the technique of alphabetization in printed books as evidence of successful information sharing. Alphabetization, they point out, had become “the dominant means of storing and retrieving information within books” by the seventeenth century. The preponderance of evidence supporting the idea that seventeenth-century Britons were “storing printed material” has suggested to historians that early modern readers anticipated electronic techniques of information retrieval, that they used “searching” techniques to access a “multiplicity” of compiled texts, and thus that they accessed knowledge made available for a wide audience.

---

5 Siskin and Warner, This is Enlightenment, 13.
8 Ibid, 7-8.
“Information” is a powerful idea that has allowed historians to discuss the ways in which emerging practices and forms of print handled unprecedented quantities of textual material in a manner that parallels electronic information management. “Information” is a constant against which historians are able to measure accelerated change in knowledge technologies, genres, and practices, an idea that allows us to make sense of the new capacities, techniques, and anxieties of early modern and eighteenth-century textual transmission. Ann Blair’s *Too Much to Know*, a history of practices related to the production of early modern reference books, argues that “large collections of textual material” were assembled for handling something which she cautiously calls “information.” She argues that publicly accessible excerpts or items that were collected and reported rather than interpreted belong to a long tradition of information management. Ann Blair and Peter Stallybrass have recently proposed that “from about 1450 information began to be stockpiled in Europe on a radically new scale,” as new collaborative “methods of information management” and note-taking produced new printed collections: “Florilegia and encyclopedias turned what began as personal notes into shared resources designed for circulation.” Clifford Siskin and William Warner, in the introduction to their collection *This is Enlightenment*, propose that the Enlightenment (culminating in the middle of the eighteenth century, when Bailey’s dictionary was in its heyday) “was an event” in the history of mediation enabled by new and proliferating tools, practices, and protocols for “the transmission and communication of information,” especially as more printed “content” began to mediate “users’ knowledge.” Siskin and Warner reframe Kant’s question “*What is Enlightenment?*,” asking “*in what*” did Enlightenment “*occu[r]*”? Among other things, they point to “*new genres and formats*” that “extended the reach of print and speech and enabled more of both”: newspapers and periodical essays, for instance, transmitted more information by mediating the knowledge of other texts.

---


10 Ann Blair and Peter Stallybrass, “Mediating Information, 1450-1800” in *This is Enlightenment*, 139-140.


12 Ibid, 12.
I argue that in the eighteenth century, “information” was not a stable object that could be conveyed and retrieved in different formats, but a form of knowledge that had to be constructed with considerable efforts of rhetoric and imagination. As Geoffrey Nunberg argues, “information” defined as an “abstract” substance or thing—a quantity dispensed by channels of communication—did not emerge until the nineteenth century. Shared content or material was not necessarily recognized as public knowledge in the eighteenth century, and thus “information” is a critical term that should be re-examined. My thesis begins that re-examination: it attempts to re-discover the ways in which information was constructed with effort by eighteenth-century Britons as they attempted to communicate what they knew and to acquire knowledge at second hand. I show how eighteenth-century Britons devoted significant thought both to the process of getting information out of printed language, and to the importance of other ways of knowing language texts that retrievals of information missed.

In Chapter One I argue that polite readers were anxious about Bailey’s lack of credentials: who was Nathan Bailey? The *English and Latin Exercises* that Bailey compiled was “for school boys” and his *Introduction to the English Tongue* (1726) was for school children. He made a downmarket pocket encyclopedia called *The Antiquities of London and Westminster* (1722), another stand-in for books “voluminous and dear.” Bailey believed that “the Generality” of readers were prevented from “being acquainted with” the true contents of books, that they were hindered by “numerous pages of Matter of no great concern.” His answer to the problem of the materiality of learning was *abridgement*. Bailey’s reference works were handy guides whose encyclopedic impulses were utilitarian rather than scholarly; their information was at odds with magisterial projects that sought to encapsulate and visualize learning, such as Ephraim Chambers’s folio *Cyclopaedia* (1726). The *Cyclopaedia* came with a diagram called “a View of Knowledge”—a map or visual “Analysis” of the

---

several connected “Parts” of learning. The map nicely illustrates that the goal of such elevated encyclopedic projects was not only to educate readers, but to provide new knowledge in the synthesis or display of the state of learning within the scholarly societies of the day.

I found that Chambers and compilers of his ilk were anxious to avoid associations with reference books that merely contained or distributed information like Bailey’s, books that did not determine what counted as knowledge. As Richard Yeo’s *Encyclopedic Visions* has shown, eighteenth-century dictionaries and encyclopaedias were often compiled by individuals who took credit for providing accurate information. The content of reference books was mastered by an organizing mind that took credit for learning it. In his Preface, Chambers made sure to denounce the “tribe of lexicographers” and the dictionary “which few People are without.” He was referring to Bailey’s *Dictionary*. The “cardinal” mediating being done by Bailey’s octavo volume yielded ambiguous knowledge in the eyes of his contemporaries, and the problem of the dictionary’s author was key. Considering the Bailey dictionary’s success—and yet keeping in mind the author’s obscurity (Chambers did not even criticize Bailey by name, but named headwords that Bailey had included)—Johnson’s persona in the *Dictionary* Preface comes into relief, the “gloom of solitude” surrounding him, the charismatic references to personal “sickness.” Historians of English lexicography are right in one sense to ignore the bibliographic evidence of Bailey’s life after Johnson. Despite Johnson’s liberal use of dictionaries and reference books in his definitions, Johnson’s reputation established him as the *Dictionary*’s sole mastermind, the one and only source of the dictionary’s thoroughly legitimate content. Johnson had made himself a “slave of science,” he claimed, a body used up by the unrewarded labour of writing. The critical

---


18 Chambers, *Cyclopaedia*, xxvi.


20 Ibid, 73.
reviews, casual references, and personal anecdotes of readers using Johnson’s dictionary suggested that the book was the product of Johnson’s mind and body.

Johnson’s limited knowledge and his inability to fully communicate what he knew (to fix the incorrect usages of his readers) made his work different from Bailey’s “storehouse” of information. In Chapter 2 on Johnson’s Dictionary, I break with excellent accounts of the Dictionary’s making which demonstrate how Johnson jettisoned Bailey’s Dictionarium Britannicum in order to record directly the complexity of English.21 I argue that Johnson’s performance as the author of the first English Dictionary made him a better mediator—a prime mover of information rather than (as Bailey was) a compiler of content. The Dictionary’s authority rested on the common belief that it was the work of one English man: what Michel Foucault called the “author function” established the reliability of the first widely-accepted English dictionary, and therefore made information retrieval possible.22

To test the idea that Johnson’s rhetoric of originality was performative—that is, not merely a reflection of his actual contribution to lexicography, but an important aspect of the cultural authority of this work of information—I consulted the manuscript of Johnson’s Plan of a Dictionary at the Houghton Library’s Hyde Collection, a planning document undertaken in the early stages of the Dictionary of the English Language project, in 1747. The document (known as the “Scheme”) was composed at the request of the booksellers involved in the project. Reading this manuscript allows us to look at a stage of the project in which the Dictionary was imagined, some years before Johnson had undertaken the work of compiling quotations on paper, before he attempted to sit down with Bailey’s folio as a guide. As I studied the manuscript, I was able to plot revisions and comments, and I determined that Johnson’s rhetoric shifted over time. There was a movement from compiling to authoring the dictionary, a process of self-fashioning that foreshadowed the lexicographer’s later


abandonment of models while compiling the *Dictionary.*\(^{23}\) Johnson was eager from the very beginning of his project to write a dictionary that would replace “all others.” But his persona became more “authorial.” At some point during the writing of the *Plan,* Lord Chesterfield became involved with the project, and an address to “His Lordship” was added to the manuscript. A friend commenting on the draft urged Johnson not to get carried away with his hope of abandoning the alphabetical order of a “reportorium” in his dictionary, the “reportorium” or “storehouse” being the genre of Bailey’s alphabetic *Dictionary.* In a compelling annotation that was eventually deleted, Johnson had begun to speak of a “Phantom of Desire” that tempted him to break out of the “shackles of Lexicography.”\(^{24}\)

In Chapter 2 I argue that Johnson’s *Dictionary* negotiated a compromise that enabled information to be shared as “knowledge communicated,” an idea of “information” that was familiar to eighteenth-century Britons. According to the *OED,* eighteenth-century “information” was “knowledge communicated concerning some particular fact, subject, or event; that of which one is apprised or told; intelligence, news.”\(^{25}\) Perhaps the Dictionary is most remembered for instances of voice—for Johnson’s definition of “oats,” for instance, as “a grain, which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people.” What Johnson does not say—or emphasize—is that he collected information from contemporary reference works, selecting, abridging, and paraphrasing articles from John Hill’s *Materia Medica* (1751), John Cowell’s *Law Dictionary* (1607), and Philip Miller’s *Gardener’s Dictionary* (1607), to name only a few examples. The rhetoric of the Preface does not invite us to use the *Dictionary* as database, as information stored for retrieval. Johnson’s *Dictionary* embodies a “communication” of knowledge authored imperfectly by a subject. The “information” which Johnson made available was of the sort that Johnson himself would later look for in “catalogues, and at the backs of books in libraries” in 1775 (according to James Boswell), when he said that “knowledge is of two kinds. We know a

---

\(^{23}\) See Reddick and McDermott.

\(^{24}\) MS Hyde 50 (39),7v.

\(^{25}\) See *Oxford English Dictionary,* 3\(^{rd}\) ed., 2.a. “information.”
subject ourselves, or we know where we can find information upon it.”

Information was apparently located and measured through indexing devices, but the object of Johnson’s search was the sum of discursive communications delivered “upon” a topic rather an independently circulating thing. Johnson’s information had speakers with whom it had originated.

Bailey’s model of information sharing sought not only to stockpile content, but to replace the need for books “voluminous and dear”—to re-direct readers from fixed material texts to a thing that properly belonged in circulation, in different formats. But the retrieval and circulation of information was not discussed directly and widely as a readily available theme or phenomenon. Rather, as I argue in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, information as an abstract quantity taken away from books, or retrieved and circulated in multiple forms, was an object imagined in fiction, satire, and periodical essays, through representations and rhetorical figures.

I turn in Chapter 3 back to Jonathan Swift’s satires on modern reading, particularly A Tale of a Tub (1704), inspired by a compelling moment in which the speaker calls on readers to compute his text—to “calculate the whole Number of each Letter in this Treatise.” Counting is part of a general motif of readers-tampering-with-texts in Tale of a Tub and Gulliver’s Travels: throughout Swift’s writing, readers dismantle the order of words written by an author or arranged by custom to get a nonverbal object out of a text. I identify this object as an early form of modern “information,” following Nunberg’s definition of an “abstract,” non-authorial thing distributed by channels rather than delivered by a speaker. Swift’s satire condemns, and yet dwells with fascination on attempts to use books as channels or mediums. The retrieval of information required instructions, like a recipe. The speaker of a Tale of a Tub shares a method for extracting “all things that are to be known, or believed, or imagined, or practiced in life” from multiple books and getting these “things” into the form of “a small portable volume.” The resulting information was “a nostrum,” a substance that could

physically enter the body, visualize itself in the brain, and be reduced to more concentrated paper form:

You take fair correct Copies, well bound in Calf’s Skin and Lettered at the Back, of all Modern Bodies of Arts and Sciences whatsoever, and in what Language you please. These you distil in balneo Mariae, infusing Quintessence of Poppy Q.S. together with three Pints of Lethe, to be had from the Apothecaries. You cleanse away carefully the Sordes and Caput mortuum, letting all that is volatile evaporate. You preserve only the first Running, which is again to be distilled seventeen times, till what remains will amount to about two Drams. This you keep in a Glass Viol Hermetically sealed, for one- and-twenty Days. Then you begin your Catholic Treatise, taking every Morning fasting, (first shaking the Viol) three Drops of this Elixir, snuffing it strongly up your Nose. It will dilate it self about the Brain (where there is any) in fourteen Minutes, and you immediately perceive in your Head an infinite Number of Abstracts, Summaries, Compendiums, Extracts, Collections, Medulla’s, Excerpta quaedam’s, Florilegia’s and the like, all disposed into great Order, and reducible upon Paper.27

Mediating the “elixir” of information cleansed texts of their materiality in a mystifying process that began with the elimination of sordes, caput mortuum, and “all that is volatile” in books. Impeding particles, worthless material, anything “volatile” or difficult to seize was boiled down to liquid—the “first running.” The liquid information could then enter the channel of the “nose.” The metaphor of chemical medicine (a recent scientific improvement on Galenic medicine) imagined a new theory of text in which books (at least the more authoritative-looking ones that were bound in “calf skin”) could be exchanged with other containers—“glass viol[s],” “drams,” and later paper “extracts.” Reading information was like “snuffing”—a means of ingesting rather than, as Swift preferred, engaging with texts. The tools and tactics of information synthesized a potent substance that could “dilate itself”

and take on “an infinite number” of paper forms. In Swift’s satire, the self-moving liquid ubiquity of information was fascinating and absurd: did it truly exist, or was it imagined by its flighty practitioners?

Swift’s satire on information re-imagined multiple areas of practice, from cryptography to textual criticism, to uses of scientific language and mathematical computations of language. In my analysis of Swift’s satire I do media archeology, looking at the ways in which information (prior to its modern emergence as a concept associated with technical mobilization) was being constructed and contested as a practice that made epistemological claims. For Swift and the Augustans, information tactics were in tension with the arts of “prudence,” under whose rubric reading was an act of interpretation, undertaken with the goal of discovering authoritative opinions in a style of language that was worthy of imitation. The revelation of truths (the demonstration of things to be known with certainty) should be left to science.28 The use of books as technical mediums of information was therefore dubious, and ultimately worth condemning; there was epistemological doubt in Swift’s satire, the sense that information was getting away with a weak argument, based on faulty premises—that a truth could be grabbed, or carried with ease.

I dub the methods of reading information in Swift’s satire reading “devices.” A reading “device” was Swift’s name for an operation that extracted an ideal substance from a language text that was not available by reading the words in sequence. Reading devices re-arranged, counted, or discarded words in order to separate the “information” from language: in the process, of course, reading devices were imaginatively installing that very “elixir” of information in the text as an object to be removed and reproduced. Swift had been imagining “information” as an object produced by magical thinking in the sense which “information” denoted in the nineteenth century, according to Nunberg: information “doesn’t change its nature according either to the medium it is stored in or the way it is represented.”29 The presence of a reading device in Swift’s satire suggested that the technical “medium” of


Nunberg’s history of information (the newspaper, television, or internet) was not available in the early eighteenth century: reading devices were doing the abstracting work that information technologies were supposed to do. The device was illegitimate, used in scenes of mindless labour and destruction. Think of the bibliographic carnage of The Battle of the Books—I discuss the Battle as an allegory of information transmission in Chapter 3.

Johnson’s Dictionary looks to be the most ambitious reading device of the century, putting English forward as the ultimate “instrument of science” or truth. Johnson argued in the Preface that English texts could be used in combination with his Dictionary as “repositories of science;” readers of the Dictionary could look upon books as mediums or containers of communicated ideas. The material of language—the English words that were printed on the page—were comparable to “daughters of earth,” Johnson calls them. The corporeal qualities of words were to be understood as enablers of ideas—“only” as mediums of the true “sons of heaven”—of hidden things, transmitted from afar, that had been converted into the base material of language.\(^{30}\) In Chapter Four, I conclude my thesis with a late eighteenth-century counter-statement on the uninformative nature of English, Hester Lynch Piozzi’s British Synonymy (1794). I turn to the work of Johnson’s friend Hester Lynch Piozzi, whose writing and conversation was considered to be a medium of Johnson’s parlour-room, pedestrian wisdom. In notebooks that Piozzi later published in works such as Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson (1786), Piozzi collected what Swift called the sordes and the capuut mortuum of Johnson’s knowledge, the words and expressions that readers wished she had left behind (Piozzi must have heard Johnson repeat himself; he lived in her home for over a decade). Piozzi, known as a letter writer and diarist (of documents such as the Thraliana), was seen in her day as a secretary of sayings and expressions that had a limited audience, of the “rubbish” and “nonsense” of quotidian language.\(^{31}\) “Synonymy” in the English language referred to the existence of words that multiplied the forms of expression without adding to the information that could be communicated in the language. But Piozzi showed how

\(^{30}\)Johnson on the English Language, 79,110.

knowledge of language customs and familiarity with language texts allowed individual synonyms to carry different resonances with readers, arguing that the British “daughters of earth” were worthy of attention in their own right. That is, because words were corporeal as well as communicative, their significance was determined in part by the forms in which they had been customarily used. According to Piozzi, synonyms were not equivalent terms, but different embodiments of meaning that British readers recognized as distinct, which could not be exchanged or translated.

Piozzi’s *British Synonymy* is thus an important investigation into the meanings that accompanied information retrieval, into the other kinds of knowledge that eighteenth-century Britons deployed as they heard and touched the surface of texts. The “Synonymy” book, a popular eighteenth-century genre published throughout Europe, attempted to prove that synonyms were irreducible varieties of expression that were compromised by mediation as translation, beginning in 1718 with Gabriel Girard’s *La Justesse de la Langue Française*. Each synonym possessed a different local connotation within its national language. I focus in one part of Chapter Four on discussing the attack on synonymy that was happening in Joseph Addison’s essays in the *Spectator*, where tedious or unnecessary uses of language, quoted as bookish, overly rhetorical, or cloistered, were displayed for censure and analysis in the compressing format of the broadsheet. Among the other detractors of synonymy was Alexander Pope, who associated the figure with redundant book commodities written by unthinking women writers.

*British Synonymy* argued that material made a difference that could be mapped socially: it was British synonymy that Piozzi dealt with in her word book, rather than a universal instrument of science. Words had associations that were heard by a particular audience: “Peril” was sometimes deployed on “wholly ludicrous occasions,” an instance of complicated “English humour,” but if “a lady [were] to resist a journey to Lisbon, alleging gravely the Perils of the deep, all would laugh, although the Hazard is surely something.” “Poet” could
not be exchanged for “Writer” or “Author” since Rasselas had proclaimed that “No human being can ever be a Poet.”

Piozzi’s *British Synonymy* suggests the ways in which “information” began to assume its modern shape at the end of the eighteenth century. That is, when the “knowledge communicated” in Johnson’s *Dictionary* had been countered with the claim that some readers did not view language as a medium of universal knowledge alone, but a medium with significant form, we may recognize the emergence of modern information as a concept that takes shape in opposition to other things, such as literature. I conclude by suggesting that *British Synonymy* was an eighteenth-century “literary” project meant to consolidate knowledge of the way that surface matters in printed texts that were supposed to be “repositories of science.” The way in which things were expressed by a speaker was crucial, and the proper use of words depended on conventional patterns as much as universal ideas. *British Synonymy*, an octavo volume that ran to about five hundred pages, was actually meant to be read alongside of ephemeral sheets, casually, aloud. Thus in Chapter 4, I argue that Piozzi acknowledged a second kind of knowledge that consumers of popular learning were taught to use with their drams of information: a literary habit of appreciating or knowing words as material forms, which required a readiness to engage with the language of writing that was “voluminous and dear” in the sense of peculiar, difficult, or obscure. Piozzi helped to protect the prestige of readers who knew the work of literature in its original language.

In this thesis I attempt to convey the complexity of eighteenth-century British information by showing the ways in which Britons engaged imaginatively with the “output of the mediations” that they circulated, as they made efforts to grasp and assess the potential of information to educate and bring intelligence from afar, as they measured and displayed the knowledge that existed in the world. There are distinct ways in which their debates do not line up with twenty-first-century discussions of information bits or bytes—or information “overload.” But the discrepancies are not only owing to new technologies and infrastructures. Swift, Bailey, Johnson, and Piozzi had different techniques among themselves to convey and

---

back up what was publicly known. Piozzi, it seems to me, would have pointed out that books and language can awaken and negotiate certain memories and feelings about what is correct or publicly “known.” Piozzi’s literary “synonymy” acknowledged intellectual conversations in which certain key *words* do a great deal of work communicating what we mean. I imagine that Piozzi might then ask: how and when is “information” a synonym that differs from “intelligence,” “knowledge,” “instruction,” and “truth”? English scholars are peculiarly well-equipped for analyzing information’s multiple forms in history, for understanding information not only as a quantity that can be measured across time, but as an idea that is constructed at different times through metaphors and devices. Information was managed not only with tools and techniques, but beliefs and practices that could be challenged by fiction writers and critiqued by literary critics.
Chapter 1

Bailey’s Dictionary: Reading Information

One of the safest investments a London bookseller could make in the eighteenth century was in shares of a dictionary by Nathan Bailey, the lexicographer who was known before Samuel Johnson as the “Author of the English Dictionary.” The market in instructive language books was a booming one when Bailey entered the business, offering busy shopkeepers, merchants, and artisans quick help with the English language. The subsequent success of Bailey’s dictionary allowed it to be produced in new editions quite regularly throughout the century. Little has ever been said about the book or the author. But Bailey’s dictionary must have been the elephant in the room, so to speak, when contemporaries began to talk of Johnson’s work on the first proper English dictionary.

The list of editions of Bailey’s English dictionaries published over the years between 1721-1802 is a staggering record of commercial success (see Appendix 1). Glancing over it, one imagines that an eighteenth-century Londoner who had any exposure to books was likely to have seen or heard of a Bailey dictionary. In the year that An Universal Etymological English Dictionary reached its fourth edition, Ephraim Chambers lamented that it was a “Dictionary which few People are without” and hoped there would be no more “new Impressions” of it. In the Preface to the Cyclopaedia, Chambers distinguishes his own compiling from that of the “tribe of lexicographers” by citing headwords which, he says, were recently coined in the dictionary of an unnamed lexicographer, words like “fastuousness,” for instance. Each of the twelve headwords he lists is in the second edition of Bailey’s An Universal Etymological English Dictionary (1724), which cannot be said of other dictionaries available at the time.\(^3\)

---

\(^{33}\) This is how Bailey was recognized in his obituary. Country Journal, or The Craftsman, 3 July 1742, in the Burney Collection Newspapers (accessed 14 Aug. 2010).

\(^{34}\) I searched dictionaries by Elisha Coles, John Bullokar, Edward Phillips, and John Kersey. Ephraim Chambers, Cyclopaedia (London, 1728), xxvi.
Such an obviously unreliable dictionary “can’t possibly live long,” Chambers said, in 1728. There would be at least thirty more impressions over the next seventy-four years. Chambers’s prediction was quite extraordinarily baffled.

While the exceptional quality of Johnson’s dictionary was appreciated by the learned and the polite, the perception shared by many historians of eighteenth-century literature that Johnson’s dictionary rendered Bailey’s obsolete is not an accurate one. Despite the fact that booksellers who invested in Johnson’s dictionary thought it wise to keep their money at the same time on Bailey’s octavo, we tend to locate Bailey’s heyday in the days of “the dictionary before Johnson.” But it is easy to see why Johnson comes conclusively after Bailey in our histories of the English dictionary. Johnson and his amanuenses are thought to have worked with a Bailey folio open before them, and it is said that they found it an insufficient model. Johnson’s impact has also been understood in terms of the instant failure of his predecessor’s folio. But Bailey’s dictionaries had never been books for the folio market: those booksellers who invested in his folios miscalculated the particular appeal of the Bailey dictionary.

In what follows, I aim to give a picture of the Bailey dictionary’s publishing history, its contents, reception, and relationship to Johnson’s dictionary. I want to take seriously the lasting commercial success and use of Bailey’s dictionary long after Johnson’s lexicographical triumph while accounting for the relative obscurity of Bailey’s book and its author. An Universal Etymological English Dictionary lacked credit while retaining usefulness: some readers saw it as a useful replacement for formal instruction. Bailey’s work was popular among readers as a book that could be consulted for quick information, or scanned for lack of other reading material, but Bailey did not achieve broad authority: like so many sources in our current age of information, the utility of Bailey’s dictionary was strangely divorced from the problem of its authority or currency. Johnson both used and refused to credit Bailey. Whether or not we accept the possibility that the Dictionary’s wordlist was built on Bailey’s, it is certainly true that Johnson cast doubt in the Preface on

---

35 This cannot be said of editions of other dictionaries available at the time by Elisha Coles, John Bullokar, Edward Phillips, or John Kersey. Chambers, Cyclopaedia, xxvi.
headwords which “stand supported only by the name of Bailey” while allowing them a place in his own dictionary.  

If his authority was doubted by some, why did readers use Bailey’s book? If this dictionary was popular, why was so little known about the author Nathan Bailey? I want to argue that his dictionary deserves a place in the history of information, that readers used this book to find what we would now call “information” long before they had a word for what they were looking for. As Geoffrey Nunberg argues in the well-known essay “Farewell to the Information Age,” the word “information” was used as late as the nineteenth century to mean ”the communication of instructive knowledge,” from one person to another. The sense in which it can now be used is information as facts that are stored in computers or libraries, contained in newspapers, reported on television, or delivered over the radio. That is, information was once articulated by witnesses, messengers, and authors to listeners and readers, while in our era it may be found in a library, searched for on the internet, or quantified as “all the news that’s fit to print,” the masthead motto of The New York Times. A reader who wants information does not have to consult an author. I want to argue that eighteenth century readers used Bailey’s dictionary in a way that they could not have used Johnson’s dictionary with its direct quotation of authors and that famous Preface where Johnson came off like a bad-tempered old man who had ruined his health by writing a massive book for unappreciative readers. Bailey expected readers to take for granted that factual information about the language had been accumulated in a book, while Johnson’s dictionary definitions were presented as the critical glosses of a lexicographer on quotations he had gathered himself.

Readers who found Bailey useful were placing their faith in an increasingly familiar kind of book rather than in a well-known author. German translations of the Bailey dictionary honoured the lexicographer with a frontispiece bust adapted from an English spelling-book


Bailey compiled in 1726. But the portrait of Nathan Bailey never appeared in his English dictionaries, and the lexicographer was a doubtful authority to many English readers. His octavo dictionary was presented as if it were a container of information, a place to search, or a thing to which readers might have “recourse, as often as anything occurs in Conversation or Reading, with which they are unacquainted,” according to its introduction. I argue that Bailey was compiling information for readers who were not able to buy many books, access libraries, or receive formal instruction. He was amalgamating and re-printing snippets of text from many reference books and presenting his product as information. But not everyone who had access to Bailey’s dictionary in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was looking for information, and some readers did not consider it authoritative because it seemed to have been copied by a mysterious compiler whose methods and sources were not transparent. Bailey’s book was a “store-house” of words rather than a lexicographer’s performance, and readers would have recognized it, sometimes with enthusiasm and other times with distrust, as a substitute for access to other books.

In the dictionary prefaces of Thomas Blount, John Harris, and Ephraim Chambers, readers were confronted by the rhetorical performance of authors who claimed to have monitored the contents of their books diligently. Johnson’s dictionary, as I will show in chapter 2, would be received as the new product of a lexicographer who could cite examples of correct style and act as a critical arbiter of purity. Bailey’s dictionary on the other hand seemed to be an unoriginal reproduction of material accumulated from other books. The reception of Bailey’s dictionary as a “word book” or repository of lexicographical and encyclopedic information then, as a book which lacked the presence or control of an author, might have shaped the emphasis which Johnson’s dictionary places on the human judgment and originality of its author, as well as the attention he devotes to the task of mastering English.

---

Bailey’s Dictionaries and Johnson’s Plan

Nathan Bailey belonged to a Seventh Day Baptist congregation in Whitechapel. In nearby Stepney he kept a school where youths were “Boarded and Taught the Hebrew, Greek and Latin Languages, in a Method more Easy and Expeditious than is common,” as an advertisement at the back of the 1721 first octavo edition declared. Bailey might have stocked his schoolroom with his own books: he began his successful career producing Latin primers. The fifth edition of his English and Latine Exercises for School-boys was published in 1720. Bailey would also author a spelling book entitled An Introduction to the English Tongue (1726) “For the Use of Schools.”

An Universal Etymological English Dictionary (no. 1 in appended bibliography), or what contemporaries called “Bailey’s Dictionary,” was first published in 1721 and reprinted every two or three years throughout the eighteenth century by the roughly one hundred different booksellers in England and Scotland who had a stake in it at one time or another. The Castle Conger owned the Universal Etymological English Dictionary as long as its members did business together, until 1748. Some of the booksellers who first produced Bailey’s dictionary included Francis Fayram, who would produce an unauthorized translation of Isaac Newton’s System of the World, and James Pemberton, who often collaborated with the infamous Edmund Curll. By the end of the forties, the dictionary had dedicated investors in Samuel Birt, William Johnston and John Hinton, who were involved with Johnson’s dictionaries, and Charles Corbett, a publisher of The Champion and a friend of Henry Fielding, whose ridicule of the Bailey dictionary I will explore below. The Longmans and


40 Bailey wrote translations of Aesop’s fables, Ovid’s Metamorphoses (1724), Erasmus’s Colloquies (1725), and Ovid’s Tristia (1726).

41 Terry Belanger, Booksellers’ Sales of Copyright: Aspects of the London Book Trade 1718-1768 (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1971), 120.


the Rivingtons sold the dictionary until the seventies. The most successful of Bailey’s
dictionaries was the six-shilling octavo format designed for “the Benefit of young Students,
Artificers, Tradesmen and Foreigners,” An Universal Etymological English Dictionary. It is
the octavo volume, and its companion “volume two” that I refer to when I use the shorthand
“Bailey’s Dictionary,” though Bailey compiled folio dictionaries as well that were less
commercially successful.

Each Universal Etymological English Dictionary included an introduction, signed by Bailey,
which outlines a rough history of the language. Bailey reflects with less sophistication than
Johnson would on the purpose of a dictionary and the nature of language, observing, for
instance, that “the Faculty of Speech . . . is of excellent Use.” The preface to the second
edition of his folio discusses in more detail the history of the language, theories of linguistic
change, and English poetry.

Volume two of An Universal Etymological English Dictionary (no. 36) appeared in 1727, a
year after the third edition of volume one was published. Sold as “an additional collection of
words,” volume two begins again with “A.” Thomas Cox, who had pirated an edition of
Robinson Crusoe, was the proprietor. Cox was not involved in Bailey’s volume one, and as a
result, volume two was rarely issued at the same time as its partner. 44 Unless retail
booksellers made an attempt to stock them both, the two volumes would have been sold
separately. 45 Although there does seem to be some coordination of content, a careful reader
who purchased both volumes would have found that the supplement, notwithstanding its new
woodcuts and derived words, also duplicated some material from the first volume. And the
“additional collection” of words in volume two came in turn with its own additional
collection of words in an appendix.


45 I have not compared owner inscriptions in volume one and two in order to see whether some readers owned
both. There is no evidence that the two volumes were ever bound together, but considering the thickness of both
books, this may have been impractical. The second part of volume two is devoted to an orthographical
dictionary, but I suspect that this two-part book is actually composed of sheets from two different publications:
Here and there a dagger before a headword signals that the spelling of a word is not of “approv’d authority,”
while asterisks meticulously indicate the legitimacy of every other. But this feature could also have been seen
the same year in Abel Boyer’s 1727 The Royal Dictionary.
The second part of volume two is devoted to an orthographical dictionary, but I suspect that this two-part book is actually composed of sheets from two different publications: the spelling dictionary probably had a separate life as an unsuccessful book before it got bound up with this one. Here and there a dagger before a headword signals that the spelling of a word is not of “approve’d authority,” while asterisks meticulously indicate the legitimacy of every other.

Although it was in “volume two” that the influential accent prime showing stress was introduced, and that woodcut illustrations first appeared in a Bailey dictionary, volume two looks to be the product of shoddy printing. Cox actually had his money on the upcoming Bailey folio, where about five hundred illustrations would be positioned with such exuberance that one sees in the *Dictionarium Britannicum* (1730, 1736; no. 39) an attempt to be the leading dictionary of its time. The book that Johnson and his amanuenses are said to have used at some point in their work as a guide, it implemented John Locke’s idea that in dictionaries, objects “which the eye distinguishes by their shapes, would be best let into the mind by draughts made of them.”

Bailey’s attitude about macrostructure, or which words belong in an English dictionary, is easy-going. The second edition of the *Dictionarium Britannicum* is said to have grown to about 60,000 headwords. Readers could look up information about figures from Judeo-

---

46 It has its own introduction and still has its own title page, halfway through the book.

47 But this feature could also have been seen the same year in Abel Boyer’s 1727 *The Royal Dictionary*.

48 There is an example of what looks to be juvenile fun on a compositor’s part when casting off: in a Cordell Collection copy of *The Universal Etymological English Dictionary*, signature 2z, a half-sheet containing only two leaves, has an illustration of Pentameter tables occupying the entire recto side of the first leaf, and it was inserted after the 3d signature. This page of illustrations has a lot of white space, and the rather prominent catchword at the bottom of the page is “Penis.” But the word is already defined on the last page of the 3d signature. The reader who turns the page of illustrations will find that the word is defined yet again on the verso side of the leaf. This also causes “Pentameter” to be defined again on the verso side of the leaf, where it would not face the illustration. A compositor casting off probably would have known that this sheet should have begun at least as far down in the alphabet as “pent__.”


Christian history, Greek and Roman history and mythology (useful in reading English poetry), archaic English words, dialect, so-called “cant,” proverbs, technical “terms of art,” and so on. Bailey was apparently undaunted by Chambers’s strident complaint in the preface to the *Cyclopaedia* that “when a dictionary comes out, ‘tis like an *East India* Fleet, and you are sure of a huge Cargo. The Effect is, that our Language is, and will continue in a perpetual flux; and no body knows whether he is master of it or no” (p. xxv). When English borrows words from other languages, Bailey reasons, it can say more. In his prefaces, he takes the lighthearted view that the bigger the English language gets with loanwords, the better. Lord Chesterfield was referring to something like Bailey’s steadily increasing wordlists when he said that “our language is at present in a state of anarchy . . . . Toleration, adoption, and naturalization have run their lengths”.

From the first edition of the octavo to his last edition of the folio, Bailey would keep borrowing words from other dictionaries, taking thousands as he found them from other lexicographers. English proverbs were taken into account and mulled over with the preachy voice of a schoolmaster, but these explanations were copied too. Benjamin Stillingfleet’s poem *An Essay on Conversation* (1737) wagged a finger at Bailey because his “Two Tomes of Words” were only “half his own.” There was ample precedent for Bailey’s copying, but learned and polite readers expected lexicographers to do original work by consulting books other than dictionaries. One of the paradoxes of the lexicographer’s claim to authorship is that it was based on the pledge not to have consulted “mere” dictionaries but to have compiled material from “authors.” It was as if lexicographers took professional pride in refusing to consult each other openly. Chambers, for instance, reassures the reader that “Recourse has been had to the Originals themselves,” and that his words and definitions were not “ready procured” from other dictionaries (i). Possibly Bailey was aware that

---


52 Starnes and Noyes report that Bailey “owes most to [John] Kersey,” (his *Dictionarium Anglo-Britannicum*), Thomas Blount, Elisha Coles, John Ray and Oswald Dyke for proverbs, Stephen Skinner, and John Harris, to name a few. They calculate that Bailey’s wordlist grew from 40,000 to 60,000 over the century (104-05).

53 In the poem, two friends kill each other “[b]ecause their Glossaries were not the same;” they disagree about a word, but dictionaries fail to arbitrate the dispute. The fatal struggle is blamed on “Ba—l—y.” *Essay on Conversation*, 2nd ed. (London, 1738), 16.
lexicographers could be accused of plagiarism for copying each other. All the same, there was no law to stop him.  

To those anticipating the advent of Johnson’s book, Bailey’s dictionary must have seemed like a silo where words were dumped without monitoring or control. Bailey has a new headword for each different sense in which a single word might be used, and this results in an overly simplistic isolation of meanings. His unstructured entries imply, for instance, that the meaning of “latitude” is different each time it is used in a different domain or subject field: there is “LATITUDE,” “LATITUDE of a Place [in Geography],” LATITUDE [in Navigation],” “Middle LATITUDE,” “LATITUDE of a Star [in Astronomy],” “Apparent LATITUDE [in Astronomy],” “Difference of LATITUDE [in Navigation],” “Northern LATITUDE of a Star [in Astronomy],” “Southern LATITUDE of a Star,” and LATITUDE of Health [with Physicians].” The logic used here to decide what counts as a different sense is opaque, if there is any logic. Why may not the separate entries for “latitude of a place” and “latitude in navigation” be merged? And notice the scattering of the same subject fields throughout the series: multiple meanings in Navigation and Astronomy are not grouped together. It looks as if Bailey compiled words in whatever order he found them, or, while making revisions over the years, allowed the compositor considerable latitude in choosing where to place additional headwords. Headwords may even be entered twice, on different ends of the page, with no perceptible difference in meaning. The noun “A LAST,” for instance, is defined with slightly different wording twice, but four other senses of “last” have been inserted between the duplicates, including the verb “To LAST” and the proverb “A Shoemaker must not go beyond his Last.” This was the state of Bailey’s octavo dictionary in 1747, the year in which Johnson began his work.

The idea that polysemy was first registered in Johnson’s dictionary, with its list of multiple significations under each headword, is proverbial but misleading. Bailey, like Johnson,

54 Jonathon Green reminds us that, however common the practice of copying was to lexicography, it could still constitute a moral infraction: Francis Holyoake and Edward Phillips were accused of plagiarizing in the seventeenth century. See Chasing the Sun: Dictionary-Makers and the Dictionaries They Made (London: Jonathan Cape, 1996), 103, 167. In those days, the courts maintained that publishing large portions of a copied work did not constitute copyright infringement.
defines dramatic action as well as legal action. But Johnson’s dictionary makes the structural innovations of numbering related significations under one headword and using cross-references to foster relations between separate headwords. The Plan (1747) of Johnson’s dictionary points to the random order of headwords in previous English dictionaries, presenting their atomization as a weakness which the Dictionary will eradicate:

the words are to be distinguished according to their different classes . . . whether primitive, as, to act, or derivative, as action, actionable, active, activity. This will much facilitate the attainment of our language, which now stands in our dictionaries a confused heap of words without dependence, and without relation. 55

In the second edition of Bailey’s Dictionarium Britannicum, alphabetical order throws a derivative word like “happily” before its root, “happy.” Johnson’s plan to sort out the “confused heap” resulting from this use of the alphabet as the single principle of organization eventually took shape in the dictionary with the use of cross-references: Johnson makes sure that the entry for “HAPPLY” refers the reader to its root, “[from happy].” Although “actionable” happens to follow its root “action” when the words are ranged in alphabetical order, the headword “ACTIONABLE” still has a note in brackets which points the reader to its root: “[from action],” ostensibly to bridge the separation of the two related headwords which results from the alphabet’s disruptive regime in “our dictionaries:” In Bailey’s Dictionarium, “ACTIONABLE” and its root are torn asunder, divided by a crowd of headwords that list different varieties of ACTION, relegated to a place below the entry, “A virtuous ACTION.”

In fact, Johnson might have originally planned to combine all words with a common root under the same headword—for instance, “happily” would have gone under “happy,” not before it. A draft of the Plan (entitled “A Short Scheme for compiling a new Dictionary of the English Language”) seems to threaten a rebellion against alphabetical order: words would not be “distinguished, but placed in their different classes” (my emphasis) in order to make sense of the “confused heap of words” in which the language “now stands in our

Dictionaries.\(^5^6\) Bailey’s ballooning wordlist, which contains over twenty headwords in no particular order defining “ACTION,” surely presses on the Dictionary’s Plan to tidy up the language. While the extent of Bailey’s wordlist was unprecedented, offering coverage of the language more extensive than had been printed in an English dictionary before, the elusive Bailey and his slapdash dictionary gave readers a lot to complain about, even if he helped to raise expectations about what an English dictionary ought to be.

The Dictionary as “Storehouse” of Words and Author’s Work

The purpose of a dictionary for Bailey is not the authoritative codification of English but the distribution of information from readily-available sources. The dictionary for him is a means of relaying facts, not of establishing good English, and this is perhaps the most important distinction to draw between Bailey’s work and Johnson’s: while Bailey’s dictionary amalgamated the contents of other dictionaries for the purpose of circulating facts, Johnson’s dictionary constructed its authoritative representation of correct English on the basis of the author’s word—the word both of the cited author in entries and the person who claimed in the “Preface” to be the author of the English dictionary—Johnson himself. Drawing on the European tradition of lexicography, in which compilers lamented the personal toll exacted by their colossal labours, Johnson used the author function to transform the English dictionary from an inventory of words to an original work.\(^5^7\) Historians of lexicography have assumed that Johnson and Bailey must have been in competition to produce similar products, or that Johnson’s dictionary replaced Bailey’s. But as I argue in more detail below, Bailey and Johnson offered readers and booksellers two very different products, and the two dictionaries continued to appeal to different readers for distinctive reasons long after 1755.

\(^{56}\) Samuel Johnson, “A Short Scheme for compiling a new Dictionary of the English Language,” MS Hyde 50 (38), 7.

Anticipating the completion of Johnson’s work, the Earl of Chesterfield distinguished two ways of understanding the purpose of a dictionary:

hitherto we have had no . . . standard of our language; our dictionaries at present being more properly what our neighbors the Dutch and the Germans call theirs, word-books, than dictionaries in the superior sense of that title. All words, good and bad, are there jumbled indiscriminately together . . . (225)

In a “true” dictionary, Chesterfield argues, an individual or academy judges the proper limits of the national language. Word-books on the other hand are like warehouses where “many words and expressions have been imported” with a riotous acquisitiveness Chesterfield likens to “free and open trade” (225). In this light, Chambers’s complaint that “no body” could claim to be a “master” of English seems to imply that, rather than accumulate another storehouse of words, the English need to take stock of their language. And both Chambers and Chesterfield are inclined to delegate the great task of knowing English to an individual subject—“some one person of distinguished abilities,” Chesterfield stipulates, and “I think the public in general, and the republic of letters in particular, greatly obliged to Mr. Johnson, for having undertaken and executed so great and desirable a work” (225). Chesterfield, perhaps, was promoting Johnson’s solitary labours in The World in 1754 because his own name had been associated with the project since the Plan had been addressed to him in 1747 and because his friend, the bookseller Robert Dodsley, had already by this point invested in the project. Nevertheless, if Chesterfield dispensed his praise frivolously, his rhetoric was overwhelmingly consistent. Nothing short of “the old Roman expedient” (226) of a dictator would rectify the chaos of the lexical status quo, in which the “injudicious reader may speak and write as inelegantly, improperly, and vulgarly, as he pleases, by and with the authority of one or other of our Word-books” (225). Indeed, Chesterfield is carried away by a lurid simile when he reaches the heart of his argument: “Nay, more; I will not only obey him, like an old Roman, as my dictator, but like a modern Roman, I will implicitly believe in him as my pope” (226).

Chesterfield hailed Johnson’s project on the grounds that the proper boundaries of true and proper English would be settled, but by the time that this puff piece was published, in
November 1754, he was already apprised of Johnson’s plan to admit words primarily on the basis of the reader’s needs. Johnson had notified readers of the Plan that he intended to sacrifice purity of lexicographical purpose as well as the purity of English. Such sacrifice is linked to his book’s capability—its superiority to his own capacities—and to a suspension of his own critical faculties. Johnson speaks of deviating from his principle of selecting only “[English] words and phrases used in the general intercourse of life,” of taking stock of English only “so far as it is our own.” He was succumbing to the necessity, as he saw it, that English dictionaries contain words that do not strictly belong in an inventory of proper English—that they include what he and others called “terms of art,” words “generally derived from other nations.” His Dictionary would permit these intruders, he said, because “the unlearned much oftener consult their dictionaries for the meaning of words, than for their structures or formations; and the words that most want explanation are generally terms of art . . .” (18:29). Elsewhere in the Plan, the useful lexicographical task of explaining unfamiliar things as well as defining common words is linked to the practice of consulting other writers—that is, Johnson will copy other sources in order to explain what a barometer is, for instance. Crucially, it is when the lexicographer includes words which he cannot himself define that “[his] book is more learned than its author.” The rhetorical statement of this qualification suggests that the lexicographer assumes credit for most of the words and definitions in his dictionary. The minor exception confirms the presence of a rule.

Chesterfield’s promotion of The Dictionary as the long-awaited imposition of a regulatory force on the lexis gathered its force from the idea of individual undertaking, inspection, and control.

The second edition of the Dictionarium Britannicum has a preface in which Bailey boasts preposterously of having read “a very large Number of Authors . . . on very various, if not all Subjects.” As to his methodology, Bailey declines to elaborate, pointing out that readers already know how his dictionary works: “there being so many 1000 of [them] already abroad in the World . . . these have rendered this not necessary.” After mentioning the help of learned associates, Bailey suddenly concludes with an elusive reference to the “Pains” of compiling a dictionary that could not possibly be improved: “I shall only add, that there has been that Pains taken to inrich this Edition with Words and Phrases that I apprehend any
Additions to future Editions cannot be very considerable.”58 Perhaps Bailey’s rather perfunctory reference to the pains of lexicography was honest enough. In An Universal Etymological English Dictionary, Bailey noted the names of authors who had supposedly authorized his wordlist. In Bailey, Spenser, “Shakesp.” and Chaucer are intermittently named as sources for words. Unlike Johnson, though, Bailey went not to the author’s text but to the editor’s notes, importing entire glossaries of difficult words from recent editions of these authors’ works.59 Bailey was here missing the point of citing authorities: a lexicographer was expected to display his sources not only to show evidence for his entries or to give credit to his sources, but to show readers that he was a well-read author.

Johnson, with his “anxious diligence and persevering activity . . . distracted in labyrinths, and dissipated by different intentions,” would have seemed busy and dedicated next to Bailey’s breezy professionalism (101-04). John Considine has suggested that Johnson took up the rhetorical conventions of the European lexicographer, who “presented not only a language, but himself,”60 and the “intimate conjunction of lexicography and personal labour and distress.”61 The biographical glimpses of humble personal toil which Johnson would reveal in the Preface to the Dictionary answer Chesterfield’s call for linguistic command and Chambers’s desire for mastery. Considering that a lexicographer must “faint with weariness under a task, which [Joseph] Scaliger compares to the labours of the anvil and the mine” (18:111), the “sickness and sorrow” (18:112) of Johnson’s private life are symptoms of his success in lexicography. Confession of weakness subtly reinforces the depiction of vigilant control.

58 De Witt T. Starnes and Gertrude E. Noyes identify those contributors mentioned as botanist John Martyn, gardener Philip Miller, natural philosopher George Gordon, and theologian Arthur Collier. Starnes and Noyes argue that “their contributions would appear too slight to warrant their being admitted as coauthors on the title-page unless Bailey believed this policy would make effective advertising.” The English Dictionary from Cawdrey to Johnson 1604-1755, 263. Nathan Bailey, Dictionarium Britannicum (London, 1736), a3r.

59 Starnes and Noyes, The English Dictionary from Cawdrey to Johnson 1604-1755, 104.

60 John Considine, Dictionaries in Early Modern Europe: Lexicography and the Making of Heritage (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008), 53.

The author of the early modern dictionary seemed a credible authority when he took credit for diligent, self-sacrificing study, and in this respect Bailey was not very convincing. While the trusted lexicographers of the day took responsibility for the completion of dictionaries, Bailey gave readers little more than his name, saying almost nothing about his labour. According to Adrian Johns, early modern “readers judged the printed books they met with by what they knew of the people, places, and practices implicated in their production.” Lexicographers made themselves accountable for their books in the preface, or what Gerard Genette called the “paratext,” writing that accompanies and attempts to control the reception of published books.

In an age in which lexicographers were boasting long lists of reading material, help from learned friends, and fallible humanity, Bailey passed up the opportunity to avail himself of what Michel Foucault called the “author function”—the convention in prefaces that allowed the humble lexicographer pride in a work that was “linked to sacrifice” and personal effort. In the Cyclopaedia (1728), Ephraim Chambers paradoxically boosts his credit by speaking of the lexicographer’s dogged but futile surveillance of all those sources he has used on folio after folio page: “What Argus could possibly see, and correct the Errors in all the Authors he had to do with? . . . But if a Man may not be allow’d to say a good number of indifferent things, in the Compass of five hundred Sheets, I know not who would be an Author” (pp. xxviii-xxix). The lexicographer speaks of the limits of individual human effort and the shortcomings of his work. By means of excusatio, the rhetorical figure by which a speaker pleads that he erred with good intentions in difficult circumstances, the book’s paratext is able to “account, truthfully or not, for the circumstances in which the work was written,” as Genette put it. In 1656 Thomas Blount told readers about conceiving the idea to write a dictionary and compiling it himself over the course of two decades:

---

after I had bestowed the waste hours of some years in reading our best English Histories and Authors . . . I encountred such words, as I either not at all, or not throughly [sic] understood . . . For these reasons, and to comply with my own fancy, I began to compile this Work; which has taken me up the vacancy of about Twenty years.⁶⁵

Speaking in the preface of the work of compiling his *Lexicon* (1704), Harris boasts getting a first-hand acquaintance with navigation, having “often gone on Board Myself, to get the more ready knowledge of this Affair; and I have compared it all with what we have already Printed of this Nature in Books and Descriptions of Ships.” In the Preface, Harris reveals his well-chosen sources to readers with a transparency that is meticulous while speaking of the inevitable errors which must have been overlooked “among so many Thousand Words as I had to range into Order.”⁶⁶

The *Lexicon* opens with a frontispiece bust of the author responsible for the book’s massive content. Critical accounts of the early modern author frontispiece portrait have tended to see it as a device that establishes a proprietary relationship between author and work or, according to Roger Chartier, as an image that “makes the assignation of the text to a single ‘I’ immediately visible.”⁶⁷ That is, the portrait imposes individuality on writing, linking its style to a source. But Harris’s portrait looks over a collection of material derived, he says, “from the best Original Authors I could procure in all Arts and Sciences” (a2v). By what principle is the face of a compiler related to a collection taken from other authors? According to Richard Yeo, authors of encyclopaedias claimed ownership of their books using the tropes of “learned abridgement, presentation and organization, while still continuing to depend on the notion of a common stock of knowledge from which they drew their content.”⁶⁸ Harris’s

---

⁶⁶ John Harris, Preface to *Lexicon Technicum* (London, 1704).
preface suggests that his authorship hinges not on possession but comprehension of the book’s material. He distinguishes his labours from those of Edward Phillips (who copied Blount) in *The New World of Words* (1658), because despite his collection of terms of art, Phillips seems to “understand little or nothing of the Arts and Sciences himself” (a2v).

When Henry Fielding’s *The Author’s Farce* (1730) was revised for a production in 1734, Nathan Bailey’s name was worked into the script to illustrate what happened behind the scenes of a print marketplace that put into question the attribution of work to author, and author’s name to individual subject. Bookweight the bookseller orders Mr. Quibble the scribbler to draw up proposals for “Mr. Bailey’s English Dictionary” and adds that “you may copy the Proposals for printing Bayle’s Dictionary in the same manner. The same Words will do for both.”\(^69\) No two dictionaries actually seem to be more different, though: Bayle’s *Historical and Critical Dictionary* contained long articles, meticulously cited in the margins and enlarged by additional commentary in footnotes, aiming at encyclopedic synthesis of the opinions of authorities on given subject-entries. Readers, Fielding suggests, could not rely on Bailey’s dictionary because its creation was inscrutable, its author ambiguous. The implication is that there is no real author behind the scenes of a dictionary, just a play of names and interchanging of title pages, a shuffling of texts by unethical bookmakers whose practices ultimately lull the reader, who is unequipped to distinguish one thing from another, into darkness. *The Author’s Farce* echoes Book II of *The Dunciad*, in which the bookseller’s pursuit of phantom authors and stolen papers eventuates in the transformation of the reading audience into a nodding “sea of heads.”\(^70\) The Goddess Dulness offers the desperate Edmund Curll this encouragement: “Son! thy grief lay down,/And turn this whole illusion on the town. . . . Be thine, my stationer! this magic gift;/ Cooke shall be Prior, and Concanen, Swift” (l. 131-32, 137-38). In *The Author’s Farce*, proposals for Bailey’s or Bayle’s dictionary are ordered after the scribblers sing “An Author’s a Joke.” But the value of the contract which

---


prefaces, author names, and titles make with readers is of course re-affirmed by the relentless negativity of the satire.

Fielding’s treatment of authorship in *Tom Jones* suggests that the importance of attribution relates to the currency of the author’s certifications. The author of *Tom Jones* tells us that books should carry some inimitable signature of authority, some “mark or stamp.” And Fielding’s *Tom Jones* shares with the dictionary a repertoire of practices for legitimizing texts. These are the prefatory essays to each book of the novel which introduce the author and the signs of his authority. The signature of the author-authority is unmistakable: the inimitable introductory essay is comparable to a *Spectator* paper’s epigraph or motto, he says, which quotes a repertoire of classical texts that men of learning share: “by the Device . . . of his Motto, it became impracticable for any Man to presume to imitate the Spectators, without understanding at least one Sentence in the Learned Languages. In the same Manner I have now secured myself” (428). The “device” of Addison’s motto is literally “something devised,” but the term puns on the “device” or heraldic bearing that a noble family would use to show legitimacy, accompanied by a motto. The heraldic figure is also faintly reminiscent of a printer’s “device,” and should remind us of the university press’s emblem which distinguishes books of scholarly expertise, or the university seal stamped on the graduate’s diploma. Indeed, it is these lofty references to his own learning that led Wayne Booth to argue that Fielding’s “self-portrait is of a life enriched by a vast knowledge of literary culture and of a mind of great creative power—qualities which could never be so fully conveyed through simply exercising them without comment on the dramatic materials of Tom’s story.” The author’s self-portrait, though, is an emblem of the English gentleman’s authority.

Given that the *Dictionary* was attributed to an incarnation of the learned compiler figure, a Scaliger for instance, and not to a name that seemed interchangeable with others—to a Bayle

---


or Bailey—there is a way in which we might take seriously the popular perception that Samuel Johnson authored the first English dictionary: even Johnson’s contemporaries seemed to think that Johnson wrote the first “real” dictionary. Jack Lynch, in a talk entitled “How Johnson’s Dictionary Became the First Dictionary,” points out that “if we adjust our criteria and allow ‘the first dictionary’ to mean ‘the first standard dictionary’—the first one widely perceived as an authoritative standard—then Johnson’s does seem to become number one . . . It was a similar process two and a half centuries ago that turned Johnson’s Dictionary into the first.”

When we have noted that Johnson was the first lexicographer to achieve notoriety, and corrected the timeline of the English dictionary’s rise, the fact remains that Johnson’s contemporaries seem to have forgotten Bailey.

**Johnson’s Use of Bailey’s Dictionary and the Bookseller’s Use of Both**

Though we know for certain that Johnson drew on Bailey’s dictionary, the question of how and to what extent has never been resolved. Sir John Hawkins, one of his biographers, knew Johnson during his work on the dictionary. Writing long after the fact, though, Hawkins made a remark about the process that would spark controversy: “An interleaved copy of Bailey’s dictionary in folio he made the repository of the several articles, and these he collected by incessant reading the best authors in our language . . .” This gist of this statement has been vigorously denied: Hawkins implies that the “several articles,” the slips of paper on which Johnson had copied illustrative quotations, were Johnson’s contributions to what would essentially be a revised Bailey dictionary. Boswell’s account is ambiguous, probably because he was himself unsure of Johnson’s method. Manuscript drafts of Boswell’s *Life* show that he initially wrote, but ultimately deleted the statement that Johnson

---


“had the words in Bailey’s Dictionary so far as it was not deficient.” Boswell acknowledged that Johnson had “a copy of” Bailey’s dictionary, but he also crossed this statement out. At this point in the text, Boswell twice wrote and twice crossed out a declaration that Hawkins had given “a satisfactory enumeration” of Johnson’s work (137-38). Ultimately, Boswell opted for a mildly critical reference to Hawkins’ account, saying that

The Publick has had from another pen a long detail of what had been done in this Country by prior Lexicographers, and no doubt Johnson was wise to avail himself of them so far as they went; But the learned yet judicious research of Etymology, the various yet accurate display of definition, and the rich collection of authorities were reserved for the superior Mind of our great Philologist.

Boswell was ultimately reluctant to give the impression that Johnson had found Bailey very useful. As Reddick points out, Thomas Percy objected to Boswell’s suggestion that Johnson began by taking headwords from other dictionaries. Percy claimed that “in completing his alphabetical arrangement, he, no doubt, would recur to former dictionaries, to see if any words had escaped him; but this, which Mr. Boswell makes the first step in the business, was in reality the last.” Walter Jackson Bate reasoned that “though [Johnson] may have used an interleaved copy of Bailey at some point, it could hardly have served as a file for more than the minutest fraction of the material.” Allen Reddick also rejected the idea as “physically implausible . . . . Imagine the chaos of thousands of slips of paper ‘organized’ in this one book, albeit an interleaved folio.”

It also seems implausible that Johnson relied only on the results of his reading to generate a wordlist—that he had no guide for predicting what he would find and gauging what he did.

---

77 *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, 1:186-87.
find. Anne McDermott re-visited the idea of an interleaved Bailey. Johnson used notebooks to pen a draft of the dictionary, and he would have needed some kind of benchmark in order to space headwords that were written down before the search for quotations was finished. McDermott reasons:

Johnson seems to have been so confident about his method that he had his notebooks filled with word entries well down into the alphabet. He can only have done this if he had already gone through the interleaved Bailey, selecting the headwords he was going to include, supplementing them with others from other dictionaries or his reading, and writing the wordlist on to the interleaves . . . (p. 8)

This wordlist sketched out in the interleaved Bailey would then be copied at greater length in the notebooks. Bailey’s dictionary, then, might have helped Johnson in his search for words and in his organization of a wordlist.

Reddick and McDermott agree that Bailey’s dictionary must have been more helpful in the early than in the later stages of Johnson’s work. Johnson eventually encountered too much material for a notebook modeled on Bailey and former dictionaries to handle, and those notebooks were eventually jettisoned. However, McDermott suspects that those notebooks might have been retained as a guide for “a third or fourth trawl through texts for quotations in 1751.”81 When Johnson began again, he might not have started from scratch.

The spectre of an interleaved Bailey aside, Johnson may have taken more than a few cues from his predecessor. Reddick is probably correct in arguing that Johnson “borrowed passages from Bailey’s dictionary only when he included a word from Bailey’s wordlist for which he did not have an illustrative quotation” (p. 201 n. 8). Bailey is cited only a few hundred times in the Dictionary. But it is possible that Bailey was not always given credit. McCracken has suggested convincingly that Johnson and his team were more likely to adopt

---

definitions from Bailey’s dictionary silently with small revisions than to copy them word-for-word with attribution.\textsuperscript{82}

One wonders whether Bailey might have been cited in the \textit{Dictionary} with the spirit of referring to a doubtful authority, for those few odd dictionary words which, as Johnson puts it in the Preface, “yet stand supported only by the name of Bailey,” rather than for the purpose of giving credit (87). Harris dealt in the same manner with dictionaries he used when he thought they recorded “Words and Terms that are not to be met with elsewhere . . . in many Places I have been obliged to put [Blanchard’s] Name to what my Amenuensis or Assistant transcribed from him, lest the Reader shou’d mistake it for my own Words.”\textsuperscript{83} But Bailey is also cited for words which stand supported by the names of other lexicographers, including those of Edward Phillips, Chambers, and Robert Ainsworth, whose dictionaries Johnson is known to have used. Attributing a word to Bailey in the \textit{Dictionary} does not literally mean that it is “supported only by the name of Bailey,” but probably that Johnson was not inclined to take full credit for such a word when he saw it. It is unlikely that Johnson checked Bailey’s wordlist against those of other dictionaries for verification.\textsuperscript{84}

Neither does it seem practical for Johnson and his amanuenses to have systematically treated Bailey as the basis for their text. Johnson and his team obviously flipped through other English dictionaries for words they would have found in Bailey had they used his dictionary consistently. When Johnson cites “Phillips” for a word, it does not mean that the headword cannot be found in Bailey’s dictionary, with a similar definition. It may be that more than one amanuensis was employed to hunt for headwords in other dictionaries to supplement Johnson’s list. If this was the case, it would have been easier to use two dictionaries rather than to have two amanuenses hovering over one book.

\textsuperscript{82} David Mc Cracken, “The Drudgery of Defining: Johnson’s Debt to Bailey’s \textit{Dictionarium Britannicum},” \textit{Modern Philology} 66 (1969): 339. The sample from which Mc Cracken derived his figures included only the letter \textit{L}. The second edition of the Bailey folio was used.

\textsuperscript{83} Harris, \textit{Lexicon Technicum}, n.p.

\textsuperscript{84} I have found a handful of references to “Bailey. Chambers.”
The attribution “Dict.” is commonly thought to refer to Bailey, a notion which goes back to Percy W. Long’s assertion that “this is the work intended when, lacking a quotation, [Johnson] credits a word to ‘Dict.’” But I have not been able to find convincing evidence of this. Definitions attributed to “Dict.,” such as those for “Affluentness,” “Larvated,” and “Lumination,” do not resemble those in Bailey’s Dictionarium Britannicum (1736); “Auletick,” for instance, does not appear in Bailey at all, and “Corticose” seems significantly revised if it was borrowed. These examples are typical. A cursory comparison of Bailey and Johnson’s folio dictionaries side-by-side reveals that words attributed to Dict. are not always defined in Bailey’s words, and often these headwords attributed to Dict. do not appear in Bailey at all. What “Dict.” means, then, remains to be shown.

That Bailey dictionaries were unscrupulously copied from Johnson’s is more well-known, a fact which Philip Gove established in 1940. Johnson’s booksellers were soon forced to produce a serialized edition of the folio in 1755, before the first edition had sold out, because Joseph Nicol Scott, a physician, was getting another Bailey folio ready for sale that contained a massive amount of content lifted from Johnson. What is more, Scott’s new folio would be issued in affordable numbers. The new Scott-Bailey folio now boasted on its title page “authorities from the best writers, to support those [words] which appear doubtful.” The title page was perhaps unwittingly ironic about the extent to which Johnson’s material was used when it stated that the new Bailey folio was “Re-published with many Corrections, Additions, and Literate Improvements, by Different Hands.” While some have scoffed at John Hawkins’ suggestion that Johnson’s was an improved version of Bailey’s 1736 folio text, in 1755, Scott was using Johnson’s book as if that were actually the case.

The lifting of Johnson’s material in the Scott-Bailey folio was apparently a misguided tactic. The next three “editions” are actually made up of unsold first edition sheets. The 1756 octavo volume two (no. 49) boasts being “improved throughout, by the addition of great variety of examples, explaining the true significations of the words, taken from the best authors.”

compilers, feeling pressure to keep up with Johnson, must have taken the course of action which Cervantes’ friend prescribes in the Prologue to *Don Quixote*, when the author worries about his book’s lack of references and authorities: “find a book that quotes the whole tribe [of authors] alphabetically, as you observed, from Alpha to Omega, and transfer them into your book.” Volume two was improved with material taken out of Johnson. But each new “edition” of this competitive new version of volume two, though supposed to be “carefully corrected,” was actually made up of the same unsold sheets.

But these unsuccessful campaigns do not indicate that Johnson’s dictionary was preferred to Bailey’s by all dictionary readers. Nor do the practices of his booksellers suggest that Bailey’s enterprise was infamous. Those booksellers associated with the successful Bailey octavo were a different crowd than those who produced the second volume or the sketchy folio in the fifties, and some of them, Hitch and Hawes, the Knaptons, and the Longmans, were even concerned with Johnson’s folio. The Longman business as well as the Hitch and Hawes partnership already owned Bailey editions when they sold Johnson’s first octavo, and they financed a Bailey octavo for the following year. The Rivingtons, Strahan, John Hinton, John Knapton, William Owen, William Johnston, Thomas Caslon, Stanley Crowder, and Benjamin Law sold both dictionaries. Six of the booksellers on Johnson’s 1770 title page appear on the title page of a Bailey dictionary dated the same year. Most of the booksellers listed on Johnson’s 1773 octavo appear on a 1773 Bailey; almost half of the booksellers listed on Johnson’s 1790 octavo appear on the title page of a 1790 Bailey. While a competition with the Bailey octavo may have been the proving ground for the excellence of Johnson’s dictionary, those who sold them probably hoped that the two octavo dictionaries were distinctive enough in their style and audience for both of them to do well.

Johnson’s octavo, less affordable at ten shillings than Bailey’s six, does not seem to have diminished the popularity of Bailey’s. The seventeenth edition of Bailey’s *Universal Etymological English Dictionary* (no. 18) dated 1759 has been listed in other bibliographies.

---

as “another issue” of a 1757 seventeenth edition (no. 17). The debut of Johnson’s octavo around this time makes the meaning of “issue” and “edition” crucial here. Comparing copies of each shows that there were two seventeenth editions printed. According to Terry Belanger, in 1760, when the value of shares in Johnson’s octavo fell significantly, “the Bailey dictionary was clearly thought by the Trade to be the more valuable Copy of the two” (p. 121). In 1768, the superintendent of a newly-established Methodist school in South Wales recommended that its “little library” be stocked with “Johnson’s English Dictionary” and “two or three dictionaries of Bailey or Dyke, for those who learn English.”

After the Donaldson v. Becket ruling (1774) limited the terms of copyright, An Universal Etymological English Dictionary began to be printed openly in Scotland by Edinburgh and Glasgow booksellers. Around the same time, in the early eighties, the London producers of the “three-and-twentieth edition” joined with nine new investors to revamp the dictionary for a new copyright. The “four-and-twentieth edition” was, according to its title page, “carefully enlarged and corrected by Edward Harwood,” who wrote a new preface acknowledging the dictionary’s tradition: “the Character of Bailey’s Dictionary hath long been deservedly established, and through a series of many years hath acquired a just reputation, which all the numerous compilations we have lately seen hath not been able to

---


89 That there were two seventeenth editions, however, is not proof that 1757 was a bestselling year for the Bailey octavo. A possible reason for printing another seventeenth edition is the new plan for branding improper words with daggers and double bars. I have not been able to find this fashionable new selling point, mentioned in the preliminary list of abbreviations, actually implemented in this or any of the succeeding dictionaries which promise to set off “bad” or “obsolete” words. Johnson, with his “low” and “barbarous” words, and Benjamin Martin with the Lingua Britannica’s (1749) daggers, probably encouraged the planned use of prescriptive marks in the Bailey dictionary.


91 The verso side of the “four-and-twentieth edition” title-page reads: “This Book Having Been Greatly Corrected And Improved, Is Entered At Stationers-Hall, According To Act of Parliament.”
eclipse.” Soon afterwards in Edinburgh, the first Scottish edition came out with a notice “To the Public” attacking the new Harwood version:

The Publishers . . . [have] done everything in their power to render this the most complete and correct copy of the Book ever presented to the Public. Among the numerous Editions of this Work, some are mutilated by omitting the original Words; other impressions have been hastily and carelessly executed; and in a late one, where improvements are pretended, the price is advanced.  

Harwood’s book cut profanities and cost an additional shilling. The Scottish edition claimed to be bigger by “Above Two Thousand Words” than other editions and provided a partial list of them at the back of the book as proof.

Sheets of this Edinburgh edition were issued in London by veterans of the Bailey enterprise who had worked with the Scottish booksellers on a Bailey dictionary before. With such a notice to the public, then, the London issue can be said to have competed with another version of the Bailey dictionary also being sold in London then, the Harwood revision. In the early eighties, therefore, it was not necessarily Johnson’s octavo that long-time producers of the Bailey dictionary were up against, but other Bailey dictionaries.

Readers of the Bailey Dictionary: Information and “the School of the People”

After the Donaldson v. Becket ruling limited the terms of copyright, An Universal Etymological English Dictionary began to be officially printed by Edinburgh and Glasgow booksellers, though it is likely that pirated Bailey dictionaries were available there earlier. In 1757 James Rivington is said to have sold his share in the dictionary only to have it “printed in Scotland and elsewhere and offered for sale in Britain and America.” A Nova Scotia newspaper advertised in 1768 that the Bailey dictionary and other books had been “just

92 From the John Bell issue of the twenty-fifth edition.
imported.” By the eighties, a circulating library in Calcutta had Bailey’s dictionary on its
shelves.\textsuperscript{94} It was about that time that the book was sold at an auction in Botany-Bay, the
British penal colony in New South Wales, where the author’s name had an unfortunate
resemblance to that of the Old Bailey prison, one source noted.\textsuperscript{95}

Copies of Bailey dictionaries show the use and re-use of eighteenth- and nineteenth-
century readers who got them second-hand. When a copy was inherited, given as a gift, or bought,
readers put their names on their dictionaries, sometimes noting the date and the occasion. A
copy that still has its original binding often shows a succession of owner inscriptions on the
flyleaves or pastedowns over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Readers
did writing exercises in the dictionary, inscribing individual letters or practice sentences
repeatedly up and down the page. The dictionary was a place for Isaac Colby Jr. to practice
writing his name, and later, a book that Isaac Colby M.D. “presented to Misses Andrew.”\textsuperscript{96}
Giving the dictionary as a gift to a son or daughter, a friend, or a lover appears to have been a
normal practice. And the Bailey dictionary was more than once over the years the object of
frustration, the butt of wrath that could only be expressed in the scribble of an agitated pencil.
One Bailey dictionary was made into a bull’s-eye and stabbed repeatedly with a pencil.\textsuperscript{97}

Although the octavo dictionary was used in schools, and subject to such demonstrations of
noncompliance, it was also represented as voluntary children’s reading material. In 1883,
William E. A. Axon recalled having always “had a kindly feeling” for the name of Nathan
Bailey,

\begin{quote}
    derived from younger days, when many pleasant hours were spent in conning his
    pages, studded with words of fearful length and cacophony, and hiding as often as
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{95} Reported in the \textit{Britannic Magazine} 1 Sept. 1802, 333-34, in Eighteenth Century Journals (accessed 30 Dec.
2009).

\textsuperscript{96} \textit{An Universal Etymological English Dictionary}, Twenty-eighth edition (Edinburgh, 1800). O’Neill B-48,
Cordell Collection.

\textsuperscript{97} \textit{A Compleat English Dictionary}, Achte auflage (Leipzig und Zullichau, 1792). RB. 23a.4022, British Library.
revealing matters of mysterious import. He who said that language was given to man
that he might conceal his thoughts might have been one of Bailey’s students. 98

As a child, *Middlemarch*’s young medical doctor Lydgate found it in the home library:

when hot from play, [he] would toss himself in a corner, and in five minutes be deep
in any sort of book that he could lay his hands on: if it were Rasselas or Gulliver, so
much the better, but Bailey’s Dictionary would do, or the Bible with the Apocrypha
in it. 99

This youthful reading was supposed to have taken place in the first couple of decades of the
nineteenth century, but one wonders whether George Eliot expected her readers to be familiar
with the reference even as late as 1872, when the second book was published.

Bailey’s dictionary was thought to absorb readers who were disqualified from producing
writing for the public on the grounds that they were youths scanning books passively, polite
ladies reading for self-edification, or uneducated working-class readers. These silent readers
seemed to be consulting the dictionary not only for the meaning or spelling of English words,
but for the purpose of what we would now call “staying informed” for want of time or means
to read book collections or classical authors.

Though Bailey addressed his Preface to writers too, his book was received as an aid for
readers who would remain on the margins of the public sphere. If few are actually men of
letters, Bailey reasons in his octavo preface, dictionaries are necessary helps for most
readers: “few, comparatively speaking, have the Advantage of a learned Education to any
considerable Proficiency”; it is for this reason that “Dictionaries have in all Languages been
compil’d, to which, as to Store-Houses, such Persons may have recourse” (A3v). In his
notice to the reader in *Antiquities of London and Westminster* (1722), Bailey introduces the

---


work as a collection of significant information selected from many books that are difficult to
access: “those Books that treat of the Matters herein contain’d, are voluminous and dear, and
therefore come into but few Hands, and being interspers’d here and there among numerous
Pages of matter of no great concern . . . the Generality have been depriv’d of being
acquainted with them.” Bailey sees the compilation as a resource that eliminates material
boundaries, putting readers traditionally circumscribed by economic limitations into touch
with books that had been out of reach, dissipated by extraneous writing and use of paper.
While decoding Milton’s meaning was one way in which the dictionary was reportedly used,
Bailey’s book was also considered primary reading for women readers and labourers, who
would have access to few other books.

Historians of lexicography have found the encyclopedic tendencies of Bailey’s language
dictionary to be atavistic—it is part of the “hard words” tradition of English monolingual
dictionaries. Bailey’s dictionary often provided detailed historical information about things
rather than definitions describing a word’s use. But editions of the *Universal Etymological
English Dictionary* revised in the 1780s attributed its success to this scientific emphasis —
the way that it defined things as well as words in entries of encyclopedic length, focused on
mathematics, and contained over twice as many subject areas in the arts and sciences than
had appeared in an English dictionary before, including Algebra and Trigonometry.100
Edward Harwood’s new edition of the *Universal Etymological English Dictionary* pointed
out that Bailey had always included “many hundred technical terms, which belong to
respective Sciences, which are not found in other Dictionaries.” The “principal excellence”
of the Bailey dictionary, said Harwood, looking back over its long career, “is, that it is a
*Scientific* Dictionary, and more useful to common Readers.”101 An edition published around
the same time in Scotland made a similar observation: the great thing about the Bailey
dictionary was its “utility,” resulting from “its extensive plan.” Perhaps these editors were
looking for ways to highlight what Bailey had that Johnson did not: this editor was also
inclined to the characterization of a “Scientific Dictionary,” saying that “the great number of

technical words and terms used in various Arts and Sciences which are comprehended in this Work, render it a valuable treasure to the ordinary reader."102

Although Bailey’s octavo would have been expensive at six shillings, his dictionary was thought to be the help not only of the “ordinary” or “common” reader, but of the untaught reader. Just before Bailey’s Universal Etymological English Dictionary was first published, an editor of Thomas Blount’s Glossographia Anglicana Nova remarked that etymological dictionaries were the companions of the self-taught, those who were “gently advancing to Science; and for want of Opportunities of Learned Helps, have the Misfortune to be their own Conductors, or have not Money sufficient to lay in the necessary Furniture of learning.”103 The bookseller William Hone (1780-1842) remembered the Bailey dictionary as a book that, as a child with access to few books, he read in periods when he could not attend school. “Entick’s ‘Dictionary’ had been bought for me before I went to school, and then Bailey’s ‘Dictionary,’ upon which, for want of other reading, I incessantly pored.”104 Hone read, in addition to magazines and Bailey dictionary entries, scraps of papers he found in “cheesemongers’ or other shops”; with these disconnected fragments he would run to the booksellers’, “showing my leaf and anxiously inquiring”(40).

Hone’s autodidactic reading resembles what Pierre Bourdieu called a “heretical mode of acquisition”: the anxious accumulation of cultural capital outside of institutions which sanction legitimate procedures for acquiring and expressing knowledge.105 Bailey dictionary readers are consistently depicted as unguided readers whose learning is degraded by its distance from primary texts and acknowledged methods of determining meaning. After its first decade in print, it was said that the Bailey dictionary had helped the thresher Stephen Duck transform himself into the cosmopolitan author of the wildly famous Poems on Several Subjects (1730), a pamphlet that went through seven editions in the first year that it was

102 An Universal Etymological English Dictionary (Edinburgh, 1783).
104 Frederick WM. Hackwood, William Hone: His Life and Times (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1912), 44.
published. Duck’s extraordinary literacy was accounted for in the preface to the seventh edition: “Milton was his constant companion in the field and in the barn,” and “Bailey’s Dictionary instructed him in the signification of all words which he thought uncouth”—all words which he found unfamiliar. Johnson would censure Milton’s “unnecessary and ungraceful use of terms of art,” asserting that his use of English words in their original Latin sense made for a language that “is so far removed from common use [that] an unlearned reader when he first opens his book finds himself surprised by a new language.” But Duck’s pamphlet portrays an untutored reader who, with no other “Furniture of learning” than Bailey’s dictionary in hand, unlocks the meaning enclosed in Milton’s classical idiom: “Our author, thus equipped, ascends the hill of Parnassus” (iv). Duck ventured over the “private hunting reserve” which Michel de Certeau sketched, the “frontier between the text and its readers that can be crossed only if one has a passport delivered by these official interpreters.” Duck approaches his reading indirectly, deferring to the dictionary and therefore to authorities who maintain the social prerogative of interpreting Milton or Addison’s meaning. Bailey’s dictionary, according to de Certeau’s metaphor of reading as poaching on a private estate, seems to allow access to the meaning deposited in prized texts. But if Bailey’s dictionary was a passport to Parnassus, “Duck was certainly too intimidated by the custodians of polite culture to initiate new forms of his own,” Linda Zionkowski argues. Decades later, Johnson, erstwhile defender of the ungentlemanly author, would speak ominously in 1753 of “these enlightened days” to readers of *The Adventurer*, when “he that beats the anvil, or guides the plough, not contented with supplying corporal necessities,  

106 Poems on Several Subjects. 7th ed. (London, 1730), v-vi.
108 Duck would have had to save up for Bailey’s dictionary—at six shillings, the book was more than a week’s wages for a thresher. The first authorized collection of his work, published by Duck himself, suggests that he worked overtime in order to buy books. Poems on Several Occasions (London, 1736), xi. But the authorized collection emphasizes that a friend shared books with Stephen and makes no mention of Bailey.
amuses himself in the hours of leisure with providing intellectual pleasures for his countrymen.”¹¹¹ Johnson unveils a cataclysmic prospect in which enlightenment brings upon itself an equal and opposite reaction: if all readers become authors, “no readers will be found, and then the ambition of writing must necessarily cease” (459). The assumption behind this menacing rhetorical flourish is that there are some writers who do not actually read, or perform practices that count as reading. While today it is thought that every good author should have a good dictionary, Duck’s use of Bailey, recorded in the Preface to his poems, was no doubt meant to portray reading practices that were beyond the pale of the gentleman-author’s education. Johnson’s insistence on keeping a population of impoverished readers away from the pen only reinforces the portrayal of Duck’s diligent dictionary reading in the Preface to his poems. Both regard Duck’s literary productivity as something other than authorship, a kind of writing whose inferiority is confirmed by a relationship to texts that is regulated by the dictionary.

By the mid-nineteenth century, when autobiographies of working class readers were narrating the prodigious labour of acquiring knowledge without instruction, George Eliot was able to class the Bailey dictionary among the paltry resources of the sturdy carpenter, Adam Bede (1859). Like Duck, it had cost Adam a great deal of trouble, and work in over-hours, to know what he knew over and above the secrets of his handicraft. . . . He had read his Bible, including the apocryphal books; “Poor Richard’s Almanac,” Taylor’s “Holy Living and Dying,” “The Pilgrim’s Progress,” with Bunyan’s Life and “Holy War,”” a great deal of Bailey’s Dictionary, “Valentine and Orson,” and part of a “History of Babylon” which Bartle Massey had lent him.

Adam is “by no means a marvelous man.” He manages to derive only “fragmentary knowledge” from reading a few books.¹¹² Eliot is more interested than were Duck’s editors in what Bede could take away from books without instruction. Adam has made the odd visit

to Bartle Massey’s night school, but school offers more instruction than Adam, immersed in his carpentry “figures,” has time or occasion for.

The Bailey dictionary would also distinguish the amateur from the scholar. A century after the controversy which finally established the teenage Thomas Chatterton as the author of poems he had forged in the name of the fifteenth-century priest Thomas Rowley, philologist W.W. Skeat used the Bailey dictionary to drive home a notion shared by those eighteenth-century scholars who had first attempted to reconcile Chatterton’s youth with his text’s learned archaic vocabulary: Chatterton must have copied old words from dictionaries. Edmond Malone, reasoning that Chatterton might have used dictionaries to lard his text with unfamiliar words, echoed Johnson’s words regarding those dictionary entries the lexicographer would copy: “a man’s book is sometimes wiser than himself.” It was said that Chatterton himself, when prompted, could not identify the meaning of archaic words in his own text. Thomas Warton conjectured that “he borrowed his language from glossaries and etymological English lexicons, and not from life or practice . . . He saw words detached and separated from their context: these he seized . . . not observing their respective local appropriations.” Warton exposes the forger’s lack of exposure to the nuances of Middle English usage, and therefore Chatterton’s failure to appropriate the language of legitimate antiquarian literary study: “let us recollect, that in the present age, literary topics, even of the most abstruse and recondite nature, are communicated and even familiarised to all ranks and ages, by Reviews, Magazines, Abridgements, [and] Encyclopedes . . . which form the school of the people” (111). Skeat recalls that while examining the teenage Chatterton’s incredible familiarity with middle English, “the value of my copy of Bailey became daily more apparent . . . Again and again Bailey befriended me.” Skeat finally concluded that Chatterton had “copie[d] words from Kersey or Bailey with slavish exactness.” Though Chatterton was never again to be thought the dull transcriber of fifteenth-century manuscripts, before he was  

114 Thomas Warton, An Enquiry into the Authenticity of the Poems Attributed to Thomas Rowley (London, 1782), 43.
hailed by the Romantic poets as a neglected genius, he was received by eighteenth-century textual critics as an amateur. Almost a century later, Skeat declared: “If we take Rowley to be a mere pseudonym for Kersey or Bailey, we shall hardly ever err” (xxxiii).

A Bailey dictionary is brought as evidence to convict an author of murdering the English language in an issue of Henry Fielding’s *The Champion* for Saturday, May 20, 1740. The literary review is delivered through the mock-proceedings of a “Court of Censorial Enquiry.” But the Bailey dictionary ultimately proves not so much that the author picked up bad words but that he has not read enough to write well. The accused—one “Col. Apol.”—was probably meant to be Colley Cibber, the notorious poet laureate, and his work, *An Apology for the Life of Mr. Colley Cibber*, which was published that year. The defendant calls his servant to testify that she has often seen him reading. But when she is summoned to recall which books, she remembers only one: “my Master used to call it *Bailey’s Dicksnary*,” is her reply; “At which there was a great Laugh” in the courtroom. “Bailey’s Dicksnary” speaks volumes to the court: not having read other books, he must have used the dictionary to help write his *Life*. The colonel is exposed; he is not writing as a man of letters, and his knowledge is not his own.

For Henry Fielding, the Bailey dictionary was a convenient symbol for the unlearned reader’s illicit access to cultural capital enclosed in the study, encoded in the learned languages, or gained from travel. *Tom Jones*’s Mrs. Western, whose dubious masculinity symbolizes her usurpation of authority, uses Bailey’s dictionary. The narrator remarks that Mrs. Western “had lived about the court, and had seen the world.” That second clause is an ironic re-statement of the former, as if Mrs. Western had concluded that because she has seen the court, she has seen the world. Hence the sarcastic euphemism that follows: “she had acquired all that knowledge which the said world usually communicates . . .” From “most of the political pamphlets and journals published within the last twenty years,” Mrs. Western formed her skill in politics, so that like her acquaintance with the ancients, which comes from translations, Mrs. Western’s exposure to politics is at one remove from direct personal

---

observation. When her niece Sophia insists on not marrying Blifil because she hates him, Mrs. Western replies “‘Will you never learn a proper use of words? . . . Indeed, child, you should consult Bailey’s Dictionary. It is impossible you should hate a man from whom you have received no injury. By hatred, therefore, you mean no more than dislike’” (296). Mrs. Western has consulted the Bailey dictionary without finding under “hate” something like Sophia’s disgust for Blifil. The dictionary’s report of the nature of human passions allows Mrs. Western to speak as if she had direct access to what is only acquired over the course of time and travel by gentlemen in Tom Jones: knowledge of the world, like ownership of land, is a qualification gentlemen like Mr. Allworthy and the author have gained in a mystifying way, sometime in the dim past. As John Barrell has argued, the gentleman’s authority was tied to his ownership of land, which freed him from the bias of economic interest.

Mrs. Western, propertyless and partial to the Whigs, clings to her dictionary. But the ways of love, the narrator points out, have already “been described by poets” (295): John Donne’s lines have already conferred authority on the narrator’s introduction of Sophia’s person: “Her pure and eloquent blood/Spoke in her Cheeks, and so distinctly wrought/that one might almost say her body thought” (141). Additionally, the introduction to Book VII in which the reference to Bailey appears contains the author’s commanding revision of the metaphor of life as a drama: “we” poets, he says, “are admitted behind the scenes of this great theatre of Nature” (291). The gentleman appreciates the gap between social action and inner worth. But “no author ought to write anything besides dictionaries and spelling-books who hath not this privilege” (291). Mrs. Western’s assertion about hatred lacks legitimacy because it derives from a secondary source, a text compiled by a subordinate drudge which lacks that privileged intimacy with original sources that gentleman authors have—the original meaning of human actions located “behind-the-scenes.”

Polite readers of Eliza Haywood’s monthly periodical The Female Spectator (1744-46) would have heard of the Bailey dictionary as a book that might do away with the need for

117 Fielding, Tom Jones, 243.

reading other books. Haywood’s periodical writing is generally known for giving advice to women about how to make the most of their limited social possibilities. As Patricia Meyer Spacks has pointed out, Haywood’s fiction offered female readers “vicarious experience” to offset the limitations of social immobility; in the same way, Haywood pointed the way to a kind of vicarious reading in *The Female Spectator*, informing readers that the gist of many important yet difficult texts could be summarized or translated in fewer, more accessible books.\(^{119}\)

Hume acknowledged female readers “Sovereigns of the Empire of Conversation” or the “*conversible,*” charged with “borrowing from Books their most agreeable Topics of Conversation,” or consuming the “manufacturing” produced by what he called the “Dominions of Learning” (535). Haywood maintained that abridgements and collections would provide fodder for conversation. “The summary of them all,” she said, was Bailey’s Dictionary, and is, indeed, a library of itself; since there never was place, person, nor action, of any note, from the creation down to the time of its being published, but what it gives a general account of.—Those who read only this cannot be called ignorant, and if they have a curiosity for knowing greater particulars of any transaction, they may afterwards have recourse to other more circumstantial records.\(^{120}\)

Though more robust reading and reflection would certainly compromise the feminine graces, Haywood conceded, the light reading of Bailey’s dictionary would not make philosophers of ladies. For women, who were denied direct access to learned works and the time to peruse them, Bailey’s dictionary could be recommended as primary reading.

But if reading practices were shaped by gendered social codes, the assumption that a dictionary such as Bailey’s contains strictly information is no less powerful or significant:


\(^{120}\) The article answers a letter dated 27 April 1745. Eliza Haywood, *The Female Spectator* vol. 3 (Glasgow, 1775), 149-50.
both tell us how Bailey’s dictionary might have been used. The recommendation of this dictionary in place of a “library” is founded on the belief that books, as the Female Spectator puts it, “have facts contained in them” (145). Books are conceived as instruments which the lady uses to gather stuff for pleasing conversation. She might, for instance, still extract historical information from the translation of a classical text, even if she never appreciates the original language: “we still find [in translations] facts such as they were, and it is the knowledge of them, not rhetoric, I am recommending to the ladies” (144). What would she recommend to readers who wade through books, not in appreciation of form or eloquence, but for a few key facts? Instead of the time and expense of acquiring and searching through her own library, she might as well access the facts that a library contains in the compressed form of Bailey’s dictionary.

Haywood was not the first to advocate that female readers expand their horizons with fewer books, nor the only writer who took it for granted that her learning would stop before the “dusty deserts of barren philology” –Johnson’s characterization of the study of language—and retire from “the labour of verbal searches” (“Preface” 94). The Dictionary feminized words themselves: “I am not yet so lost in lexicography, as to forget that words are the daughters of earth, and that things are the sons of heaven” (18:79). But the study devoted to tracing the Latinate “original” of English words was reserved for the application of masculine vigor. Mary Astell, an early advocate of female education, sounded ambivalent about the role of language in the curriculum she proposed: “it is not intended she should spend her hours in learning words but things, and therefore no more languages than are necessary to acquaint her with useful authors.” Though David Hume made “Women of Sense and Education” sovereigns of his realm of the “conversable,” where “Information” was consumed and delivered in turn to the realm of the “Learned,” knowledge of language itself was forbidden women.121 Though Astell proposed that the realm of learning be opened to women, “[men’s] enclosure broke down, and women invited to taste of that tree of knowledge they have so long unjustly monopolized,” Astell still maintains that it would not

be necessary for the female reader to “trouble herself in turning over a great number of books.”¹²²

Haywood’s recommendation of Bailey, then, confronts us with this annoying paradox: Bailey’s English dictionary is not necessarily a book about language. Putting Bailey on her reading regimen helps Haywood draw an important distinction. The dictionary contains the general account or historical summary of everything. On the other hand, there are “greater particulars,” other books, superfluous detail, rhetorical device, language and its history, that comprise the original texts from which the dictionary, the abridgement, or the translation might have been drawn. The Female Spectator lays emphasis on this distinction between portable content and the weightiness of text: she explains, “[It] is not my ambition to render my sex what is called deeply learned . . . it is merely for information I would have them read history” (145). In order to illustrate just what it means to get information from books without worrying about speakers, language, form, or context, Haywood uses this metaphor: “we should not be angry with a fellow who comes to bring us news of some unexpected great accession to our fortune, tho’ he should tell it us in the most unpolite terms . . .” (146). In other words, what the fellow says is more important than how he says it; what is said should not be affected by him at all. Content, or the main points of the text, have nothing to do with the context in which they are presented, including the matter of who is speaking. The author has no significance, and neither, I am arguing, did Bailey.

In Geoffrey Nunberg’s well-known account of the history of the word “information,” the latter is treated as a substance that “doesn’t change its nature according either to the medium it is stored in or the way it is represented.”¹²³ We could get the same information from watching the news, listening to the radio, or searching the internet. Information is stored for retrieval, found, and distributed by impartial hands. Its significance can be corrupted by the media that transmits it, we think, but not shaped by it. According to the OED, the only sense that comes close to this in the eighteenth century denotes the idea of “knowledge

communicated concerning some particular fact:” this older sense recalls the action of informing and the agent who makes a fact known. Hence the Female Spectator’s advice that we should not be angry with the fellow who comes to bring us good news if his language spoils the message. And yet Haywood’s recommendation to read Bailey “for information” comes as close to our sense of the word as any eighteenth-century use of the word could have: readers of the Female Spectator have been advised to disregard that irksome messenger fellow just as readers seemed to have forgotten, or never to have minded, who Bailey the author might have been. Readers approached the book expecting to find general accounts of particular subjects stored there, as if it were a silent “library of itself.” The encyclopedic qualities of the long articles in Bailey’s dictionary, where not words, but things are explained, made it eligible for non-linguistic autodidactic inquiry—according to Warton with his scholarly scruples about the historicity of the language, dictionaries and encyclopaedias belonged to an unregulated extra-institutional “school of the people” made possible by reprints.

Bailey’s name would continue to appear on the dictionaries readers used, long after Johnson’s acquired the unofficial status of a standard authority. And Bailey’s name would quietly persist with Johnson’s on circulating library lists advertised to readers, as I noted above. But Henry Fielding put a finger on the problem with Bailey’s name: readers were just as unequipped to imagine who this lexicographer was as we are today. In that scene in The Author’s Farce where hack writers draw up proposals for “Mr. Bailey’s English Dictionary” by copying “the Proposals for printing Bayle’s Dictionary,” Bailey’s name seemed interchangeable with that of other lexicographers. As the hacks in The Author’s Farce gather material to compile, the question of who assembles it hangs over the scene. Bailey’s book of information did not bring readers behind the scenes of book production or show the qualifications represented by the author’s name. What Fielding suggests in The Author’s Farce is that there was no authority behind Bailey’s book.

It may not be going too far to suspect that, even if Johnson had not acquired literary fame, he might still have made a legendary visit to Miss Pinkerton’s school in Vanity Fair, where his dictionary was used as a mode of social indoctrination as well as a writing aid. And Johnson’s book achieved authority which subjected it to irreverent treatment by Becky
Sharp, who used it as an air-borne sign of liberation from school. But Bailey’s was thought to be the popular all-purpose reference book of the self-taught, whose reading practices were not sanctioned by any visible icon of cultural or institutional authority. With little education and slight social encouragement, the reader with a Bailey dictionary was to inform herself about what had been written in the pages of canonical literature and unlock the meaning of words in books that were the patrimony of polite readers. And to Haywood, Eliot, and Hone, “for want of other reading,” the dictionary was a book to seek out and read “a great deal of,” whoever its author was.

Bailey’s commercial use of parts of other dictionaries benefitted from eighteenth-century England’s narrow understanding of literary property. As Simon Stern points out, Donaldson v. Becket “expanded what was already a vital factor in the literary marketplace.”\(^\text{124}\) The public domain included significant parts of recently published works, allowing the reprinting of significant portions of copyrighted works. Bailey compiled his dictionary of all dictionaries with the sort of freedom that a U.S. court has granted Google Books to copy significant parts or “previews” of out-of-print copyrighted works.

Those who read “merely for information” in Bailey’s dictionary looked for the “facts contained in” books rather than the “particulars” of book learning. But the readers of information in Bailey’s dictionary were accessing material that lacked a legitimizing context. In an age that displayed portraits of compilers in reference books, information retrieved from storehouses presided over by phantom figures did not amount to learning. In Chapter 2, I argue that Johnson’s Dictionary brought about a compromise between compiled, shared material and the expression of privileged knowledge that had cost Johnson much pain to acquire. In the hierarchy of writing labours, mechanical methods of manufacturing or copying content were placed beneath learned efforts to communicate what one had read. I

---

argue that Johnson’s *Dictionary* presented a compiled body of public knowledge through rhetorical displays of individual authority. Johnson, as the author of the *first* English dictionary, communicated a valid form of public knowledge.
Chapter 2

Johnson’s *Dictionary*: Authoring Information

I once began collecting, from correspondence in newspapers, and from other public arguments, variations on the phrases “I see from my Webster” and “I find from my Oxford Dictionary.” Usually what was at issue was a difficult term in an argument. But the effective tone of these phrases, with their interesting overtone of possession (“my Webster”), was to appropriate a meaning which fitted the argument and to exclude those meanings which were inconvenient to it but which some benighted person had been so foolish as to use.—Raymond Williams, Introduction to *Keywords*

Imagine Samuel Johnson in his garret, hard at work on the *Dictionary*, performing word searches on a computer. If Johnson had overlooked the technique of “Machine” reading for a project like the *Dictionary*, he would have been as foolish as the “blockhead [who] ever wrote, except for money.”126 Robin Valenza has suggested that when Johnson wrote to Samuel Richardson in March 1750 begging for an *Index Rerum* to *Clarissa*, he sought a tool that would allow him to do word searches: “a study of *Clarissa* alongside the *Dictionary* shows that nearly all of Johnson’s quotations from *Clarissa* were lifted directly from the table, the *index rerum*, with only a couple of notable exceptions.”127 Johnson promised no

125 *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Flamingo, 1984), 17.


127 “How Literature Becomes Knowledge: A Case Study,” *ELH* 76.1 (2009): 217-18. Using *Clarissa* as her case study, Valenza performs a word search on the text, comparing the nature of the knowledge derived from this method to Alexander Pope’s “index learning” in the *Dunciad*. What Valenza calls “slow reading,” by contrast, “looks for the kinds of things that a more mechanical method could or would not” (229). Allen Reddick has revealed that Johnson lifted quotations from concordances of the Bible and Milton, too, after he misplaced a
more than this in the *Plan of a Dictionary* (1747) when he said that “perhaps I may at last have reason to say . . . that my book is more learned than its author.”\(^\text{128}\) The Preface, however, reveals Johnson in a different attitude. Rather than mention the index that widened the scope of his reading, Johnson claims that the *Dictionary*’s great corpus of English classics from Spenser to Pope draws on the limited capacities of his own mind: “whatever abilities I had brought to my task, with those I must finally perform it . . . I did not find by my first experiments, that what I had not of my own was easily to be obtained” (18:100).

Johnson’s struggle to organize the language in a book has been taken for one of the most engaging examples in the history of managing the accelerated output of the printing press in eighteenth-century Britain.\(^\text{129}\) According to the *Dictionary* Preface, however, Johnson did not cope well with information overload. If we would believe what Johnson says there, information technologies proved to be more of a hindrance than a help: “book referred to book . . . to search was not always to find, and to find was not always to be informed.”\(^\text{130}\) Johnson accumulated a collection of quotations, copied them onto slips, filed them inside Bailey’s folio, and pasted them into notebooks.\(^\text{131}\) But the Preface brushes all this paper aside, leaving an author who confesses that “in making this collection I trusted more to

---


\(^{129}\) Clifford Siskin and William Warner have argued that eighteenth-century dictionaries were one of a range of techniques developed “to mediate knowledge” and to enable the exchange of information that marked the Enlightenment. See *This is Enlightenment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 17. James Gleick’s *The Information* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2011) articulates the typical view that early modern dictionaries were ways of containing a putative “flood” of information, tapped by the printing press. See also the issue on “early modern information overload” in the *Journal of the History of Ideas* 64.1 (2003) and Roger Lund, “The Eel of Science: Index Learning, Scriblerian Satire, and the Rise of Information Culture,” *Eighteenth-Century Life* 22.2 (1998): 18-42.


Then Johnson claims that certain terms of art were omitted from the Dictionary only because he could not acquire them himself: “I could not visit caverns to learn the miner’s language, nor take a voyage to perfect my skill in the dialect of navigation . . .” (18:102). This lexicographer aims to emulate, not to document his sources, to acquire or to “lear[n]” a language. One perfects a “skill” in order to perform it. “Knowledge is of two kinds,” Johnson would later remark; “We know a subject ourselves, or we know where we can find information upon it” (Life 2:365). If Johnson had sought to access and gather information rather than to acquire knowledge himself, he might have easily documented “the dialect of navigation”: John Harris’s Lexicon Technicum and Nathan Bailey’s Dictionarium Britannicum provide definitions of nautical terms.

No other eighteenth-century compiler had managed so convincingly to assimilate to himself a universe of knowledge: in the Preface, Johnson wove the rhetoric of Herculean labour that early modern lexicographers had rehearsed into an intensely personal account, making his own work in a time-honoured profession of copying seem unprecedented. He talks about living with his book, of letting research wreck his life and drain his vitality. It made him “faint with weariness” (18:111) and leaves him old and alone: “I have protracted my work till most of those whom I wished to please, have sunk into the grave” (18:112). In the opening of the Dictionary, the contents of the book are taken out of Johnson, or so he claims, as if he could tell the story. Walter Benjamin argued that it was the other way around, that storytelling came before information. The story, he says,

\[\text{does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report. It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again. Thus traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel. Storytellers tend to begin their story with a presentation of the circumstances in which they themselves have learned what is to follow . . .}^{132}\]

---

The author of the Preface begins as a storyteller does, recalling the circumstances in which he read the classics and let go of the hope of finding the meaning of all words written in English. Rather than scientific, objective reporting on the language, Johnson conveys an adventurous project with which he got carried away, at a certain time in his life—“I resolved to leave neither words nor things unexamined . . . but these were the dreams of a poet doomed to wake a lexicographer” (18:100). In fact, the dreams of a poet sent Johnson on a quest for universal knowledge with the eagerness of an empiricist; it was the disillusioned lexicographer who contracted his aims to the personal and the subjective. The Preface’s speaker remembers how he came to relinquish all knowledge that could not be “brought within my reach” (18:102).

The Dictionary’s Preface puts us in the position of having to argue that information has an author, a person who has been altered by it and who refuses to communicate it without creating a scene. It was in an analogous fashion that Johnson composed news for the Gentleman’s Magazine that blurred the boundary between disseminating information and authoring it. In the “Debates in the Senate of Magna Lilliputia” (1740-1743), he drafted reports without attending meetings himself. Based on notes which were taken down and delivered to Johnson, the reports treat the rhetorical style of Demosthenes and Cicero as a means of transcribing the day’s significant political events. They are, in Paul Korshin’s words, a “landmark in Swiftian imitation and irony.”

Here what distinguishes the author from the magazine reader is the author’s exclusive access to reports. Writing in the first issue of the Literary Magazine in 1756, Johnson defines information as a phenomenon of differential access: it is neither the content of the news nor the way it is presented, but the author’s relationship to the event and to his sources that makes for an “informative” account, a summary of reliable intelligence. Journalistic fabrication, he claims, is the crime of those who neither attended parliament nor received word from witnesses: “the speeches inserted in other papers have been long known to be

fictitious, and produced sometimes by men who never heard the debate, nor had any authentic information”.\textsuperscript{134}

For Johnson, the “informed” author cherishes the privilege of intimacy with rare texts and restricted sources rather than equality and universal access. John Locke’s \textit{Of the Conduct of the Understanding} (1706) promotes a similar idea to readers bent on profiting from study. The reader is to “inform himself” not by allowing his mind to be filled with popular facts and precepts, but by strengthening the mind through acquaintance with “the best books” and “the most material authors,” an instructive process which resembles that of an English literature program more than coffee house exchange or newspaper consumption. Readers capitalize on information by “furnishing their heads with ideas, notions and observations, wheron to employ their minds and form their understandings.”\textsuperscript{135} By “the gathering up of information,” Locke designates both exposure to and exploitation of valuable texts in such a way that the information itself gets put to work as a medium for something else: “let him exercise the freedom of his reason and understanding in such a latitude as this, and his mind will be strengthened, his capacity enlarged”\textsuperscript{(172)}. If the mind is a medium for information, the mind in its turn makes information a resource for personal advancement and literary production.

Locke’s use of the term “information” captures at once two levels of meaning which I shall depend on in this chapter. One, now obsolete—“information” as a verbal noun—names the process by which social differences in moral and intellectual aptitude are reproduced: “the shaping of the mind or character; communication of instructive knowledge; education, training; advice.”\textsuperscript{136} As late, according to the \textit{OED}, as 1901, to be informed was not only to receive a specific message or to maintain the provisional state of mind sought by the act of “staying informed,” but to become involved with and affected permanently by the thoughts of others. Information is a process completed with the achievement of a skill or aptitude

---

\textsuperscript{134} \textit{The Literary Magazine} 1756, 3.


rather than with the movement of common facts and cultural capital through the media of search engines and lectures to receptive readers. The informed reader should distinguish him or herself from other readers by the capacity to emulate those authors whose abilities all readers would like to match and excel.

Two: signalled by Locke’s prescient use of the verb “gathering,” information is the objective result of communication, a result that recalls the subjective act of communication itself—“knowledge communicated concerning some particular fact, subject, or event.”\(^{137}\) It was this sense of the noun, at once objective and personal, which Johnson used in a startling manner when he decided against “courting living information” (the input of miners, sailors, merchants, artificers) for the Dictionary because of its “sullenness” and “roughness.” Such an epithet—“living information”—suggests not only that Johnson saw people as objects, but that books themselves are animated by the wish of their writers to communicate (Works 18:103). “Knowledge communicated” in the Dictionary is not quite abandoned by the messenger who delivers it.\(^{138}\)

Johnson’s Dictionary and the paratexts—the Preface and The Plan—I argue, necessarily involve readers with “living information,” with an author who confronts researchers with the very “sullenness” that he attributes to those mechanics and merchants who would not behave with the efficiency or docility of objects. It is my central claim in this chapter that eighteenth-century readers treated the Dictionary as a relic or remnant of Johnson’s own reading, despite the collaborative way in which the book was produced (the work of amanuenses and the use of various encyclopaedias and dictionaries from which they copied). It was possible to treat

\(^{137}\) Ibid., 5a.

\(^{138}\) I have been influenced by Geoffrey Nunberg’s distinction between the modern information contained in newspapers, radio, and television, and early modern information, transmitted by communication. See “Farewell to the Information Age,” in The Future of the Book, ed. Geoffrey Nunberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 121. The way that informative things and people overlap can be seen in “A letter from an English gentleman at Edinburgh,” in Lloyd’s Evening Post and British Chronicle for April 5th 1758. The writer discusses Scottish “men not bred to trade,” who are “obliged to see with the eyes, and work with the hands, of others.” Of this knowledge by proxy the writer comments: “the real man of business is the dictionary to the pretended one, who can’t make the least progress without it,” (326). 17th-18th Century Burney Collection Newspapers.
the *Dictionary* as a token of Johnson’s powers of judgment and memory notwithstanding the various technologies which Johnson and his team used to locate and document items—indexes, the movable paper slip, the notebook, the scribal system of copying, and the alphabet itself.

In the first part of this chapter, I interpret three cases of readers using the *Dictionary*’s author-function. The *Dictionary*’s accessible definitions, brief and seemingly straightforward, took on the tone of innuendo once placed within the context of struggles for rhetorical power. When the dictionary definition seemed to harmonize with their own use of language, readers hinted at a connection between Johnson’s authority and their own unrelated interests. In widely dispersed locations and decades during the eighteenth century—in England, colonial America, and Ireland—dictionary “communications” echoed with bad imitations of Johnson. While these cases are suggestive rather than fully representative of the practices that make them possible, they help me to make the claim that “information” is at best an ambiguous word when it comes to what eighteenth-century readers found in reference books such as Johnson’s. Definitions in the hands of readers engaged in public debates carried an elusive yet powerful rhetorical effect quite apart from their factual content.

In the case of the *Dictionary*, a style of reading makes an author. That is, Johnson’s own reading distinguished him from other readers, and, for that very reason, gave readers a stake in treating him as an author. Even as his lexicography reproduced the words of other authors, Johnson distinguished himself from other readers and compilers. His authorship, as I will show, was also embedded in the social life of readers who had a stake in persuading one another to recognize the distinction between Johnson and themselves. Readers slyly and divisively appropriated—they identified with and seemed sometimes to possess—the memory of an author whose abilities no other reader seemed to have. The *Dictionary* in my account is less a form of media than a symbol used in public debate to identify and distinguish different parties. Readers of the *Dictionary* exploited the accessibility of succinct dictionary definitions precisely by treating them as rhetorical material, valuable artifacts of Johnson’s privileged sentiments and thoughts.
The evidence of readers’ approaches to the Dictionary suggests that their engagement with the work’s “bibliographical code,” Jerome McGann’s phrase for the social, material meaning of a text, is not yet fully understood.\textsuperscript{139} I am not concerned with how the typographic organization of the Dictionary invited readers to treat language.\textsuperscript{140} To cite Johnson’s Dictionary as Johnson’s was to see the book in a way that was not determined by the printing press or compiling mechanisms. Indeed, although the Dictionary’s expensive folio volumes seem to typify the hegemony of print capitalism, the material format of the Dictionary did not determine the ways in which readers who never handled the books cited the Dictionary. Readers seemed to know Johnson’s text by heart. While the eighteenth-century press, as Carey McIntosh argues, “inevitably generate[d] . . . what we now think of as reference books,” readers liked to summon ideas of Johnson’s personality and reputation for wisdom and moral integrity when they cited the book.\textsuperscript{141} Richard Yeo has pointed out that in the eighteenth century, “the prospect of an encyclopedia written by a single author may have sustained the notion that universal knowledge could be condensed and contained.”\textsuperscript{142} Readers imagined that Johnson was the medium of information that they accessed, or that the Dictionary conveniently mediated the personal authority of Johnson as a poet, essayist, and critic.

Ann Blair and Peter Stallybrass point out that “collaborative encyclopaedias and dictionaries were generally attributed to the heroic labors of named authors.” They conclude that these books posed an alternative to the “new regime of authorship (and copyright)” because their


\textsuperscript{142} Yeo argues that Ephraim Chambers made a claim to copyright based on his organization of the Cyclopaedia text. Yeo also marks the shift in encyclopedias and dictionaries later in the century toward signed articles and edited projects. See Encyclopedic Visions: Scientific Dictionaries and Enlightenment Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 117.
compilers copied and shared information.\footnote{143} I re-visit this claim by asking what we would need to believe in order for Johnson’s claim to be true, that he freed himself from information overload and worked on the Dictionary alone—that “whatever abilities I had brought to my task, with those I must finally perform it.” Would it be more accurate to say that the Dictionary, with all its copied fragments and public content, was presented as Johnson’s own literary property?\footnote{144} In the rest of the chapter, I examine the manuscripts of The Plan of a Dictionary, drawn up in 1746 for the booksellers, Lord Chesterfield, and the readers who would buy the printed quarto pamphlet in August of 1747. Clergyman Dr. John Taylor and another unidentified reader commented on the manuscripts, encouraging Johnson at this early stage to conceive of the Dictionary as a useful instrument, a tool for storing and retrieving what we would now call public information. The idea that “my book is more learned than its author,” that Johnson’s dictionary might be a collaborative collection rather than a text constrained by the author’s shortcomings and eccentric inhibitions, still shaped the ambivalent language of the finished Plan. A different trajectory one notices running through the same drafts simultaneously though is the disappearing discourse of the compiler, effaced to make way for that of an author who monopolizes attention. I focus primarily on the manuscripts of the Plan, documents written before work on the Dictionary had begun.\footnote{145} The manuscripts show a shifting array of voices and approaches long before the putative experience of recording the language taught Johnson how to conceive of the Dictionary: here Johnson and the readers who commented on the drafts were more concerned with what the dictionary and its author should look like rather than with representing what the dictionary really was.

\footnote{143}{Blair and Stallybrass, “Mediating Information, 1450-1800,” in \textit{This is Enlightenment}, 159-60.}

\footnote{144}{Mark Rose has shown how the rise of literary property in the eighteenth century transformed the discourse of authorship: writers now create unique works that reflect their lives and personalities. See \textit{Authors and Owners: The Invention of Copyright} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).}

How to read the first English Dictionary

Johnson’s authorship of the Dictionary has long piqued the interest of literary critics. W.K. Wimsatt argued that the Dictionary “is a record and revelation of a certain mind and personality,” pointing to Johnson’s “continuing and cumulative capacity” while working on the Dictionary “to remember what he had already done and what he had yet to do.”¹⁴⁶ Anne McDermott insists that

there is authorial presence in this text. . . . [W]e can find an equivalent of Johnson’s “authorial” activity in the medieval redactor. The selection, arrangement and editing of others’ texts can be seen as just as much “authorial” as the writing of a novel or a poem, and in this case it is quite possible, contrary to Barthes’ assertion [in “The Death of the Author”], to see the writer as subject and the author’s book as predicate.¹⁴⁷

Though it does not count as literary, Johnson’s lexicography is “just as much ‘authorial’ as the writing of a novel or a poem.” While Barthes’ scriptor arranges the texts of others with a “hand, cut off from any ‘voice,’” transcribing an “immense dictionary,” Johnson’s immense dictionary, as it happens, seems to bear his signature.¹⁴⁸

The question of whether the Dictionary of the English Language belongs to Johnson is a persistent one, as compelling as its ever-changing answer. The most inspired eighteenth-century versifiers, like their lexicographer counterparts, collected what they knew, made use of particular formal conventions, and selected models to “copy.” But although literary

historians now tend to see Johnson as one of the last representatives of a literary culture that thrived by neoclassical imitation and learned commentary, it is difficult to imagine *London* (1738) or *The Vanity of Human Wishes* (1749) interrogated with the question which Gwin Kolb and Robert DeMaria framed for the *Dictionary*: was it “Johnson’s personal creation” or was it “merely compiled, the accretion of a tradition . . . the work of others?” We distinguish the collaborative work of compilers from the imitative copying of poets. Determining the originality of the *Dictionary* has been crucial in determining how we understand the work and measure Johnson’s achievement in completing it.

In the *Life of Johnson*, Boswell felt compelled to distinguish the hand of authentic Johnson from that of redacting Johnson because readers, he says,

> have confounded Johnson’s Essays with Johnson’s Dictionary; and because he thought it right in a Lexicon of our language to collect many words which had fallen into disuse, but were supported by great authorities, it has been imagined that all of these have been interwoven into his own compositions (*Life* 1:218).

Boswell resists the tendency to treat Johnson’s copying as emulation, as the work of a copycat, insisting instead on the impersonal work of duplication and preservation. The

---

Dictionary is gleaned from a corpus of texts, not a list of all the words that Johnson has picked up himself.¹⁵⁰

Boswell belonged to a literary culture that, as Trevor Ross has argued, distinguished the practices of reading and writing: while pre-Romantic readers used texts as rhetorical instruments for improving their own compositions, modern readers acquire cultural capital by interpreting canonical texts.¹⁵¹ Authors and reader-compilers cannot perform the same labours. Literary historians most often cite the Dictionary to contextualize a word in the age of Johnson rather than in Johnson’s thinking on a given topic. Johnson is, paradoxically, more reliable than any other reader in his time for predicting how other readers of his time understood the language of the English classics. For most modern readers, the Dictionary is, as Lawrence Lipking puts it, the work of a “master reader,” a work whose potential to have been authored or arranged by one man is fascinating and perhaps incredible.¹⁵²

Eighteenth-century readers, however, were inclined to regard the dictionary as Johnson’s own creation: for them, reading and authoring were not necessarily distinct practices. Not only had the hard words in his dictionary been “interwoven into his own compositions;” it was as if he had picked up the habit of reciting them against his own will. Johnson may have wrestled with a world of knowledge in books, but in the end the information issued from him.

¹⁵⁰ A good example of the way in which readers equated the voice of the critic with the lexicographer appears in 1783. A reader showed that Johnson’s “objection to Gray’s use of the word ‘honied,’” in the “Life of Gray” was unreasonable by pointing out that “instances of [‘honied’] from Shakspeare [sic] and Milton are exhibited by himself in his Dictionary,” an unthinkable contradiction, apparently. Gentleman’s Magazine, Nov 1783, 929. It is not merely that the authority of Shakespeare and Milton supersedes Johnson’s. Johnson’s objection to “giving adjectives, derived from substantives, the termination of participles; such as, the cultured plain, the daisied bank” seems inconsistent because “daisied” was included by Johnson himself in the dictionary. Rather than distinguish information Johnson provides in the capacity of a lexicographer from the judgments that are a function of the critic, rather than attribute these discrepancies to the passage of time, the lexicographer’s deferral to authority, his reliance on quotation, or on his strained memory, this reader pits Johnson against himself, relying on the author’s indivisible identity in order to expose the irrationality of his argument.


¹⁵² Lipking, Samuel Johnson: The Life of an Author, 113. His superb essay explores the themes with which I am concerned: the compiler verses the composer, the mechanically produced verses the authored text, and the biographical themes of the Preface and their value in the marketplace.
Archibald Campbell lampoons Johnson in *Lexiphanes: A Dialogue Imitated from Lucian* (1774) by collapsing the difference between the monumental dictionary volumes and the lexicographer’s body: the ambitious reference books suggest the real impotence of his “orbicular repositories.” In this dialogue, Johnson’s speech is unintelligible, consisting of pages and pages of opaque Latinate words and phrases. It is as if Johnson could recite the *Dictionary*. One “Dr. Monro,” the Scottish physician who presided over Bedlam, is called in to treat Johnson because he “collected all this trash of hard words” and put them not only in the dictionary, but in his own mouth. Monro was notorious for his indiscriminate prescription of emetics.

For Hester Lynch Piozzi, Johnson’s way of providing information resembled poetic inspiration. Piozzi’s praise of Johnson’s learning challenged the icon of the reader grasping the book intensely—Sir Joshua Reynolds’ 1775 portrait of “Blinking Sam.” There was a mysterious gap between Johnson’s reading practices and the learning he actually possessed. According to Piozzi,

> The erudition of Mr. Johnson proved his genius; for he had not acquired it by long or profound study: nor can I think those characters the greatest which have most learning driven into their heads, any more than I can persuade myself to consider the river Jenisca as superior to the Nile . . . [which is] the great parent of African plenty, flowing from an almost invisible source, and unenriched by any extraneous waters, except eleven nameless rivers.

Piozzi’s comparison of Johnson to the Nile is perplexing: his acquisition of knowledge through reading is denied as a positive fact—the lexicographer has an “invisible source.” We rarely catch him reading, and his “erudition” could not be fully explained by books. This topography would seem to allegorize the mystified origins of literary property were it not for the fact that Johnson’s text is water, not land. Enclosed land is the primary figure of literary

---


property, according to Mark Rose.\textsuperscript{155} Neither has Piozzi pictured the act of creation: inspired erudition is Johnson’s talent, his mouth the source of knowledge that seems to come out of nowhere. Apparently Piozzi never spotted Johnson with his \textit{Index Rerum}.

Just after the \textit{Dictionary} was published, Edward Moore wrote in \textit{The World} as if he had expected Johnson’s reading for the \textit{Dictionary} to produce something like \textit{The Beauties of Johnson} (1781), a collection of aphorisms organized alphabetically by topical headwords, a book that was taught in London schools alongside of the \textit{Dictionary}.\textsuperscript{156} Moore regrets that someone with Johnson’s powers should have completed a dictionary without sharing his esteemed sentiments. Johnson should have defined the “notable woman” and the “good woman” for unsuspecting bachelors:

I called at your friend Dodsley’s the last time I was in town, to look in Mr. Johnson’s dictionary for the meaning of the word \textit{notable}; but could find no such epithet applied to a wife. I wish with all my heart that he had given us a definition of that character, as also of a \textit{good woman}, which according to some alehouse signs in the country, is a woman without a head.\textsuperscript{157}

Moore’s sense of “notable” is not to be found in the \textit{OED}, where the term simply describes the wife who is “competent and efficient in household matters” (“notable, adj. 3.a.). In the third volume of \textit{Clarissa}, however, Anna Howe spells out the term’s connotations: “I believe a \textit{notable} wife is more impatient of control than an \textit{indolent} one,” she reckons, and decides on a synonym: the notable wife is “a \textit{man-woman}.”\textsuperscript{158}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{155} See Rose, \textit{Authors and Owners: The Invention of Copyright}, 7.
\textsuperscript{157} \textit{The World} 142 (18 Sept. 1755), in \textit{The World: in Four Volumes} (London, 1793), 316.
\textsuperscript{158} Samuel Richardson, \textit{Clarissa, or The History of a Young Lady}, ed. Angus Ross (London: Penguin, 1985), 476. The Table of Contents attached to the second edition of \textit{Clarissa} indexes the letter on the “notable woman” with a useful description that is liberated from the world of the narrative and the voices of its characters, from verisimilitude and the conservation of character: “Miss Howe to Clarissa . . . Observations on managing Wives.” Anna Howe seems, in this letter, to have lost her typically rebellious head. If, as Leah Price argues, \textit{Clarissa}’s moral sentiments and reflections are “designed to correct or even to punish readers’ putative desires,” for plot, readers might also skip the indeterminate story with its unstable texts and baffling array of epistolary
It is difficult to imagine an analogous use of another dictionary, in which the absence of a word could be used as evidence that its maker, rather than its readers, had been silenced: “I wish with all my heart that he had given us a definition of that character,” Moore complains, and continues to describe the muted frustration of a man besieged by modern fashions and a disappointing marriage. The Rambler had warned readers of the hapless fate of bachelors like “Prudentius,” who was “so tormented with the clamours of his wife.”¹⁵⁹ A couple of months after the first numbers of the Rambler were issued, Johnson was sarcastically noting the dissatisfaction of readers for “having hitherto neglected to take the ladies under his protection, and to give them rules for the just opposition of colours, and the proper dimensions of ruffles and pinners” (Works 3:129). Such manly contempt for fashions in a periodical paper of all places would have allowed one to expect a similar attitude of ironic intolerance for the qualifications of future wives from the lexicographer.¹⁶⁰

If the Dictionary frustrated Moore’s craving for biased information, readers later in the century found the dictionary easier to manipulate as Johnson’s fame grew. In the taxation debate leading up to the American Revolution, for instance, Alexander Hamilton used Johnson’s dictionary repeatedly to stage an identification with Johnson, whose public stance of independence from worn-out critical rules and the threadbare patronage system only heightened his authority with revolutionaries. Johnson’s sentiments were read into the information transmitted by the Dictionary, the author’s attitude was appropriated by voices for a concise definition of the “good woman.” See Price, The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 22.


¹⁶⁰ Nathan Bailey’s first priority in defining words is piercing into the silences of cultural idiom with something like the Urban Dictionary’s candor and bias: “Beldam” Bailey says, is “a fine Lady; but it is now used ironically for an old Woman, either ugly, decrepit or ill behaved.” “Madam” is “a title of honour formerly given to women of quality only; but now . . . even to tradesmens wives, and but too often to servant-maids.” See the Dictionarium Britannicum (London, 1736). Although readers did not have the origin narrative with Bailey’s dictionary that might have put the voice of an author behind such pronouncements, these examples give us a sense of the discursive practices and function Johnson might have been expected to perform.
Hamilton as he put himself in a position to say what Johnson would have. In fact, Johnson’s critique of the *Proceedings of the American Continental Congress* (1774) in *Taxation no Tyranny* (1775) chipped away at the flimsiness of revolutionary discourse: the declarations of the colonists were “airy bursts”(*Works* 10:443), “threats hissed”(448)—a “loud hurricane of Pennsylvanian eloquence”(449), and most famously, “yelps” (454). Hamilton would not have known this, however: *Taxation no Tyranny* was published a month after Hamilton claimed to “have his [Johnson’s] authority” when a royalist called into question the grammar of the *Proceedings*, including the choice of the words “independent colony” to refer to America.\(^\text{161}\)

In September 1774, the First Continental Congress gave itself the power to govern while colonial militias were mobilizing against the British. After the close of the convention in October, its resolutions were circulated in pamphlets and re-printed in newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic. The *Proceedings of the American Continental Congress* banned trade with Britain and the West Indies and issued directives to the colonies for conserving resources.

The regulation of the sheep slaughter was announced: “we will kill them as sparingly as may be.” They continue: “those of us who . . . can conveniently spare any sheep, will dispose of them to our neighbors.”\(^\text{163}\) Samuel Seabury, a royalist writing from New York as “A.W.


\(^{163}\) *Extracts from the Votes and Proceedings of the American Continental Congress* (Philadelphia, 1774), 17.
Farmer,” focused triumphantly on the apparent contradiction of “killing” and “sparing” in his Free Thoughts on the Proceedings of the Continental Congress (November 1774): “We are ordered to kill them sparingly: a queer phrase; however, let it pass. If it is not classical, it is congressional; and that’s enough” (Papers 70). Seabury reacted against the convention’s legality by mimicking its debased diction: “And after having killed them sparingly, if we have any to spare, we must spare them to our poor neighbors. But supposing that . . . I should, by reason of killing them sparingly, have still more to spare—what shall I do with them?” (Papers 70-71). Seabury’s parody replays the descent of an etymon into insignificance.

Hamilton defended the language of the Proceedings in A Full Vindication of the Measures of Congress (December 1774) by quoting the Dictionary. Hamilton played Johnson’s part, identifying the lexicographer with his cause:

Patience good Mr. Critic! Kill them sparingly, I said, what objection have you to the phrase? You’ll tell me, it is not classical; but I affirm it is, and if you will condescend to look into Mr. Johnson’s dictionary, you will find I have his authority for it. Pray then, for the future, spare your wit, upon such occasions, otherwise the world will not be disposed to spare its ridicule. And though the man that spares nobody does not deserve to be spared himself, yet will I spare you, for the present, and proceed to things of more importance. (Papers 70)

Hamilton’s riotous self-assertion, demonstrated with a flourish of puns, is permitted by Johnson himself. Never mind that the Dictionary defines the pun as “an empty sound” and thus a “low conceit” (“quibble”). Hamilton deals with words as Johnson did in the Dictionary, not only consulting, but imitating the lexicographer. The punning of the former moves through various meanings of the verb “to spare” and the adverb “sparingly” in a manner reminiscent of the Dictionary—“to spare” or to use “sparingly” is, as Hamilton demonstrates with his tedious recitation of the different possibilities of meaning, “to use with frugality,” “to refrain from using,” “to save a person from (ridicule),” and “to treat with mercy.” While Seabury makes this repetition seem inane, emblematic of revolutionary
barbarism, Hamilton’s invocation of Johnson’s name links the performance to the lexicographer’s delineation of each English word’s history.

To have the *Dictionary*’s authoritative record behind him was to triumph in the favour of Johnson’s judgment. Not only that, but to interpellate Seabury into the role of “Mr. Critic” was to inhabit in turn the crucial role that Rambler 156 played in exploding the dramatic unities. Like Johnson’s groundbreaking attempt to distinguish “that which is established because it is right, from that which is right only because it is established,” Hamilton’s ambitious case against the crown and Parliament in *The Farmer Refuted* (1775) argued that colonists were subjected to legislation that violated “the law of nature” (*Papers* 87), echoing Johnson’s case against “rules which no literary dictator had authority to enact” (*Works* 5:70).

Seabury showed that his preoccupation with semantics and his deafness to the subtleties of context was politically motivated in *A View of the Controversy* (1774): “It is an impropriety of speech,” he said, “to talk of an independent colony: The words independent and colony, convey contradictory ideas, much like *killing* and *sparing.*” (*Papers* 86) But in his answer, Hamilton clung to Johnson’s dictionary as if the autonomy of the colonies depended on proving the pliancy of the word: once again Hamilton confirms that “sparingly” is “taken from Johnson’s Dictionary,” and lists four of the definitions, with the names of the authors who authorize them, that are listed in the octavo (*Papers* 89). It was the very next month, March 1775, that Johnson’s *Taxation no Tyranny* was published, a bitter attack on the language of the *Proceedings* and a stubborn defense of royal prerogative commissioned by the North ministry.

The power to restrict or expand the meaning of a “keyword” like “independence” or “colony” becomes available to those who can bring the dictionary over to their side, to make it speak for them. For Raymond Williams, the ambiguity of “keywords” in public debate calls our attention to “conflicts of value and belief” that “embody different experiences and readings of experience.” As he implies in the passage I cite for my epigraph, however, “my

---

164 Williams, *Keywords*, 24.
Webster” or “my Oxford English Dictionary” functions paradoxically to erase the specificity of my social position, to free me from the biases that other readers face in determining the meaning of a keyword.

By contrast, however, Johnson’s Dictionary is never “mine.” The crowning moment of Hamilton’s reference was, I think, a rhetorical surprise rather than the opening of an unbiased dictionary: if Johnson’s dictionary sanctioned the diction of the Congress, then the latter was vaguely justified by the adversary’s own words. For Hamilton, Johnson’s Dictionary functions in terms of what Quintillian called “External sources to support a cause,” including “whatever may be regarded as expressing the opinion of nations, peoples, philosophers, distinguished citizens, or illustrious poets” (V.XI.36). The Dictionary articulated Hamilton’s connection to Johnson’s opinion without collapsing the difference between the geographical and social positions of the reader and the author on either side of the Atlantic.

A similar tactic came in handy to John Philpot Curran, an Irish politician and lawyer defending United Irishmen against the charge of treason. In this case Johnson’s dictionary was an opportunity to apply another of Quintillian’s recommendations: “[to] produce some saying or action of the judge, of our adversary or his advocate in order to prove our point” (V.XI.43). Curran, apparently faced with defending clients who had sworn the United Irishmen oath, argued that “neither taking the oath nor tendering it was guilt, for the meaning of which Curran desired them to look [at] Johnson’s Dictionary.” Johnson’s Dictionary actually contains no definitions or quotations under “guilt” that appear to warrant Curran’s citation, though. The two definitions, which do not appear to have changed substantively from the first to the 1786 edition of the folio, are “The state of a man justly charged with a crime; the contrary to innocence,” and “A crime; an offense.” The “dictionary definitions”

166 I draw my case from an incident reported in a private letter in 1796, written by Martha McTier, who quite often in her letters articulates her own emotions and experiences by quoting Johnson’s words. Martha McTier to William Drennan, undated, The Drennan-McTier Letters, ed. Jean Agnew (Dublin: The Women’s History Project in association with the Irish Manuscripts Commission, 1998), 274.
are not what Curran seems to be after, however, nor any factual information that the book contained. Curran uses the *Dictionary* in the courtroom not as forensic proof but as a provocative allusion that appeals to the colonizer’s own national identity. Curran persuades the court that Irish allegiances are not at odds with the ideals and sentiments that belong to Britons. At the same time, Curran’s technique works precisely because the *Dictionary* represents the opinion of his adversary: “Your Johnson has said so himself,” Curran seems to say, “not I.”

J. Thomson Callender attempted to reveal the contrivances of Johnson, the compiling reader, behind the authorial curtain. This was Callender’s first major publication—the *Deformities of Dr Johnson* (1782). Taking a closer look at the *Dictionary*, Callender makes the disheartening discovery that “arthritis is ‘the Gout’ and the Gout is ‘Arthritis,’” that the book is nothing but “a mass of words without ideas.” ¹⁶⁷ How could these recycled scraps have an author? The reader’s indignation is a confidence that he could perform the same task better: Johnson has no right to be the author of information. Callender follows “arthritis, Gout” to “Gout, Arthritis,” and sees only a tangle of floating signifiers. Here Callender catches Johnson in the unfinished act of reading. Nevertheless, he finds himself doomed to see yet another side of the great Cham when he opens the *Dictionary*:

> We look around us in vain for the well known hand of the Rambler, for the sensible and feeling historian of Savage, the caustic and elegant imitator of Juvenal, the man of learning, and taste, and genius. [But] the reader’s eye is repelled from the Doctor’s pages, by their hopeless sterility, and their horrid nakedness.” ¹⁶⁸

Aiming to de-mystify the father of literary criticism, Callender, as did Ham in Genesis, discovers a patriarch without clothes. Too much information, indeed. The *Rambler*, the biographer of Savage, and the imitator of Juvenal cloak Johnson with the decency of a persona and generic rules. But the lexicographer has no persona but Johnson’s.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 58.
How to plan the first English Dictionary

Callender, one might say, encountered an unexpected difference between Johnson’s reading and his own, a mysterious authority that gives the lie to the characterization of Johnson’s labours as public service. The distinction that belonged to Johnson as a reader depended in part, I want to argue, on a quite deliberate (that is to say, not at all natural or obvious) staging of the lexicographer as the first compiler of an English dictionary in the Plan and later, in the Preface. Johnson presented his text as an artifact of his reading rather than a collection of pre-existing models in a manner that jettisoned traditional understandings of dictionary production as compiling. Francis Gouldman’s Latin-English Copious Dictionary explains that lexicons are things that gradually pile up.169 The book is described on its title page as “a Comprisal of Thomasius and Rider’s Foundations, Holland’s and Holyoak’s Superstructure and Improvements” with “Amendments and Enlargements very considerable.” By degrees the parts of a dictionary accumulate. With its heterogeneous “foundations” and engrafted “superstructure,” the edifice is precarious. With no author to secure its completion, the Copious Dictionary is open to infinite revision. “Dictionary-makers,” Gulliver sorrowfully remarked, “are sunk into oblivion by the weight and bulk of those who come last, and therefore lie uppermost.”170

I want to insist on the importance of the rhetorical ways in which the author of the Dictionary of the English Language refuses to be mixed up with other compilers and readers, both for what these dissociative gestures might tell us about how this book became the first English dictionary, and about the history of information as part of the history of authorship. For Johnson’s authorship of the Dictionary has as much to do with his command of the texts he reads as with the originality of the content he produces. His status as an author depends on

169 Francis Gouldman, A Copious Dictionary (Cambridge, 1674). The dictionary is rather early for my purposes, but its eloquent description of dictionary-making is valuable evidence for the ways in which Johnson and contemporaries seem to view these books.

the way in which the production of the *Dictionary* could be tied into the personal life of a reader who had made himself a mouthpiece. More important, however, is that the compiling readers from whom Johnson distinguishes himself duplicate and combine the books they handle in silence. In 1723, a London Dissenting minister, Simon Browne, believing himself to be “under the displeasure of Heaven,” claimed that “he had been entirely deprived of his rational being and left with merely his animal nature. He had accordingly resigned his ministry, and employed himself in compiling a dictionary, which, he said, was doing nothing that could require a reasonable soul.”¹⁷¹ Deprived of the human capacity to reason, the compiling animal possesses the capacity to reproduce without the mimetic ability to interpret nature.

Compilers, then, are machine readers of the texts they reproduce. For, if the lexicographer is like an animal, the animal, Descartes argued, is like a machine—“a clock, which is made only of wheels and springs, [and] can count the hours and measure time more accurately than we can with all our efforts.”¹⁷² The *Rambler* paper on the “manufacturers of literature,” typically read in terms of its valorization of creativity and professional writing, might also be understood in terms of relations among readers, machine and non (Works 5:10).¹⁷³ There is the reader who may “select his thoughts” (10), and compilers with mechanical minds, who have “no other rule than the law or the fashion for admitting their thoughts or rejecting them” (11). The latter, the infamous hack writers of Grub Street, resemble Michel de Certeau’s passive consumers or potential “poachers” of texts as much as they do the producers of literature.¹⁷⁴ It is not so much that the manufacturers have no material of their own as that they require input in order to function: to manufacture is “To make (a product, goods, etc.)


from, (out) of raw material” (my emphasis), or “to work up as or convert into a specified product” (my emphasis). 175 The drudge, then, the “dispenser of beneficial knowledge” (11) converts the raw material of texts into “abstracts” and “epitomes” (12), relaying them to other readers by way of summary, in shortened form or different language, with minimal interpretation. Take as a possible instance, Milton’s Paradise Lost. Rendered into Prose (1745), Milton’s sense in four hundred and sixty faithful octavo pages without the meter, the figures, the long sentences or digressions; or George Green’s A New Version of the Paradise Lost (1756), a breezy fifty octavo pages, proposed in 1750 as an adaptation in which the “spirit and stile of the author” would be “effectually preserved, and successfully imitated,” yet “rendered easy, more intelligible and striking, to the understanding of the reader” for two four-shilling installments. 176

For Augustan poets and mid-century critics, authors distinguish themselves not by their original ideas but by their supposed freedom from mechanical devices. To suffer the disgrace of plagiary, for instance, was not only to be sullied by a moral infraction but to be déclassé, tarnished by mechanical writing and the servility of the hand that duplicates. Rambler 143, for instance, accuses Alexander Pope of drawing from a nearby book rather than an active memory: passages from the “Epistle to Arbuthnot” and the “Epitaph on Mr Elijah Fenton” are reproduced and compared with antecedents to show that “in the first of the following passages Pope remembered Ovid, and in the second he copied Crashaw” (Works 4:399). For Johnson, the problem with Pope’s borrowing is that “not only the thought but the words are copied” (399). This sort of imitation is too close, too mechanical, fed by textual materials that are available to the critic as well as the author—for Johnson can produce his Ovid and Crashaw as easily as Pope. The disgrace suffered by Pope’s memory is one of status inconsistency: the poet should not be compelled to attribute directly what he imitates. In 1753, Joseph Warton gleefully presented his own discovery that Pope could “creep tamely and cautiously in the track of [his] predecessors.” Warton quotes an excerpt from Pope’s

176 George Smith Green, Proposals for printing by subscription . . . A new version of the Paradise lost (London, 1750), 1.
“The Dying Christian to his Soul” and reports: “I was surprised to find this animated passage closely copied from one of the vile Pindaric writers in the time of Charles the second.” Warton betrays the stakes of his investigation when he confesses, “while I am transcribing these similarities, I feel great uneasiness . . . lest the reader should be cloyed and disgusted with a cluster of quotations.” The critic who quotes too much and the poet who plagiarizes extort from the reader a dutiful attention which they cannot legitimately command as mechanical writers. Warton’s “closely copied” text carries the shame not only of literary theft, but of the submissive labouring hand, an uninspired mechanism which involves the eye of the reader who follows it.

However fascinatingly self-sacrificing Johnson’s lexicography may seem at first glance, as he patiently resigns himself to “beating the Track of the Alphabet,” his copying has a place in a social economy of textual reproduction: the poet’s crime was the lexicographer’s trade. The readers of Johnson’s dictionary might have been expected to be “cloyed and disgusted with a cluster of quotations.” Setting aside the question of whether Johnson’s dictionary was his own, Johnson’s compiled book was original in the sense that it secured an audience for mechanical writing, for the manufacture of a book on principles that were not “selected” by the author but admitted by “the law” of lexicography, the narrow track of the Alphabet. Johnson willingly submitted himself to the status inconsistency that Pope had been betrayed into, to the identity of a poet working in manufactures.

Johnson would have been aware that the project he was proposing was a new one, that quoting the testimony of authors, for instance, had not yet been attempted in an English dictionary, and that to prescribe limits to proper English was something that had not yet been done by previous lexicographers. But his projected contribution to English letters was not initially featured as prominently in the manuscripts as it would be in the published Plan. The innovative quality of the project which from the very beginning should have distinguished Johnson’s dictionary as original, was emphasized later.

177 *The Adventurer* 63 (June 12, 1753).
The rudiments of what would become the Plan, what we may call, after the title on the manuscript, the Scheme, contains at least two drafts—Johnson wrote the first in April 1746 and probably revised it on at least one other occasion, before and after readers were invited to comment on it. The Scheme was a prospectus for the booksellers who intended to hire Johnson; two months after it was finished, Johnson met with the booksellers to sign a contract. The fair copy of the Plan, based on an expanded version of the Scheme, now lost, was copied some time after October 1746 in the hand of an amanuensis and addressed to Lord Chesterfield. Johnson made revisions in the fair copy and presumably another set of revisions to the proofs, since the Plan has substantial variants.\(^\text{178}\)

The first draft of the Scheme opens by assuming that the making of an English dictionary, in 1746, would require the lexicographer to enlist himself in the performance of time-honoured tasks—in a manufacture that would subject him to a system of subordination. The lexicographer begins the Scheme by reciting a formula: “In an attempt to compile a new Dictionary of the English Language, the first question to be considered is by what rule or by what marks of Distinction the words are to be chosen?”\(^\text{179}\) Johnson has already missed an opportunity to highlight the originality of his project by beginning in this way. Of course, asking the question of which words to include in a dictionary of the language was a gesture made compulsory by the Académie française.\(^\text{180}\) In the English context, however, the politically sensitive subject of the selection of words was new and exciting, certainly an


\(^{179}\) “A Short Scheme for compiling a new Dictionary of the English Language,” MS Hyde 50 (38), Houghton Library, Harvard University (Cambridge, MA), 1. Subsequent citations in text.

\(^{180}\) Furetière struggled publically with the Academy over the compilation of his Dictionnaire universel des arts et des sciences “an all-embracing reference work which would include information on everything from natural history to heraldry.” Furetière’s dictionary opposed the Academy’s aim to purify and systematize the language by listing words grammatically under their roots, for instance, rather than alphabetically, and excluding terms of art. See Walter W. Ross, “Antoine Furetière’s Dictionnaire universel,” in Notable Encyclopedias of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries: Nine Predecessors of the Encyclopédie, ed. Frank A. Kafker (Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, 1981), 57.
unprecedented occasion for nationalistic history-making. For never had an English lexicographer pretended to fill the role of the Continental institutions by fixing the limits of proper English. But Johnson rehearses the problem in front of the English producers of Bailey’s dictionary without noticing the distinctiveness of this question of choosing words.

The present work is distinctive only in its novelty—a new dictionary is recent. This is a plan for another new English dictionary, one that might be thought to have Gouldman’s “foundations,” “superstructure” and “improvements.” The use of the Latinate gerundive construction “to be considered” makes the “question” of which words to include an obligatory rather than an intentional one: it has always been proper for lexicographers to name the principles by which words “are to be chosen.” The mood of obligation, the tone of compliance with which the lexicographer recites the rules is one demanded by the manufacture of bookselling; it is a tone Johnson takes before the investors who are ready to hire him for the job should he demonstrate familiarity with its protocols.

The Scheme wastes no words. But it took Johnson some time to determine the Dictionary’s relationship to English lexicons before it. The Scheme explains that readers will expect the new dictionary to include the hard words of its forebears:

since Books of this kind are much oftener consulted for the sake of learning the meaning of words, than of inquiring into their construction since those words of which the meaning is most frequently sought are terms of art, and since they have spread themselves with great exuberance over other Dictionaries, they cannot in my opinion be omitted, in this, which is intended to serve all the uses of all others, and to have many which all others want. (2)

Johnson is not only forced to follow example but determined by the content of similar books.

Johnson began to alter the language of the Scheme, though, offering himself as the dictionary’s origin. Was there authorial presence in his book? Did Johnson follow in the footsteps of earlier lexicographers, adopting their texts as a basis on which to build his own, or did he confront the English language himself? Would Johnson merely compile a new
dictionary or begin a fresh one? These are questions which Johnson began to answer before his work on the dictionary had begun.

The revisions to the *Scheme* develop a distinguished persona for the speaker, altering his tone and language, but they do not offer significant alterations to the working method projected. They can therefore be considered rhetorical rather than technical. One cannot say for certain when these revisions began, whether before or after friends commented on it, after the booksellers examined it. Some of the changes might even have been made after Johnson had decided to address Chesterfield, for a reference to “your Lordship” was written into the *Scheme* before the new proposal directed specifically to Chesterfield was begun on separate paper (4). The following changes, however, are not the sort that appear in first drafts—on the same line, immediately after rejected phrases, but above the line, where revisions are added afterward to be inserted into the line below.

That uninspired “attempt to compile a new dictionary,” was scrapped, and Johnson began again, this time opening with his own story: “When I first conceived the design of compiling a new Dictionary of the English Language . . .” (1). The passive voice of the lexicographer who obediently recited the rules for making dictionaries was replaced by the persona of an author recalling the development of his own ideas.

This passage was re-worked again for the fair copy of the *Plan*, and its contemplative air was replaced by a tone of freedom. It is not the design of a new dictionary model, but plans for an uncharted adventure that Johnson recalls, now with the persona of a narrator: “In the first entrance upon my undertaking . . . It was not easy to determine by what rule of Distinction the words of this Dictionary were to be chosen.” This dictionary is now a particular project, its words “chosen” rather than compiled. Nor does Johnson’s dictionary promise to offer all that can be expected of “Books of this kind,” to include all that Bailey did and

---

181 My emphasis. The “opening” appears on page five of the fair copy of *The Plan*. It was moved to accommodate the new opening address to Chesterfield. “To the Right Honourable Philip Dormer Earl of Chesterfield one of his Majestey’s Principle Secretaries of State,” MS Hyde 50 (39), Houghton Library, Harvard University (Cambridge, MA), 5. Subsequent citations in text, distinguished by the title “Plan” to indicate the fair copy of that work.
more—to pile dictionary on dictionary. That ambiguous association with the English dictionary manufacture is gone. Instead, Johnson suggests that he and previous lexicographers have independently come to the same conclusions as a result of the nature of hard words rather than the similarity of their books: “the Words which most want explanation are generally terms of Art, which therefore experience has taught my Predecessors to spread with a kind of pompous Luxuriance over their Productions” (“Plan” 7). His “Predecessors” share an object of study with him, but Johnson will treat it differently, beginning again.

This tone of polite contempt for other dictionaries replaces one of anxious deference, in fact. In the first manuscript, the comment on the necessity of including hard words reads—“since they [hard words] have spread themselves with great exuberance over other Dictionaries, they cannot in my opinion be omitted, in this [dictionary].” Rather than appear to fulfill precedents, Johnson re-works the initial purpose of the reference to dictionary title pages, citing them now to show awareness of a tradition he will distance himself from. Now the very term “dictionary” carries ambiguity when Johnson uses it to name his book, as if A Dictionary of the English Language shares the name of a well-known genre by accident: “The Title which I prefix to my Work has long conveyed a very miscellaneous Idea, and . . . [those who] take a Dictionary into their hands have been accustomed to expect from it a solution of almost every difficulty” (“Plan” 6-7).

One is tempted to see this shift in approach in terms of an enlightened rejection of tradition, a suspicion of authority and unexamined precedents. But what Johnson proposed to do did not for the most part change over the course of the revisions; the work of quoting the best authorities, plotting multiple significations, listing phrasal verbs, showing grammatical relationships between roots and derivatives were goals from the beginning. The rhetoric of the Scheme did not initially frame these aspects as distinctive, though; it was how the book, the author and his work were characterized that received the attention of revisions. The nature of the revisions can be more accurately described as a shift in affiliation, then, from deference to a profession that would bind him intimately with machines and other readers, to himself.
The single most substantial and most striking addition is an opening in which Johnson unsettles the hierarchy which places lexicographers in the category of manufacturers in the modern literary marketplace. Lexicography is treated as a trade in which Johnson might be disgracefully involved without totally identifying himself as a manufacturer. The Plan opens by making use of an approach which Latin rhetoricians recommended in the case of a speaker who anticipates “prejudice on the part of his audience for some reason or other; perhaps because of his own character or reputation, or because of the nature of the case he is pleading.”\textsuperscript{182} \textit{Insinuatio} is a method for introducing arguments indirectly when the speaker’s public character or situation makes his cause unfavourable. Quintillian mentions insinuation for speakers involved in scandal, who are humbled by involvement in discrediting circumstances. The technique involves subtly dismissing opposition by anticipating it (IV.I.48).

Johnson’s initial approach to dictionary making—as a burden which many lexicographers have obediently carried, and which \textit{anybody} could perform—is now treated as an opinion of lexicography which is prejudicial to the contribution which Johnson’s own effort in that role will make to English letters:

\begin{quote}
I knew that the Work in which I engaged is generally considered as Drudgery for the Blind, as the proper Toil of artless Industry, a Task that requires neither the light of Learning nor the Activity of Genius, but may be successfully performed with out any greater quality than that of bearing burthens with dull Patience, and beating the Track of the Alphabet with sluggish Resolution. (“Plan”1-2)
\end{quote}

Acknowledging the distastefulness of the mechanical task, Johnson’s voice registers not blindness but deprivation and humiliation. For this compiler seems as uneasy as Warton is about the job of copying a “cluster of quotations.” Johnson begins cooperatively, articulating the opinion his readers must have of the character he has been summoned to play. Without

\begin{footnotes}
\item\textsuperscript{182} E.W. Bower, “\textit{ΕϕΟΔΟΣ} and \textit{Insinuatio} in Greek and Latin Rhetoric,” \textit{The Classical Quarterly} 8 (1958), 224.
\end{footnotes}
directly challenging readers’ beliefs, Johnson makes their limitations felt, a more effective tactic, perhaps, than attacking them defensively:

> Whether this Opinion, so long transmitted and so widely propagated, had its beginning from Truth and nature or from accident and prejudice and whether it be decreed by the authority of Reason, or the Tyranny of Ignorance, that of all the Candidates for Literary praise the unhappy Lexicographer holds the lower place, neither Vanity nor Interest incited me to enquire (“Plan” 2).

Johnson admits only that the reputation of lexicographers is low. This gap between the mask of the lexicographer and the person behind it suggests that not only will this be a different kind of dictionary, but that this dictionary will be different because Johnson is behind it. It matters who is speaking: Johnson searches not only for words but for acknowledgement from readers.

A deleted comment in the Plan suggests that perhaps more illusory than “the dreams of a poet doomed at last to wake a lexicographer” is the promise that the Plan and the Preface yield direct evidence of Johnson’s personal triumph over the genre’s disenchanting possibilities. Howard Weinbrot remarks of this passage: “The view of the lexicographer as drudge dealing with rubbish was suggested in the Plan and then dismissed as clearly wrong, since Chesterfield would not trouble himself with such unimportant and gross matters.” Noting that the lexicographer of the Preface is a slave, Weinbrot argues that Johnson had by then accepted “the subservient but necessary role of lexicography” and assumed the “generous wish to propagate the work of greater men,” characterizing the shift as a sign of Johnson’s own moral growth.¹⁸³ As early as the fair copy of the Plan, however, before Samuel Johnson had compiled the Dictionary, the drudge was already crying out after the fading dream of mastering his text. Most of this passage was deleted: “might I break for a moment the shackles of Lexicography, and let my imagination wander after the Phantom of Desire, I

---
should wish . . . that these fundamental atoms of our speech, might obtain the firmness and immutability of the primogenial and constituent particles of matter” (“Plan” 25-26).

It is usually taken for granted that Johnson nursed a delusive hope to stop alterations in the language until work on the Dictionary cured him of the fantasy. Indeed, Johnson confesses this much in the Preface: “I flattered myself for a while” that the dictionary “should fix our language, and put a stop to those alterations which time and chance have hitherto been suffered to make in it without opposition” (Works 18:104). The manuscript of the Plan, however, written in 1746, clearly frames this “wish” as an extravagant desire—a desire, most tellingly, that a poet, rather than a lexicographer, could entertain.

How to Read Johnson’s Dictionary

Lord Chesterfield’s notorious puff piece in The World predicted that the Dictionary would stop the chaotic influx of curious foreign words into the English language. But Chesterfield followed this well-known piece with another essay portraying the Dictionary as a fashionable thing that defies classification, an object on which to bestow temporary affection. The second essay recommends that Johnson supply a compact companion to the folio Dictionary containing the fashionable slang used at the most exclusive London tea tables—“those polite, though perhaps not strictly grammatical words and phrases, commonly used and sometimes understood by the Beau Monde.” While it seems at first that Chesterfield projects a book that would make an opaque idiom speak English, Chesterfield concludes by sketching a still-life with dictionary, a scene in which the accessories of fashionable pastimes have accumulated around a book: “we shall frequently meet with it in ladies dressing rooms, lying upon the harpsichord, together with the knotting bag . . . in the powder-rooms of our young nobility, upon the same shelf with their german flute, their powder mask, and their four-horse whip.”184 Here the Dictionary belongs to readers who hold it close, like the mask that protects the face while wigs are powdered. But it is to be manipulated like the flute, the whip,

---

184 In fact, it is not clear whether Chesterfield refers to Johnson’s dictionary proper or the supplement when he imagines the setting in which it might be used, so that the attractive appendix seems to displace the work it was supposed to sell. The World 101 (5 Dec. 1754), in The World in Four Volumes (London, 1793), 228-29.
or threads from the knotting bag, dangled from the wrist—for fun, to show off, or to distract the fingers.

It is possible that Johnson’s famous “Letter to Lord Chesterfield” reacts not only against the economy of patronage but the projected reader’s self-aggrandizing display of it as a personal possession. In Chesterfield’s scheme, the Dictionary is valuable not for what it contains but for what it says about the reader who has it. For dressing rooms were spaces for entertaining guests with the display of fashionable commodities. The trouble with this advertisement is not only that Chesterfield advocates including slang for commercial success, but that Johnson himself is not part of the scene of the dictionary’s consumption. While the first, more well-known puff piece installs Johnson as literary dictator, the second recommends that he step down and allow readers to enjoy the book. Johnson’s dictionary would be side-by-side with the “commercial spoils of imperialist expansion,” its leaves turned over (or not) in a context reminiscent of Belinda’s toilet in The Rape of the Lock, a quaint thing rather than a symbol of British self-sufficiency. Johnson’s dictionary now appears to be what Garrett Stewart calls a “demediated” text, in which a “transmissible text or image is blocked by the obtruded fact of its own neutralized medium.”

But to suggest that Johnson’s dictionary gets “demediated” when the verbal text goes silent would be to ignore the cultural meaning of the book itself, which Johnson’s readers negotiate when they show it to one another. In fact, what Johnson’s dressing-room readers might have ignored is not simply a meaningful “text” whose boundaries are already clearly demarcated, but Johnson’s Preface, which “demediates” the dictionary by opening with the distracting story of his suffering. The author of the Dictionary of the English Language is the intractable medium of information who refuses to make himself scarce.

If the Preface is often remembered for Johnson’s grim opening appearance as “the slave of science,” it is no less famous for the lofty closing that makes such a point of snubbing

readers: “I have protracted my work till most of those whom I wished to please, have sunk into the grave, and success and miscarriage are empty sounds: I therefore dismiss it with frigid tranquillity, having little to fear or hope from censure or from praise” (Works 18:113). Like the language he preserves, Johnson seems to speak to readers from beyond the grave as one who cannot enjoy fame in his lifetime. Yet in a letter written to Thomas Warton just a few months later, Johnson is ready to put up a fight for the work, comparing its publication to Odysseus’s perilous epic journey homeward and the arrival in the port of celebrating multitudes that closes Ariosto’s Orlando Furioso:

I now begin to see land, after having wandered, according to Mr. Warburton’s phrase, in this vast sea of words. What reception I shall meet with on the Shore I know not, whether the sound of Bells and acclamations of the People which Ariosto talks of in his last Canto or a general murmur of dislike, I know not: whether I shall find upon the coast, a Calypso that will court, or a Polypheme that will eat me. But if Polypheme comes to me have at his eyes.  

The discrepancy between these public and private representations of the Dictionary’s reception, a stoic disregard for the reader’s response on one hand and a determination to disarm negative criticism on the other, reveals the constructed nature of both. Notwithstanding the acknowledgment of loved ones “sunk into the grave”—a reference to Elizabeth Porter, Johnson’s wife, who died in 1752—the “frigid” public farewell to the Dictionary was a calculated pose, impossible to conceive without imagining the other side of the same coin—“the sound of bells, and acclamations of the people.”

While Johnson’s private letter shows him accompanying the Dictionary to shore as a public hero, the “slave of science” reluctantly cuts his work loose in the Preface, dismissing contemporary readers for their ingratitude, leaving it to future audiences to judge of the nature of its importance. Such a bleak send off is hardly compatible with an information genre that is expected “to classify, process, store, retrieve, or transmit information quickly or

187 See Boswell’s Life, i:279 for Samuel Johnson to Thomas Warton, 1 Feb. 1755.
with less cost and effort.”  

The burden on the future to welcome this text rather than to exploit its information resembles the reading of the canon more than it does a reference book. This compiler seems opposed to providing ephemeral material that subordinates “the idea of inherent excellence to the social imperative of communication,” as Paul Keen puts it in his account of the eighteenth-century professional writer’s public role. This question of appreciating the author of the *Dictionary* is one that eighteenth-century readers might have asked, too, and one that Johnson certainly must have: the dictionary’s traditional purpose in the English book market was to serve readers rather than to demand applause. How could a compiler, an animal, a machine, or a slave hope for identity, let alone permanent fame?

I argue that the author of the *Dictionary* stands between readers and public information. While Bailey’s readers were to pick through the dictionary as through a “Store-House,” Johnson’s readers were forced to “regard” a mediator. The manuscripts of the *Plan*, though, suggest that Johnson’s initial characterization of the *Dictionary* included generic qualities of the copied reference work: it could be a book “more learned than its author,” a mechanism designed for “common hands.” Johnson’s friend Dr. John Taylor, who commented on the *Scheme*, saw the projected *Dictionary* as a popular repository which the reader rather than the compiler should control. In the *Scheme*, Johnson asserts the need for longer articles about things like barometers and baronets as well as grammatical definitions simply because readers would look for them: “[not] without some attention to such uses can the Dictionary become popular” (12), he says. According to the *Dictionary’s* own definition, to be “popular” is to be “suitable to the common people,” “pleasing to the people,” or “studious of the favour of the people.” The dictionary designed to be *popular* must be capacious enough in content to allow the “common reader” to determine the occasion for its use. This would involve

---


Johnson in the making of a “database,” an inventory of shared re-usable knowledge as Peter Stallybrass conceptualizes it in his discussion of early modern writing practices. On the other hand, Johnson also seems to have wavered on the question of readers, not only on the role the book would play in their lives, but on the role that readers would have in determining its use. Lord Chesterfield, though amenable to a dictionary of slang, would still insist that a literary “dictator” should subdue “the injudicious reader” of the Dictionary. The fair copy of the Plan was addressed to him, and when it was readied for the eyes of Chesterfield, or perhaps after it had passed the eyes of the patron, the necessity that the dictionary be strictly “valuable” replaced the requirement that it be popular: “without some attention to such demands, the dictionary cannot become generally valuable” (31)—or “worthy; deserving regard,” the Dictionary’s definition of “valuable.”

Johnson’s compiling actually made his dictionary, Jack Lynch points out, “more encyclopedic than any earlier dictionary.” The entry for “Emerald” for instance is taken from John Hill’s article in the Materia Medica (1751); comparing the two texts reveals a remarkably agile condensation of Hill’s material. The Dictionary’s entry is a compact distillation of salient information; one imagines Johnson combing the article with a greedy eye and prying out its essential bits—throwing away, for instance, the description of the use of emeralds in medicine, boiling down a paragraph about the emerald’s varieties into three sentences.

This editorial labour was ultimately not an aspect of the work that the Preface emphasized, however. There is only that one laconic notice that reference book words were permitted: “Of the terms of art I have received such as could be found either in books of science or technical

dictionaries” (*Works* 18:84) Although Johnson’s tendency, as he puts it, to “solicit auxiliaries” (*Works* 18:101) is in evidence in some of the longer copied articles under certain headwords, it remains an under-acknowledged aspect of the work. The Preface claims that consulting references “produced more incumbrance than assistance” (101) for Johnson, and so he liberated himself from the weight of precedent—as if that would make his job easier. With few exceptions, what the *Dictionary* contains is within the scope of this one man’s knowledge, since he determined that “whatever abilities I had brought to my task, with those I must finally perform it” (100). After surveying the language with his own eyes, there was no time, Johnson claims, “to look for instruments” or “to enquire whenever I was ignorant . . . I saw that one enquiry only gave occasion to another, that book referred to book” (100).

By “auxiliaries” and “instruments” that would make it difficult to “set limits to my work,” Johnson no doubt refers to encyclopaedias, tools that would provide information that he could not directly examine or provide himself. Rather than refer here in the Preface to the encyclopaedias he has indeed consulted, copied, and relayed to the reader—rather than emphasize the entries in the *Dictionary* which amount to short compiled articles, Johnson informs the reader that “I then contracted my design, determining to confide in myself” (101). But Johnson and his team of amanuenses have also confided in John Cowell’s *Law Dictionary* (1607) for the legal definition of “appropriation” for instance, or both Hill and Philip Miller’s *Gardener’s Dictionary* (1735) for “cocoa.” The title page to Bailey’s *Dictionarium Britannicum* (1730) credits Miller as one of the “several hands” that “collected” that proudly encyclopedic volume.

How would a reader know from the Preface that the *Dictionary* contains useful information like this? And consider Johnson’s surly rejection of technical languages, notorious for its contemptuous attitude toward oral communication: “I could not visit caverns to learn the miner’s language, nor take a voyage to perfect my skill in the dialect of navigation . . .” (102). But Johnson still cited John Harris in the *Dictionary*, the lexicographer who claims to have boarded ships to improve his knowledge of nautical language. One suspects that his conspicuous refusal to document miner’s language owes as much to Johnson’s physical limitations as to prejudices against dialect and miners.
In the Preface, Johnson demands recognition, but that Rambler paper on the “manufacturers of literature” makes compilers the mirror image of readers they write for: “Every size of readers requires a genius of correspondent capacity; some delight in abstracts and epitomes, because they want room in their memory for long details.” (Works 5:146). Compilers disappear into the fabric of the texts they tailor to fit readers. The Scheme manuscript is littered with these anticipatory calculations. Attempting to justify the decision to include rare terms, Johnson and a friend covered the page with so many additions and cancellations that the discussion spilled over onto the verso side of the sheet. On this occasion, Johnson was so frustrated by the task of offering a rationale for what sort of words to include, that he turned over the sheet and concluded gruffly: “if only those [words] which are less known are to be mentioned [,] who shall fix the Limits of the readers [sic] knowledge[?]” (4v). This was calling the bluff of previous lexicographers, who compiled lists of “hard” words on the basis of their foreignness or obscurity: there can be no rule for anticipating which words a reader will find difficult. All the same, the prospect of adjusting the dictionary to fit “every size of reader” consumed paper here in the manuscript.

In the fair copy of the proposal, Johnson collected the Scheme’s scattered remarks about readers into a defense of utility and open access: while excluding the “terms of Particular professions” answers “the exact and pure Idea of a Grammatical Dictionary,” Johnson declares, “in Lexicography as in other Arts, naked Science is too delicate for the purposes of Life. Words in Dictionaries must be conjoined with things, as Form and motion in mechanics must be united to matter” (6). But this passage is cryptic. A reader of this manuscript recorded a note of protest: “This does not seem to me to be very clearly expressed.” It was this reader’s prompt that pushed Johnson to replace that comment with the most Johnsonian of observations, scribbled below the reader’s complaint on the other side of another sheet:

The value of a work must be estimated by its use: it is not enough that a Dictionary delight 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 subtlety of its mechanism, if it requires so much knowledge in its application, to become useful in common hands. (5v)
At this point Johnson is ready to consider himself a public representative as well as an author. The classical injunction to delight and instruct has been transformed into an obligation to satisfy two kinds of reader, the critic and the “learner.”

Johnson’s friend John Taylor is perhaps responsible for the characterization of the dictionary as an “Engine” or machine. In the Scheme Johnson had proposed to arrange words according to their etymology, as did Robert Stephani’s Dictionarium Latinogallicum (1538), rather than alphabetically: “the words are to be placed in their different classes whether . . . primitive . . . or derivative” (7). But on the verso side of the sheet, Taylor vehemently rejects this idea because it reduces the reader’s ability to control the material:

> If the Words are not alphabetically placed, a Man must understand the Language only to find a Derivative, & then he has no occasion for your Dictionary. This would spoil the Sale of it to Schools & Foreigners. Besides may not the Author & differ in a Derivative, & if it should so happen, by what Rule can I find the Derivative I want? A Dictionary has no more to do w Connection & Dependance than a Warehouse book. They are both mere Repertoriums, & if they are not such they are of no use at all.

(7v)\(^{194}\)

Alphabetical order wrests words from the hands of lexicographers, offering the lexis up to readers who search for information with their own expectations. Words “alphabetically placed” guarantee the success of readers who do not see eye-to-eye with the compiler as they dip in and out of his book. We might say that what Taylor all but tells Johnson here is that there is no place for an author’s organization in a book of information, where technical

\(^{194}\) A near contemporary publication illuminates what Taylor wanted for readers: the Repertorium (1730) is a “complete collection and explanation of the several marks and ciphers by which the prints of the best engravers are distinguished,” a hand-held (duodecimo) inventory for decoding these characters, suitable for the collector. Purchasers could page through its list of graphic marks used by engravers to sign their works. Beside each cypher was information about the importance of a particular artist and other ciphers he used. Some bear no explanation, and seem to be included merely as a sign of their value or the desirability of such an engraving. But there is no “Connection & Dependence” among items. One has no need of information about Mathew Grunevald’s cipher when one is only interested in Nicholas de Bruyn’s marks. Cypher number 55 is like number 18, and the two are cross-referenced, but this is pointed out to prevent the confusion of multiple items rather than to show connection.
standards allow wide and free access. The dictionary is a teaching and research tool for others: the lexicographer should resist the temptation to give instructions. Indeed, the system of alphabetization frees attention for focusing on the meaning of words in other books, not on the grammatical relationships between words which the Dictionary could show on its own pages. The compiler should leave no mark of his own: the effect of his choices and exclusions should be invisible. So much for delighting the critic.

The folio Dictionary forgets Johnson’s goal of popular instruction, for all that it reveals encyclopedic articles when one reads beyond the Preface. Readers who are “seldom intending to write”—readers with “common hands”—are referred to the octavo, an “abstract or epitome of my former work,” Johnson explains in its preface. The octavo “abstract” dispenses with concrete examples from texts for those readers who, as the Rambler put it, “delight in abstracts and epitomes, because they want room in their memory for long details”: canonical quotations disappear, eluding the grasp of readers. In the octavo, Johnson had become the compiler of his own dictionary. In the manuscripts of the Plan, however, Johnson imagines wide access, anticipating the variety of hands that might use the book rather than the folio format that would exclude most readers.

When the manuscripts of the Plan are compared to the final product of the Dictionary, the most striking conflict appears to be between the reader and the author, between “popular” access to information and the author’s “valuable” arrangement, rather than between Johnson’s aspirations for the Dictionary and the intractable language itself. I do not believe that the Preface recalls Johnson’s recent surrender to linguistic variety; nor does it, I think, record the author’s resignation to incompleteness so much as a staged rejection of the open-ended collaborative database—the dictionary as “storehouse” that no one dreams of completing. For Johnson not only finishes the dictionary, with all its flaws, but claims to have begun it too, by closing other reference books. Johnson’s Preface does not offer readers a book that “is more learned than its author.” Rather than point the way to encyclopedic articles for unlearned readers who might have encountered the folio, Johnson drew attention to his own studies.
The reader’s debt to this exacting benefactor was not necessarily honoured. Johnson’s gift to readers was converted into personal property, but not without some anxiety. Frances Burney betrayed uneasiness when she recommended to Sarah Harriet Burney in 1839 “a short cut to getting mottos—Beg—Borrow—or the other thing Dr Johnsons Dictionary.” Sarah Harriet Burney replied: “I like your idea of hunting out mottoes from dear Johnny—His Dictionary.” Readers ransack the dictionary for pre-fabricated emblematic quotations, but Johnson’s book could not be used like a database. “Hunting” and “the other thing” Burney refuses to name—“stealing”—is an illicit creativity, the reader “poaching” and recycling a text without the payment of a proper reading, as Michel de Certeau describes it. The affectionate “dear Johnny” indicates that Johnson is “dear” to them, and that the mottos must be stolen, sheepishly.

While plagiarism violates the rules for crediting original ideas, the Burneys “steal” from Johnson the texts that he deserves credit for reading. In doing so, they identify a literary crime that is no longer recognized as theft. To do “the other thing” is to appropriate something more fundamental than literary property—to write as if one possessed Johnson’s memory and judgment. Frances Burney’s suppression of the word “steal” does not reveal the guilty reader’s consciousness of “plagiary,” but an urge to misrepresent the breadth of one’s reading. Burney recommends a search for passages where keywords appear. In this sense, the dictionary works in the way that a database does. Eighteenth-century readers, however, encountered the complication of an author function. The Burneys were not using machines but appropriating “dear” Johnson’s reading.

If, on the other hand, the Preface and the Plan tend to enforce reflections on the character whose life and mind were shaped by the book he dedicates “to the honour of my country,” (Works 18:109) so much the better for readers. Readers had their own reasons for honouring the author. Johnson’s iconic figure comes between readers and the language that belongs to them, making a dramatic appearance in the Dictionary, but the shadow he cast was like a hallmark. Johnson’s character appears more vividly in the frontispiece portrait of the author.

in the 1785 quarto edition of the *Dictionary*. The face that claims the *Dictionary* was easy to duplicate, recognize, and therefore manipulate for different purposes: his physiognomy turns up on the 1797 trade token that depicts “Dr Samuel Johnson” on its face. The halfpenny copper coin was cast for Birmingham tavern-owner Henry Biggs during the specie shortage of 1797, when merchants were ordering and circulating their own coins.\(^{196}\) Johnson’s silhouette on the token bears a distinct resemblance to the profile on the frontispiece, which is situated inside of a medallion: the wig, forehead, shape of the shoulder, and even the sagging chin are similar. While the first issue of the Johnson tokens referred the bearer to Biggs’s establishment, and so were probably redeemed there by employees, they were soon re-fashioned to bear what is called an “evasive edge,” a promise for redemption that is deliberately more vague: the Johnson halfpenny now claimed to be payable in “Birmingham W. Hampton or Litchfield” rather than at the establishment of the original promissory.\(^{197}\) Another reads “Payable in London.”

The homely Johnson halfpenny issued by Henry Biggs seems populist in nature: the penny is circulated rather than owned, and it seems to commemorate Johnson precisely because his work is self-effacing. Provincial tokens cast in previous years depict humanitarians and benefactors—Bladud, founder of Bath, John Hales, founder of the Coventry free school, John Howard, prison reformer.\(^{198}\) Another token commemorates the scholarly beneficence of Philemon Holland, who provided the first translation of Livy as well as Pliny’s *The History of the World*. In this sense, Johnson can be turned into common coin precisely because he represents enlightenment and social progress, public education and the spread of information.

\(^{196}\) 2003 JM-216, Donald and Mary Hyde Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University (Cambridge, MA). The coins were brought to my attention by John Overholt. R.C.Bell, *Commercial Coins 1781-1804* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Corbitt & Hunter, 1963), 194.

\(^{197}\) James Atkins, *The Tradesmen’s Tokens of the Eighteenth Century* (London: W.S. Lincoln & Son, 1892), 208.

\(^{198}\) See Charles Pye, *Correct and Complete representation of all the provincial copper coins, tokens of trade, and cards of address, on copper, which were circulated as such between the years 1787 and 1801, when they were entirely superseded* (London, 1801).
One suspects, however, that the social currency of Johnson’s unmistakable face was owing to the fact that it was identifiable, distinguished, that is, by the anecdotes of marvellous ability that had been attached to his image.\(^{199}\) Although the Johnson halfpenny was small change, the quotations which Johnson had selected and approved, “stored” and “transmitted,” were expensive for eighteenth-century readers, even if they were portable. In the London and Edinburgh editions of the *Dictionary of the English Language in Miniature*, for instance, the frontispiece portrait on which Johnson’s readers bestowed attention stood in the place of illustrative quotations—the *Dictionary*’s evidence and its symbolic capital. Johnson’s profile appears in the book as a token or pledge where documentation is absent: authority and testimony took the place of evidence. Readers substituted Johnson’s name and face for the “authentic information” which they could not themselves acquire.

Whatever one thought of Johnson and his book, to duplicate his research for the *Dictionary* or to challenge his authority would be pointless given the national and international currency his documentation of the English language already had. The dogged public service of this lexicographer had the paradoxical tendency of cornering a market and underlining an emerging distinction between readers and authors. One reader attempted to continue Johnson’s work, but there was insufficient interest in printing the manuscript. Sir Herbert Croft (1751-1816) wrote to the *Gentleman’s Magazine* in 1787 with the claim that he had amassed 200 quarto manuscript volumes toward composing a new dictionary of English. While Johnson was jealous of his reading materials, refusing, some correspondents in the *Gentleman’s Magazine* complained, to accept input from others, Croft was “a man willing to receive information” from collaborators and to share it with other readers: “If any literary person would do me the favour of calling upon me, in his way through the University [of Oxford] . . . I shall be very happy to show him my manuscripts.”\(^{200}\) Interest in this

\(^{199}\) Helen Deutsch summarizes the circulating quality of Johnson’s personality helpfully: “The character of Johnson—more beloved by many readers for his pungent sayings, anecdotal exploits, physical oddities, and medical history than for his literary production, more beloved precisely because he is not Shakespeare and Milton—seems to gain universality the more particularly and locally embodied it remains.” *Loving Dr. Johnson* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 121.

\(^{200}\) *Gentleman’s Magazine*, Supplement, 1788, 1154; August, 1787, 652.
collaborative project was insufficient, however, and the reproduction of these manuscripts was never financed. If readers desired access to Croft’s manuscripts, they would have to visit him at home. One writer who promoted Croft’s project complained that Johnson’s nation of readers were all too content “to put their opinions and judgements in other hands than their own”—to “judge a work from the man, not the man from the work.”

The miniature frontispiece medallion resonates, in a subtle manner, I think, with the imprint of a seal which one would stamp in wax on legal contracts beside one’s signature, a pledge of faith and liability which helped to raise the confidence of other investors. Not only does pressing Johnson’s “signature” face into the book memorialize the lexicographer, it also signals the Dictionary’s legitimacy by placing it in the authentic corpus of Johnson texts. It was as if readers could sign Johnson’s name by engraving his image or striking it in copper, to sanction their own exchanges.

What is our investment in treating the Dictionary of the English Language as if it had an author, and as if that author were Samuel Johnson? Crediting Johnson with the Dictionary is more than convenient. Johnson’s passionate and personal encyclopedic dictionary recalls the power of what Montaigne called “understanding”—knowing “the measure of my sight, not the measure of things.” Johnson does not only know many excellent passages from many important books. He recalls what it felt like to read them.

That the history of information is tied to the history of authorship is a fact recalled by the continuing literary critical fascination with the Dictionary’s author. The “information” of the Dictionary is privileged “intelligence,” spoken knowledge created by the painful formation of the best reader’s mind. In Chapter 3 I discuss a different form of eighteenth-century information that was taken away from books without the blessing of authors. The writing of Jonathan Swift imagined the use of new mechanical reading devices for uncovering hidden substances, occult messages, or illegible content beneath the surface of language texts.

201 Gentleman’s Magazine, Nov., 1788, 948.
Swift’s readers used language to mediate distant truths, muting their personal engagements with texts, extracting portable content which made the reading of texts at length unnecessary. Swift imagined information acquired through reading tactics that distilled an illegitimate form of knowledge from books.
Chapter 3

Swift’s Reading Devices: Imagining Information

Was there information in early eighteenth-century London’s proliferating newspapers and reference books? Misinformation in Isaac Bickerstaff’s Predictions for the Year 1708? The penny paper reports that John Partridge, astrologer and noted radical, will be dead in several months. In 1709, when Partridge broadcasted news of his vitality in his popular almanac, Bickerstaff replied by spreading word that the astrologer’s wife “has gone about for some time to every alley in the neighborhood, and sworn to the gossips that her husband had neither life nor soul in him.” If Partridge still claimed to be alive, then there must be “an uninformed carcass [that] walks still about and is pleased to call itself Partridge.” Bickerstaff’s pun on “information” evokes the word’s strange past: in 1709, to be informed was to be filled with life. Partridge, an uninformed corpse, therefore, has “neither life nor soul in him.” According to another sense of “information” that Bickerstaff puns on, however, Partridge is a corpse that has not heard of its own death—never received “news” or “intelligence” of it—and “walks still about” none the wiser.

Eighteenth-century information is set apart from wisdom. In his Spectator paper for March 12, 1711, Joseph Addison criticizes the need of his readers to get news reports—dispatches on war and politics—and suggests that such “Blank”—minded readers are vacuous rather than vivacious. The news-reading “Blanks of Society” are “unfurnish’d with Ideas” until they get the latest story—“needy Persons [who] do not know what to talk of, till about twelve a Clock in the Morning” (No. 10). Such a regimen, it seems, only perpetuates the condition it was meant to correct. A coffee house reader who picked up the Spectator with a paper like

---


204 I use The Commerce of Everyday Life: Selections from The Tatler and The Spectator, ed. Erin Mackie (Boston: Bedford St. Martin’s, 1998), 90.
The Examiner or The London Gazette on March 12, 1711, would have been asked whether it was “not much better to be let into the Knowledge of ones-self, than to hear what passes in Muscovy or Poland . . ?”\textsuperscript{205}

Eighteenth-century information understood as a portable, immaterial substance, has an unclear relationship to knowledge. In his Letter to a Young Gentleman, Lately enter’d into Holy Orders (1721) Swift describes the education of a “rational Man” as a permanent surrender of the mind rather than the filling of blankness: if he “reads an excellent Author with just Application, he shall find himself extremely improved, and perhaps insensibly led to imitate that Author’s Perfections . . For, Books give the same Turn to our Thoughts and Way of Reasoning, that good and ill Company do to our Behaviour and Conversation.”\textsuperscript{206}

The modern readers whom Swift satirized throughout his work are fond of information and suspicious of knowledge. A Tale of a Tub’s hack author is quite resentful that knowledge is fixed in institutions rather than mobile and slippery like Partridge and the gossip about him: “to enter the Palace of Learning at the great Gate, requires an Expence of Time and Forms,” he complains.\textsuperscript{207} Opposed to this institution is a certain modern “Commerce with Books,” whereby one “transcribe[s]” the “Extract” and collects “Materials” “without entering into the Genius and Spirit of the Author” (76). So too does the “illiterate” hack author of A Tale of a Tub attempt to “catch Knowledge,” as he puts it (145). The hack’s insistence on access and mobility—on “enter[ing]” the Palace of Learning”—suggests a negation of “time and forms,” ideals of certain older, unnamed, debased reading practices. In place of them comes a dynamic of exchange or transmission. If Pope’s “half-learn’d Witlings” (1.40) famously search for a shortcut to Parnassus in his Essay on Criticism (1711), or invade the summit of the muses, as in the introduction of Peri Bathous, Swift’s moderns carry the riches of

\textsuperscript{205} Ibid., 88-90.


Parnassus *away.*\(^{208}\) Denied entry at “the Palace of Learning,” they turn their efforts to the portable, to “that which *passed thro.,”” for instance, collections of “*bright Parts,* and *Flowers,* and *Observanda’s*” \(^{(148)}\). Pope’s untaught readers are in Swift’s writing the conveyers of things.

For such carriers of things, *A Letter of Advice to a Young Poet* (1721), one of Swift’s short didactic prose satires, recommends the “modern Device of consulting Indexes,” which he advertises as a method of becoming “very learned with little or no *Reading.*”\(^{209}\) The “device” refers, by eighteenth-century definition, not to a technological tool but to a strategy, or tactic “devised,” a “*Way of using Books*” (*Tub*, 145). The modern reader consults the index “as if learning were a sort of conjuring,” a supernatural trick that can “convey, as by magic,” revelations across space and time (“conjure,” v.9.b). Indeed, Partridge’s well-broadcasted predictions in his *Merlinus Liberatus* almanac convey information from the future, as if by magic. Swift’s reading *device* attempts to get at the authority of knowledge lodged within the “Palace of Learning” while handling something in books that is hidden from other readers—a secret substance that involves “no reading” to find.

Although the index is a kind of shortcut to learning, the question of speed does not cover the range of practices that, as this chapter will show, become so offensive to Swift for their “devices.”\(^{210}\) In the *Tub*, lexicons are used like “*Sieves and Boulters [fishing poles]*” (4). The *Letter* refers to tricks for taking things away from books. One operation treats the book like hard, brittle food: “Authors are to be us’d like *Lobsters,* you must look for the best *Meat* in the *Tails,* and lay the *Bodies* back again in the *Dish.*” The index in particular is used like a thief who can “cut off the Portmanteau from behind, without staying to dive into the Pockets of the Owner.” “*Abstracts, Abridgements, and Summaries . . . have the same Use with* 


\(^{209}\) *A Letter of Advice to a Young Poet*, in *Irish Tracts 1720-1723*, 334.

\(^{210}\) See Roger Lund’s “The Eel of Science: Index Learning, Scriblerian Satire, and the Rise of Information Culture,” in *Eighteenth-Century Life* 22.2 (1998): 18-42, which argues that the printing of reference books of various sorts was the primary target of Augustan satire on modern learning.
Burning-Glasses, to collect the diffus’d Rays of Wit and Learning in Authors, and make them point with Warmth and Quickness upon the Reader’s Imagination.”

This exuberant list of metaphors fills just one paragraph of *A Letter to a Young Poet*. The use of these figures, and their relationship to everyday life, suggests that more than particular genres or forms are at stake for Swift in his satire on modern learning. The effect of so many comparisons is to reveal a pattern running through the use of these unrelated instruments, a pattern of textual operation more complex than the manipulation of shortened or reduced parts. Winnowing, fishing, cracking, cutting, and catching are actions that embody the pursuit of detachable, mobile, or volatile substances.

The hack’s promotion of a device for becoming “very learned with little or no reading” imagines a procedure by which knowledge is *mediated* rather than acquired by some process of “just application” or personal involvement. My use of the concept of “mediation” to discuss such a “way of using books” is anachronistic: the “medium” of mass communications through which information is dispensed and legitimized did not appear until the nineteenth century. Users of Swift’s reading devices, however, participate in reading strategies that turn books over in search of knowledge that one can “catch” or “convey,” knowledge which might exist at a distance from those readers whose bodies legitimately contain it, for whom books give a permanent “turn to their thoughts.” In this chapter, I discuss a few examples of those suspicious reading “devices” that appear in *A Tale of a Tub* and its companion piece, a *Battle of the Books* (1704), as episodes in the history of media, including Swift’s treatment of the new textual criticism of Richard Bentley: although Bentley’s reputation for backward pedantry was already secured by the early eighteenth century, his methodology in the *Dissertation upon the Epistles of Phalaris* (1697) is treated in the *Battle* as a new approach to books as tools for the transmission of movable, hidden, absent, or “lost” material. If Swift’s

---


212 See Knut Ove Eliassen and Yngve Sandhei Jacobsen, “Where were the media before the media? Mediating the world at the time of Condillac and Linnaeus,” in *This is Enlightenment*, ed. Clifford Siskin and William Warner (University of Chicago Press, 2010): “‘medium’ did not signify technology, invention, or even *techne*. . . It appears that the plural form did not come into common usage until the nineteenth century and then significantly in relation to technologies and cultural phenomena that in the early twentieth century would be referred to as the ‘mass media’”(65).
young clergyman finds himself “extremely improved” by books, and “insensibly led to imitate” them, Bentley follows the “footsteps” of forged texts back to their secret origin. Using the definition of eighteenth-century “media” provided by William Warner and Clifford Siskin—that media is “everything that intervenes, enables, supplements, or is simply in between”—we may say that the critically mediated text lies between the author and the readers who develop strategies for locating information about its original state. The *Battle of the Books*, on the other hand, argues that the author and modern reader are divided and somehow brought together by corruptions, so that mediating the text is both impossible and unnecessary.

This chapter also dwells on those reading devices that represent a distinctive, controversial approach to language. The first section proposes a reading of Pope’s *Peri Bathous* (1727) as a parody of cryptanalysis, a reading strategy that discovers hidden meanings conveyed in mysterious writing. *Peri Bathous*, an ironic manual on how to compose bewildering poetry, is an exercise that ultimately discourages the search in verse for what Royal Society founder John Wilkins called “secret information” in his cryptography manual, *The Secret and Swift Messenger* (1641): unwritten messages. This, Wilkins’s lesser-known publication on various contrivances, ancient and modern, for sending secret messages to one’s associates, anticipates the treatment of language in Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), in which the philosopher argues that words are “Instruments whereby Men communicate their Conceptions” and “abstruse significations,” which are “hidden from others.” Pope’s tongue-in-cheek *Key to the [Rape of the] Lock* (1715) takes up the accusation that his own poetry works secretly, as if by magic, dispensing pernicious Catholicism at large, without the knowledge of readers. I conclude this section by pointing toward Wilkins’s recommendation that rhetorical figures be used for cryptography, or code.

---

214 “This is Enlightenment: An Invitation in the Form of An Argument,” in *This is Enlightenment*, 5.
Finally, Swift satirizes the way in which the moderns confuse reading and counting. The hack author of the *Tub* invites readers to do a quantitative analysis of his work: “Whoever will be at the Pains to calculate the whole Number of each Letter in this Treatise, and sum up the Difference exactly between the several Numbers . . . the Discoveries in the Product, will plentifully reward his Labour” (187). In a manner that recalls the hermeneutics of Kabbala, the hack recommends tabulating the frequencies of “each Letter” in his treatise, comparing total percentages, and adding those percentages together. The hack’s formula for computing his work recalls the philosophy of “universal mathesis,” the programs of Gottfried Leibniz and Rene Descartes. Described by Jan C. Westeroff as “a peculiar view of language and systems of notation,” *universal mathesis* took a computational approach to language and truth. As we shall see in the famous reading machine that appears in book three of *Gulliver’s Travels*, Swift imagines “algorithmic criticism,” the computation of language to arrive at truth, and offers a critique of it.

**Pope and Swift’s Ciphers**

*A Tale of a Tub* features an allegory of textual tampering. Three brothers read the will of their deceased father, searching for permission to alter the clothes they inherited, desiring to adopt the new fashion of “Shoulder-Knots” (84). No such clause exists in the will, however, so the “Book-learned” brother devises an “Expedient” for locating the unexpressed thing “totidem syllabis”—not by following word order but by re-arranging available syllables (83). When this shuffling fails to discover their meaning, they perform the tactic of spelling out the phrase they seek “totidem literis,” by selecting letters (83). Despite the absence of a “k” in the document, they have “picked out S,H,O,U,L,D,E,R” and so on (84).

Their selective approach is most obviously a Kabbalistic interpretation, a method that refuses the superficial surface of the text and handles the constituent elements of it instead. Aiming “to sublimate the gross internal sense of the words and to extract the spirit and soul of the

---

discourse,” as one authority on espionage put it in 1702, the Kabbala was a device that allowed initiates to approach the book’s unwritten, occult “information” or spirit. Such a book is a “mechanism of infinite purposes”—containing “revelations lying in wait,” Jorge Luis Borges says. But “sublimating” scripture from the dross of language so as to access a second, less evident text, has an association to chemical action bestowed on it, an imputation of artificial tampering from which the institution of Anglican reading delivers itself. The Kabbala, like that “modern device of consulting indexes,” defies the conventional order that placed the “sense of the Words” over the mechanistic handling of books, the “gross” or evident meaning over the mystical, hidden “information.”

The Tub aligns the Kabbala device with modern mysticism, but Paul Korshin has argued that the satire of reading in A Tale of a Tub represents a “ridicule of cryptography.” Indeed, John Wilkins connected the Kabbala to the technical logic of transmitting encrypted messages in the Secret and Swift Messenger (1641), a book that discusses “inventions” for the “private conveyance, of any written message” (37)—an “art of secret information.” He called it “perplexing the order of the lines” by reading the words out of order, in different directions (vertically, for instance), selecting only certain characters, or indeed, adding up the characters themselves—counting them (66).

The cryptanalytic reading device goes against prevailing tenets of Augustan literary criticism, which took reading to be an intuitive engagement with an immediately appreciated, public text. The Augustans were suspicious of deep meanings: think of Pope’s literary criticism, with its consistent praise of simplicity and light. In his Essay on Criticism, true eloquence bestows on us “Something, whose Truth convinc’d at Sight we find, / That gives us back the Image of our Mind” (l.299-300). Whatever formal complexities greet the reader of Augustan couplets, Pope insists that poetic meaning should be fairly self-evident: “true Expression, like

---

th’unchanging Sun, / Clears, and improves whate’er it shines upon” (l.315-316). The glib surfaces of Pope’s poetic performances can be appreciated without close reading them; in his theory of taste, it is bad poetry that requires scrutinizing attention: the “Gout de travers” gives rise to an “uncommon, unaccountable Way of Thinking” in poetry, “a Depth” and “a Labyrinth, out of which no body can get you clear but [the poet] himself.”

Peri Bathous, Pope’s satirical critical treatise on profundity in Augustan verse, is just such a minute exercise, however, a careful exposition of curious metaphors, one close reading after another of passages written by his contemporaries. Although bad poetry seems to ignite Pope’s desire for exegesis, he remains anxious not only about obscure metaphors but the operations which discover their meaning. The hidden sense of the “known Idea” for instance, is suspiciously hidden and yet pleasant to find, “misteriously couch’d, [so] as to give the Reader the Pleasure of guessing what it is that the author can possibly mean; and a Surprize when he finds it” (35). The Epistle to Arbuthnot (1734) goes so far as to present the close reader as a passionate libeller who “reads but with a Lust to mis-apply, / Make Satire a Lampoon, and Fiction, Lye” (l.301-302).

Pope’s close readers perform a peculiar kind of labour, creating a space in his verse for the production of more writing. It was to vitiate this use of depth in his writing that Pope wrote a satirical Key to his own Rape of the Lock in 1715. The pamphlet pretends to have been written by one Esdras Barnivelt, an apothecary concerned about a Catholic “Poyson” conveyed through the “Vehicle” of Pope’s verses. Barnivelt’s skill with chemical processes prepares him to detect beneath the surface of Pope’s allegorical poetry another substance, the “Artifice” of political messages in rhyme. While traditional allegories—Spenser’s The Faerie Queen or John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress, for instance—linked particular fictional characters and incidents to general moral, philosophical truths—Barnivelt’s poetic artifice

---


conveys the dangerously particular ideas of religious faction secretly, under the cover of sylphs and gnomes. Pope also registers his regret here that the dedicatee of *the Lock*, Arabella Fermor, believed Belinda to be her portrait, although, as he says, the author “meant something further.”

*Peri Bathous* copes with the cryptographic potential in the literary marketplace of Augustan satire, the way in which secret messages as well as social correction sold books. Edmund Curll’s key to a *Tale of a Tub* was in its fourth edition in 1724, and keys to *Gulliver’s Travels* were issued in 1726 and 1727. Edmund Curll would go on to publish a key to Pope’s *The Dunciad* in the following year.

Perhaps more striking in the few years before the publication of *Peri Bathous*, however, were the cryptographic triumphs of the ascendant Whig government, its claim to have deciphered Bishop Atterbury’s treasonous correspondence with the Pretender. The subsequent trial of Atterbury, a friend of Pope and Swift, for clandestine Jacobite communications, shows up in *Gulliver’s Travels*: Gulliver’s report on the state of political science in Lagado mentions “a Set of Artists very dexterous in finding out the mysterious Meanings of Words, Syllables and Letters. For instance, they can discover a Close-stool to signify a Privy Council, a Flock of Geese a Senate, a lame Dog an Invader, [etc.]…” Gulliver describes their methods to readers: they “decypher all initial Letters into political Meanings. Or secondly by transposing the Letters of the Alphabet in any suspected Paper, they can discover the deepest Designs of a discontented Party” (163).

These readers (or, “informers,” as Gulliver calls them) break up the superficial orthography of the letter, approaching it as a cryptogram. By “transposing” Gulliver means something like “switching” the letters, and this he calls “the Anagrammatick Method.” *Gulliver’s Travels* has its own set of cryptic references to real historical figures, of course—the “lame Dog” is

---

223 *Key to the Lock* (London, 1715), l.ii,12.


code for Atterbury. But some readers would have felt the palpable presence of Swift’s mischief too, and guessed that the jabs at the Walpole administration were meant to be felt.

*Peri Bathous* is a playful key to the bad poet’s code. Pope writes, “The *Triumphs* and *Acclamations* of the *Angels*, at the Creation of the Universe, present to his [the bad poet’s] Imagination the *Rejoicings of the Lord Mayor’s Day*;” “If he looks upon a *Tempest*, he shall have the Image of a tumbled Bed” (20). These wrong-headed associations do not compare images, they translate between two levels of being that cannot be brought into harmony, converting the sublime into a code of vulgar terms. “The most Sublime of all Beings is . . . a PAINTER,” “CHYMIST,” or “WRESTLER” (22). The bathous is not only a deflating tendency, but a transformative inclination to turn one thing into another. Pope marginalizes these metaphors, treating them as ciphers governed by rules: “a Spear flying in the Air is compar’d to a Boy whistling as he goes on an Errand . . . . A Man raging with Grief to a Mastiff Dog . . . . Clouds big with Water to a Woman in great Necessity” (55). The iterative present tense of Pope’s grammar here—“x becomes y”—evokes a system of substitutions: “the Reader, by this *Cloud* of Examples, begins to be convinc’d of the Truth of our Assertion, that the *Bathos* is an Art” (24). “The spungy Door” replaces “cork” and the “nut-brown Coat [of Ceres]” is substituted for “crust” (70).

In Wilkins’ discussion of encrypted correspondence in his *Messenger*, figurative language—allegorical symbols and rhetorical devices—were used as techniques for sending encrypted texts: “so farre as they concerne the ornament of speech, [figures] do properly belong to *Rhetorick,*” but they “may be applied for the secrecy of speech” as figures in a cipher (15). Metaphors, allegories, fables, and parables, he says, can be used “to convey” (19) a “concealed message” (15). Wilkins maintains that cryptography is used by authors, who, like the targets of *Peri Bathous*, deliberately conceal their meaning, as “when the thing we would utter is so concealed under the expression of some other matter, that it is not of obvious conceit” (15). Speaking of parables in the Bible, Wilkins argues that Jesus used words for “secret argument[s].” Jesus’ message was “done in Parables” like the Catholic toxin administered by Pope’s verse: “the adversary might unawares be brought over” without his or her knowledge or understanding (15).
Wilkins’s study of cryptography must be understood as a preliminary exercise for the theory of communication that he would later advance in his Real Character (1668). The Real Character was a written system for sharing scientific information across geographic distance. The Character, a system of notation that is purely written, converts the idea of the trope into a tool for “silent” information transmission. Later, Locke would build the utility of cipher into everyday expression, speaking of “conveyances” and “messages,” echoing his fellow Royal Society member, John Wilkins. Ideas were “invisible and hidden from others” yet negotiated with the “perfectly arbitrary” code of words or “signs.” Pope’s celebration of eloquence, on the other hand, still privileged language that “gives us back the image of our mind,” and the recollection of already-known images, superficially, “at sight.” Augustan writers opposed, struggled with, and became fascinated by their cryptanalytic counterparts in the arts of figurative language, the would-be communicators of information.

The Ancient versus the Virtual Text

Walter Shandy shuffles the syllables of Erasmus’s “Of Benefice-Hunters.” Shandy is hoping to find physical proof that “there is more meant, than is said in it,” that there is something particularly bawdy in Erasmus’s discussion of long noses. Walter re-arranges the letters of Erasmus: “He had got out his penknife, and was trying experiments upon the sentence, to see if he could not scratch some better sense into it.” Walter’s experiments in cutting can legitimately be defended: he has the “seeds of verbal criticism . . . deep within him.”

---

226 See John Guillory, “Enlightening Mediation,” in This is Enlightenment, 39-40. John Guillory argues that the Messenger initiates the rise of “the communication concept, which emerges in early modernity as a challenge to the motive of rhetoric.” Rhetoric holds that the “thoughts and feelings [of the speaker] were best kept to himself,” while communication “posited the transfer of the speaker’s thoughts and feelings accurately to the mind of the auditor.”

227 According to John Durham Peters, Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), communication’s most signal proponent was John Locke, who, John Durham Peters argues, “gives the first sustained philosophical use of the term ‘communication’ as a central principle of speech and language” (63).

228 Ibid., 179. The affinities of textual criticism and deciphering would be expressed in the twentieth century Hinman collator, a bibliographic device for mechanically exposing variants in comparable editions. Hinman’s wartime work in the science of cryptanalysis influenced his design of this bibliographic tool; both, in turn, had
the same time, Walter’s obsessive book handling falls short of the name “verbal” criticism: verbal or textual criticism in Britain during the eighteenth century gained reputable experts who attempted to restore texts to their original state, not to disfigure them. Walter’s tactics surely echo the imaginary figure of the parasitic verbal critic criticized early in the century in Pope’s Epistle to Arbuthnot—“slashing [Richard] Bentley . . . who reads not . . . but scans and spells,” a destructive “Word-catcher that lives on syllables” (l.164-66). Tristram Shandy’s black and marbled pages show Tristram to be suspicious of probing analysis. The ostentatious, obtuse marbled page invites blunter handling. Tristram reminds readers that they all own unique versions: each copy of volume III contains a slightly different rendering of the marbled page.

Swift presents verbal criticism as a destructive operation in the Battle of the Books, and the target of his satire is Bentley. Swift represents Bentley’s criticism as an attack on the living body of the ancient author: Bentley “aimed his Flail at Phalaris’s Breast” and “seized” his “Armor” (354). Bentley claimed in his Dissertation Upon the Epistles of Phalaris (1697), an appendix to the second edition of Wotton’s Reflections Upon Ancient and Modern Learning, that Phalaris had not written the celebrated Epistles commonly attributed to him. Swift’s patron Sir William Temple had recently written the Essays on Ancient and Modern Learning (1690) praising Phalaris. Thus England’s “quarrel” of the “ancients” and the “moderns” began. On the side of the Moderns were William Wotton and Bentley, who reprinted part of Temple’s case for Phalaris in the first few pages of his scathing Dissertation. On the side of the Ancients were Temple and his Christ Church wits, among them Bishop Atterbury, the

“the tendency to regard texts as virtual” Alan Galey argues— to treat the received text as evidence for some abstract, unrealized entity. The connection between the collator, the New Bibliography, and the virtuality of texts is drawn by Galey in “Networks of Deep Impression: Shakespeare and the History of Information” Shakespeare Quarterly 61.3 (2010): 299.

229 For more on this subject, see Jonathan Brody Kramnick, Making the English Canon: Print-Capitalism and the Cultural Past, 1700-1770 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 85.

secret correspondent defended in *Gulliver’s Travels*, and Charles Boyle, to whom a recent edition of the *Epistles of Phalaris* was attributed.

The two sides launched arguments based on epistemologies and values that were irreconcilable. Temple’s side believed that the ancients should be used to form one’s own style: “reading the ancients,” Joseph Levine explains, “was preliminary to imitating them; the study of the classical authors was immediately practical.” While Temple’s book praised the unparalleled style of Phalaris, Wotton discussed scientific advances—a “Numbers of Tools, or Arts, which may be of the same Use as Tools, to make the Way plain to several Things, which otherwise, without their Help, would be inaccessible.” Wotton names the modern art of Printing (accurate texts, especially mathematical demonstrations) among measuring tools like thermometers and baroscopes, but the idea “that rhetoric might be more than merely decorative seems not to have occurred to Wotton.” If Temple’s camp could be found “saturating [them]selves with the ancient authors,” Bentley argued, it was not necessarily with accurate editions. Neither did Bentley’s appendix to the second edition of Wotton’s book, the “Dissertation,” make the case for modern literature on the grounds of style. Instead, Bentley documented “another sort of Proofs” that Phalaris had simply not written the *Epistles*.

Bentley’s colorful *Dissertation* aims to discover “the Ass under the Skin of that Lion” (11), “the lurking Sophist under the mask of the Tyrant” Phalaris (35). Stripping away the surface of the text, Bentley locates accidents, corruptions, and additions that take him beyond the received text to the scene of its origin: comparing the *Epistles* with a passage from another

---


234 Bentley, “Dissertation Upon the Epistles of Phalaris,” in *Reflections on Ancient and Modern Learning*, 14. Trevor Ross discusses a relevant eighteenth-century shift in which “art” ceased to be merely “rhetorical or didactic,” and became the object of study for the “few who can decode” it accurately. See *The Making of the English Literary Canon: From the Middle Ages to the Late Eighteenth Century* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1998), 5, 10.
book, he claims that “the Author had this very passage before his Pen” at the time of writing. While Pope imagines Bentley’s criticism with the figure of myopic accuracy in the *Dunciad*—“that microscope of Wit” (4.233) that “Sees hairs and pores, examines bit by bit” (4.234), Bentley was a distant reader. In the *Dissertation* Bentley makes a “computation” of the true date of the text (26), following the “foot-steps of Imitation” (35) back to an unknown imposter.

Bentley marginalizes other readers of Phalaris down through the ages, accusing them of reading “through the distorting lens of modern taste and refinement,” Jonathan Brody Kramnick explains. Turning to the text edited by Boyle, Bentley complains that the editor has “lopt off and destroyed this Branch of our evidence” (29) and “transplanted” in its place a word that alters the text. Bentley’s mediation of the true text set itself up against the tendency of the Ancients to discuss the classics as exceptionally durable, the great work as timeless and best appreciated, as the *Essay on Criticism* puts it, “With the same Spirit that its Author writ” (l.234). Bentley focuses precisely where the great work breaks down: Bentley compares passages of Phalaris to passages in other books that he has on hand: his “usual procedure in the *Dissertation* was, inevitably, to compare small passages of Greek one against another.” Setting himself against the idea of the timeless text, imbued throughout with its author’s “Spirit,” Bentley treated texts as if they had come from another time and another place.

Bentley explains his neglect of the general “Sense” of the text—his refusal in the *Dissertation* to give his opinion on the “body” and “form” of the entire “work”—by saying that “none, perhaps, would be convinced by it” (52). Temple had argued that Phalaris’s authorship must be authentic because of the presence in the text of his “[G]race,” “Force of Wit and Genius,” “Diversity of Passions,” “Freedom of Thought” “Boldness of Expression,” and other such intuitive characteristics and generalities (qtd. in Bentley 4). Temple’s feeling of the text seemed more *obvious* than Bentley’s proofs, however: Pope’s *Dunciad* suggests that Bentley deals with evidence that is not easily seen: “dim in clouds, the poring Scholiasts

---

235 Kramnick, *Making the English Canon*, 86.
mark, /Wits, who like owls, see only in the dark” (3.191-192). Reading in a manner that the hack poets had encouraged with their “cloud” of bathetic images documented in the cryptic annals of *Peri Bathous*, the critic’s work is an obscure art.

Like the letter-shuffling brothers in the *Tale* (and Walter Shandy in search of evidence for innuendo), the verbal critic dismantles the text’s surface, refusing the *textus receptus*, scanning and spelling in a secluded darkness. Swift’s reaction to Bentley surely has something to do with the fact that textual criticism was bound up with ideas of Christian scripture, and Bentley belonged to a camp that was advocating the revision of Biblical scripture. Bentley’s *Dissertation* on Phalaris and Aesop was motivated by a related hope that, in the field of Biblical criticism, “every word of the true Book” could be “faithfully preserved” (49). For Swift, the document was necessarily flawed, yet adequate: the inevitability of corruption led one to conclude that the *textus receptus* was the best version.

*The Battle of the Books* depicts Bentley’s appearance in Wotton’s second edition as personally motivated: Swift concentrates on a personal description of Bentley’s body. He appears as “the most deformed of all the *Moderns*; Tall, but without Shape or Comeliness; Large, but without Strength or Proportion” (250). While Phalaris had elegance and “Grace,” Bentley’s “Armour was patch’d up of a thousand incoherent Pieces” (250), an allusion, possibly, to his use of historical quotations to establish the date of the text.

The encounter between authors and readers in the *Battle* is full of grating, harsh sounds, an atmosphere that makes the allegory particularly compelling as a fable of textual transmission. Following Bentley’s character in the *Battle*, we see that his attempt to mediate the past by eliminating the “noise” of corruptions and secretaries only seems to magnify the din of the modern editor. Notably, “the Sound of [his armour], as he march’d, was loud and dry, like

---


that made by the Fall of a Sheet of Lead” (250-51). In pursuit of the author’s very word, and in his attempt to avoid undue modern refinements, it was as if Bentley, quite paradoxically, had created a new, different noise. In the Battle, Phalaris is still alive, though in a “profound asleep” (254). Creeping up on the author, Bentley attempts to “quietly possess” (252) his armour, stripping it from his body just as he peels back the superficial layers of the text in his Dissertation.

Rather than forging a connection with a faraway past, however, Bentley’s mediation alienates the text from the timeless qualities of the author. In a turn of events that echoes his own quest to expose “the Ass under the Skin of that Lion,” Bentley puts on the armour of the sleeping Phalaris. Bentley’s “soft and slow” (253) creeping, however, prevents him from having a true encounter with the formidable, sleeping author.

Thus the outcome of the Battle is to re-instate the paradigm for reading promoted by the Ancients: Bentley’s treatment of the text as a perfectible object that travels between the body of the author and the reader, makes him not only “inhuman,” but altogether dangerous to the preservation of the classics. The Battle’s violent contest between ancient authors and their modern counterparts suggests that reading has what Wai Chee Dimock calls “resonance” in her account of the diachronic historicity of literature. Resonance is the ambient meaning which constructs the text that “do [es] a lot of traveling” through different times and spaces, as it “run[s] into new semantic networks.”239 In a scene of textual transmission rather than of imitative, amicable reproduction, the Battle’s authors clash with readers: Aristotle takes aim at Francis Bacon, sending an arrow “hizzing over his Head” (244); Virgil meets with a translator whose “Speed was less than his Noise” (246). The authors of old books retaliate against the modern readers who gloss and correct them. In favouring an idea of reading as imitation, Swift echoes Dimock’s theory of resonance, which holds that “A past text” must gain a “life that is an effect of the present, rather than of the age when the text was produced.”240 Swift suggests that mediating the ancients with modern tools inevitably


240 Ibid.
produces more noise than resonance, the sound of silencing weapons or murderous engines, rather than of appropriate engagement.

Bentley’s odd attempt to wear the armour of the author who is supposed to be his enemy suggests that the moderns try and fail to extricate themselves personally from the transmission of the text. The author should give a personal “turn” to one’s thoughts and conversation. The introduction to *A Tale of a Tub* draws a similar contrast between the methodical devices of the “learned” reader and the more immediate responses of “superficial” and “ignorant” readers moved by their own physical reactions. Readers of the *Tub*

may be divided into three Classes, the *Superficial*, the *Ignorant*, and the *Learned* . . . The *superficial* Reader will be strangely provoked to *Laughter*; which clears the Breast and the Lungs, is Soverain against the *Spleen*, and the most innocent of all *Diureticks*. The *Ignorant* Reader (between whom and the former, the Distinction is extremly nice) will find himself disposed to *Stare*; which is an admirable Remedy for ill Eyes, serves to raise and enliven the Spirits, and wonderfully helps *Perspiration*. But the Reader truly *Learned*, chiefly for whose Benefit I wake, when others sleep, and sleep when others wake, will find sufficient Matter to employ his Speculations for the rest of his Life. (184)

Laughing and staring, Swift’s hardy prescription for elevating the spirits of readers, seems to anticipate the gustatory indulgence of Henry Fielding or the rambling jests of Laurence Sterne more than the sneering prohibitions of Pope in the *Essay on Criticism*: “Drink deep, or taste not the *Pierian* Spring: There *shallow Draughts* intoxicate the Brain”(l.216-17). Swift does not speak disparagingly of shallow draughts but encouragingly of excretion. As it happens, Pope and Swift employ images of “bad” reading that are opposed: the profoundly learned Wotton in Swift’s *Battle* is taught “not to draw too *deep* . . . from the Spring” of Helicon (my emphasis 255). Comedic writing like *A Tale of a Tub* resides at the bottom of the neoclassical literary hierarchy, employing readers physically in its destiny: they complete
the text’s life span, letting it move through their lungs and out of the body. Wotton or Bentley are “too deep,” too focused on the text as a vessel or container of truth, an occasion for discovery rather than “enliven[ed]” responses.

Swift’s annotations in the margins of a modern English work enacted reactive engagements. In his copy of Lord Edward Herbert’s Life and Raigne of King Henry the Eighth, Swift wrote hectoring annotations. For instance, when Herbert writes of Henry, “that concupiscence which in some is a vice,—in others [is] a necessity of nature,” Swift writes: “as men go to Stool so he was damnably laxative.” When Herbert writes “to conclude; I wish I could Leave Him In His Grave,” Swift overreacts: “And I wish he had been Flead, his skin stuffed and hangd on a Gibbet, His bulky guts and Flesh left to be devoured by Birds and Beasts for a warning to his Successors for ever. Amen.” Swift uses margins to make a scene, loudly and self-consciously complaining of omissions in the printed record. Swift’s contribution to the quarrel of the ancients and moderns suggests that Bentley’s mediations were just as noisy.

The Mathematical Computer

An eighteenth-century computer is “a person who makes calculations.” Swift’s modest proposer presents himself as a computer when he proposes the sale of Irish children for food. “I have already computed” the cost of feeding beggar children, he says, and then: “I compute” the country’s projected annual product of infant flesh. The Modest Proposal’s calculations echo the “political arithmetic” of John Graunt, whose Natural and Political

241 See Dustin Griffin’s account of satirical writing as a kind of medical treatment for splenetic complications in “Venting Spleen” Essays in Criticism 40.2 (1990): 124-35. The satirist “literally expresses some kind of bodily product” in “venting his spleen” (124). The spleen was the seat of laughter as well as melancholy.


Observations (1663) drew on mortality records to grasp the nature of life and death in London. And yet while it is tempting to see the proposer’s computations as Swiftian satire on statistics, we know that Swift’s comments on the subject of poverty in other contexts show his willingness to use statistics against the poor, with gross imprecision. On one occasion Swift can be found arguing that “there is hardly one in a hundred who doth not owe his Misfortunes to his own Laziness or Drunkenness, or worse Vices.” In his “Causes of the Wretched Condition of Ireland,” it is only “one in twenty” who is not to blame for his poverty.

Over the course of the pamphlet, the Proposer’s arithmetic begins to reveal the values that give meaning to numbers. He is a computer who points out the burdensome cost of feeding the poor—“two Shillings per Annum,” per child, but he predicts in another place that his Anglo-Irish readers would pay more to eat that child for one meal than to feed it for a year: “no Gentleman would repine to give Ten Shillings for the Carcase of a good fat Child.” “Ten shillings” must be spent to eat a “fat child,” but it costs “two shillings per annum” to feed it. Charity and investment in Irish manufacture are counted as expenses, while the cost of an exotic dish makes “no gentleman . . . repine.” A computer is thus a character who fails to detect the social meaning of numbers, or who refuses to acknowledge their cultural overtones. On a deeper level, computing in the Proposal is an effective rhetorical performance that reflects a palpable imbalance in social values: the proposer’s use of numbers in his speech reflects poorly on readers’ unreflecting tastes and habits of thought.

---

To call one’s opponent a “computer” was thus to identify him with a naïve faith in measuring devices and scientific notations. While Swift’s “computing” was a form of rhetoric, his opponents elevated mathematical computing, using it as a mechanism for discovering the unknown. Philologist William Wotton, according to A Tale of a Tub, is “a very skillful Computer” (146) of the latter sort. In his championing of modern progress, Wotton had allegedly quantified knowledge, praising, we recall, the art of printing books in the same breath with thermometers and baroscopes. The Tale’s speaker paraphrases one of Wotton’s more offensive claims thus: “there is not at this present, a sufficient Quantity of new Matter left in Nature, to furnish and adorn any one particular Subject to the Extent of a Volume” (146). With palpably brash optimism, Wotton (or his impersonator in the Tale) hopes that books can measure nature. In the Reflections, Wotton hopes that “Knowledge, in all its Parts, might at last be completed,” and that science might prove items of faith: “the Invisible Things of the Godhead may be clearly proved by the Things that are seen in the World,” he maintains.250

Mathematical computing falls under the rubric of universal mathesis, a philosophical program associated with Descartes and Leibniz which placed truth beyond the reach of the senses but within the reach of method. Descartes’ discussion of universal mathesis appears in his outline for the quantitative processing of nature—the use of mathematics as the sole reliable means of discovering truth—in his Rules for Guiding One’s Intelligence. In his Discourse on Method (1637), Descartes determined that as long as one reasoned by way of enumeration and mathematical inference, “there cannot be anything so remote that it cannot eventually be reached nor anything so hidden that it cannot be uncovered.”251 Thus universal mathesis promises to mediate the unknown by concrete means, to acquire knowledge of “invisible things” by means of “the things that are seen in the World.” Douglas Lane Patey’s


discussion of Swift’s attitude to modern science suggests that this newly accessible horizon of scientific discovery must have seemed to dispense with the “arts,” including poetry and rhetoric. These arts of “prudence” were supposed to discuss questions which science was unable to answer with certainty, drawing on textual authority and tradition rather than proof.\textsuperscript{252} *Mathesis universalis* dispensed with, or threatened to replace, the belief that certain matters had been reserved for the treatment of the arts of prudence, in its search for ways of notating and quantifying all truths in nature and beyond.

Leibniz’s *Characteistica Universalis*, a system for the notation of all concepts with letters or numbers, calls the very need for argumentation into question. The “character” is a logical language that Leibniz designed to function automatically, according to combinatorial principles: his *calculus rationcinator*, the mathematical procedure governing the combinations, would discover all potential permutations of the finite set of letters or numbers in the *character*. Begun as a doctoral dissertation project, Leibniz’s mechanism performs incontrovertible analytical readings for him, without the need for thought: “there would be no more need of disputation between two philosophers than between two accountants,” he hoped. “For it would suffice to take their pencils in their hands, to sit down to their slates, and to say to each other . . . Let us calculate.”\textsuperscript{253} Swift might have supported Bertrand Russell’s pronouncement on Leibniz’s invention: because “the *calculus* cannot generate the very premises from which its deductions proceed, the system “leads to an emphasis on *results,*” at the expense of “those primitive axioms, upon which any calculus or science must be based.”\textsuperscript{254} Leibniz’s reading device is flawed, that is, because it assumes that arguments are reducible to the mechanical manipulation of finite parts, and supplies no means of postulating fundamental premises.

As we see in *Gulliver*, computation lacks motive and premise. The Lilliputians, for instance, are comically bereft of motive when they calculate how many Lilliputians Gulliver’s body

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{254} Ibid., 170-71.
\end{footnotes}
can contain: “his majesty’s Mathematicians, having taken the Height of my Body by the Help of a Quadrant, and finding it to exceed theirs in the Proportion of Twelve to one, they concluded from the Similarity of their Bodies, that mine must contain at least 1728 of theirs. . .” (39). This mathematical episode derives its humour from the dim, ostensibly compulsive motivations of the characters who calculate these sums. While it is true that the sum of “1728” will be used to calculate the amount of food that Gulliver requires, the appearance of mathematicians where cooks might have been expected alerts us to the presence of an odd whim. Although the Lilliputians compute with success, this is owing to a kind of mechanical energy which is already set going by the time we glimpse them in action. There is an unaccountable tenacity in the attentions of the Lilliputian computers when they design clothes for Gulliver:

The Sempstresses took my Measure as I lay on the Ground, one standing at my Neck, and another at my Mid-Leg, with a strong Cord extended, that each held by the End, while a third measured the Length of the Cord with a Rule of an Inch long. Then they measured my right Thumb, and desired no more; for by a mathematical Computation, that twice round the Thumb is once round the Wrist, and so on to the Neck and the Waist, and by the Help of my old Shirt, which I displayed on the Ground before them for a Pattern, they fitted me exactly. (57)

The sempstresses suddenly cover Gulliver’s body, run a cord along the softest part, take a measure of his thumb, and then abruptly “desir[e] no more,” ready to do their lengthy computations from the circumference of his smallest visible appendage.

Gulliver’s account carries contrasting instances of computation gone wrong. While the Lilliputians are charmingly diligent and resourceful, Gulliver displays no such proficiency when he appears in Brobdingnag: “the Trees [were] so lofty that I could make no Computation of their Altitude” (77). When in Brobdingnag, Gulliver makes several speeches to the King in hopes of vindicating his home country. He wishes he had use of “the Tongue of Demosthenes or Cicero” for the purpose (116). Comically lacking in such eloquence, Gulliver settles on something like Leibniz’s “let us calculate:” he “computed the Number of our People, by reckoning how many Millions there might be of each Religious Sect, or
Political Party among us” (117). The report of this fact wins Gulliver a contemptuous retort from the King, who questions the premises of his calculations: “He laughed at my odd Kind of Arithmetick (as he was pleased to call it) in reckoning the Numbers of our People by a Computation drawn from the several Sects among us in Religion and Politicks” (120). Gulliver has obviously proceeded from unsound premises, consigning a portion of the British population to religious dissent and political opposition. The King’s laughter signals Gulliver’s dependence on arithmetical “results” rather than “axioms,” so that mathesis leaves Gulliver speechless when the King examines his rhetoric.

We descend from the homely computations of the Lilliputians and Gulliver’s clumsy application of arithmetic into the amoral world of the Laputians and their pernicious deductions. Mathematics in Book Three is no longer a comic touch, but a suffocating theme. Compared with the facility of the two hundred ant-like sempstresses, the deductions of the Laputians are useless: their sartorial measurements end up leaving Gulliver naked for a period of days. Taking his “Altitude by a Quadrant, and then with a Rule and Compasses,” they “described the Dimensions and Out-Lines of [his] whole Body; all which he [the tailor] entered upon Paper” (149). The use of scientific instruments, paper, and mathematical notations in a case demanding a mechanical art results in clothes that are “very ill made, and quite out of Shape” (149). We recall that the sempstresses supplement the use of quadrants by standing on the body of their subject.

Moreover, the Laputians are notably incapable of the concord Leibniz imagines when he pictures a mathematical conversation: they are “very bad Reasoners, and vehemently given to Opposition” (150). In fact, Leibniz might deserve a footnote here in Book III, since, like the citizens of Balnibarbi, he had attempted to build a new kind of windmill powered by a pipe air system. Swift’s projectors, who are obsessed with technological innovation, experiment with an ineffective pipe system for a watermill. Leibniz’s plans were thwarted, but he pursued his theory through “repeated failures and fresh attempts”;\(^{255}\) in *Gulliver’s Travels*,

the projectors persist with their useless watermill on the mountain side belonging to “Lord Monodi” (165).

Computers appear in different lights in Books 1, 2, and 3 of *Gulliver’s Travels*, and this has the effect of confining mathematical computing to a restricted sphere of practice. If the calculations of the Lilliputians are beneficial, it is because their ingenuity is among the virtues of a servile, silent class: Swift has bestowed on his Lilliputians the whim he ascribes elsewhere to servants. *Directions to Servants* attributes an obtuse literalism to servants that works in their favour: “when the Master calls [Who’s there?] no Servant is bound to come; for [Who’s there] is no Body’s Name.”256 Useful, accurate computations are used by subaltern figures like the buzzing Lilliputian weavers. The detrimental effect of mathematical computers in Laputa and Balnibarbi results from their acquisition of social and political power. *Scientists* should not attempt mathematical computing.

**Communication versus Rhetoric**

Reading devices bypassed the text as Pope and Swift understood it, looking for hidden information. Cryptanalysis, historicist textual criticism, and mathematical computers threatened to replace the prudent reading of authorities. This chapter closes by examining how Swift imagined the principles of *mathesis universalis* working through a reading machine—the literary turning frame in Book III of *Gulliver’s Travels*. The frame is the most well-known and concrete of Swift’s reading devices, concentrating in its form a complex synthesis of textual approaches. This set piece in *Gulliver’s Travels* offers a critique of what Stephen Ramsay has recently called “algorithmic criticism:” the mechanical execution of a set of instructions for re-arranging the words, allowing for the discovery of “potential” readings of a text.257 The potential readings of algorithmic criticism are based on


mathematical methods of information retrieval, not on superficial readings. The sequential order of words and phrases is set aside.

Before discussing Swift’s literary machine, however, I will address Swift’s response to new theories of language inspired by scientific communication. Wotton’s claim that the book contains a “quantity” of things makes better sense in the context of Locke’s recently articulated theory of language in the Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1689): Locke argued that words are like a “Conduit” through which “Men convey their Discoveries, Reasonings, and Knowledge, from one to another” (510). According to Locke, language conveys things from a writer’s “own Breast,” where they are “invisible, and hidden from others,” (405). The theory of language promoted by practitioners of the new science articulated twenty years before in Thomas Sprat’s History of the Royal Society (1667) celebrated the return to the purity of primeval communication, “when men deliver’d so many things, almost in an equal number of words . . . a close, naked, natural way of speaking; positive expressions, clear senses, a native easiness bringing all things as near the mathematical plainness as they can.”

One year after Sprat’s History was published, Wilkins developed a systematic language that, he argued, could be used in scientific correspondences, by speakers of any national language. Ultimately a doomed project, the Real Character is Wilkins’s most remembered work. This “character” accomplished Francis Bacon’s injunction to focus on things rather than words, on “the weight of matter” rather than the “clean composition of the sentence, and the sweet falling of the clauses.” Wilkins aimed to build a language system that would symbolize information about things with the flexibility and analytical precision of numbers. In Wilkins’s system, each of the “characters” that comprise the words represents an essential item in the described object. In their flexible combinations, the characters describe things so precisely that word choice is non-existent.

---


Wilkins’s character was designed to encode and transmit a quantifiable number (what he called “solid knowledge”) of informational things, in the sense of “information” developed by Claude Shannon for Bell telephone in his “Mathematical Theory of Communication” (1948). Shannon was concerned with a quantity which he calls “information,” which was conveyed in a language possessing a finite number of terms, a code that has a size, a “vocabulary.” Individual messages have a percentage of redundancy, which is measured as the predictability of word combinations, according to Shannon. Redundancy allows receivers of messages to revise corrupted messages by guessing the missing terms. A receiver that is familiar with the code will be able to guess the next (missing) word in the sequence. A message’s redundancy is language-driven, it is recognized as “grammar” or idiom dictating word choices. “Redundant” material is recognized within information theory as language rather than as information. In his introduction to Shannon’s theory, Warren Weaver explains that language is “unnecessary” wherever it fails to communicate a quantity of information. In his introduction to Shannon’s theory, Warren Weaver speculates that the “redundancy of English is 50%.” (I have not been able to comprehend the basis of Weaver’s assertions.)

Higher quantities of information tend to make “each letter in the message completely independent of its position vis-à-vis other letters.” Too much information makes a text more difficult to read.

Wilkins argued that ambiguity in language was the result of “deficiency” in the total number of words. Wilkins’s character would contain zero ambiguity because it would contain a sufficient “number of words” for communicating the information of each thing. Wilkins also argued that his character could eliminate redundancy, understood not as predictability but as verbal material in excess of information. Especially offensive to Wilkins was the excessive number of words that were used in phrasal verb constructions in the English language: idiomatic constructions—such as “break off,” or “come off,” where unnecessary

words appear. English “doth too much abound,” Wilkins said, in “wild and insignificant” word combinations. Wilkins explicitly advocates his language as a corrective replacement of all regional languages (13).

For Swift, the move to replace social languages with a universal code must have seemed useless or laborious rather than inventive. Swift’s language proposal, written as a self-styled “Projector,” aimed to prevent the “Decay” of English, which he attributed to “Manglings and Abbreviations” of words like “Drudg’d, Disturb’d, Rebuk’d, and Fledg’d.” These reductions by which English speakers “clip their Words,” leaving them “curtailed, and varied,” would slowly render the language “unintelligible,” so that one would “hardly know [the words] by Sight,” Swift worries, and proposes an academy for dealing with this. Especially pernicious would be an adoption of phonetic spellings, which would “confound Orthography,” and the fashionable adoption of “the newest Set of Phrases.” Orthography should follow predictable patterns rather than sacrifice intelligibility.

Swift’s proposal protected English as a national language, and made a defense of “redundancy” as necessary, and desirable. Communications such as Wilkins proposed are a tedious burden in Book III of Gulliver’s Travels, where there appears at the grand academy of Lagado a proposal for “abolishing all Words” (172). This results in the use of arms, backpacks, and pockets instead, to carry the objects to which speeches once conveniently referred. The language projectors in Lagado believe that it would be more convenient for all Men to carry about them, such Things as were necessary to express the particular Business they are to discourse on . . . . when they met in the Streets [they] would lay down their Loads, open their Sacks and hold conversation for an Hour together . . . (173)

263 Ibid., 18
265 Ibid., 11-12.
266 Ibid., 11-12.
This project—Gulliver notably calls it an “invention” (172)—is over-particular. The projectors in Lagado stop using words as a health measure to conserve space in the lungs: speech causes “a Diminution of our Lungs by Corrosion, and consequently contributes to the shortning of our Lives” (172). One wonders then: why should the lungs be conserved, if rhetoric is to be abolished?

The minute literalism of Swift’s own “plain style” must be accounted for. There are few better descriptors of Swift’s writing than those which Sprat used to commend the style of the Royal Society: “positive,” “close,” and “naked.” Recently, Neil Chudgar has argued of Gulliver’s Travels that it makes little sense to “conceive [of] all the text's moments of literal description as ironic,” and suggests persuasively that Swift aims “to bring us back to our senses.” 267 Swift’s literal descriptions play with the rhetorical effects of lists and collections, placing information at the limits of intelligibility and attention. Readers are made to experience lists or collections of information as the tedious speech of characters. This rhetoric of things challenges the purity and efficacy of Locke and Wilkins’s scientific, mathematical theories of communication.

For example: Swift’s Polite Conversation (1738) is a collection of proverbs that is somewhere between dictionary and dramatic dialogue. Wagstaff, the fictional compiler of Polite Conversation, has compiled an exhausting quantity of conversational quips and retorts that resembles the collections of James Kelly, Some Select Proverbs (1722) and the Complete Collection of Scottish Proverbs (1721), as well as John Ray’s Collection of English Proverbs (1670). Like Kelly and Ray, Wagstaff tells us the number of items in his collection: “the Flowers of Wit, Fancy, Wisdom, Humour, and Politeness, scattered in this Volume, amount to one thousand, seventy and four.” 268 Wagstaff has fallen far short of Ray’s “Two Thousand Seven Hundred Sixty Five” and Kelly’s “Three Thousand.” 269 But Wagstaff’s “flowers” are

---

269 Subsequent citations are in-text. Kelly gives these numbers (including Ray’s, with whom he is competing) in his introduction to A Complete Collection of Scotish [sic] Proverbs Explained and made Intelligible to the English Reader (London, 1721), A6.
put into the mouths of lords and ladies and exchanged in the morning at St. James’s Park; in the second dialogue, “at three a Clock” (121), and finally, in the third dialogue, at tea time.

Wagstaff’s stock of one thousand, seventy and four proverbs sacrifices a necessary level of intelligibility to thoroughness of coverage—to a “complete” representation of polite conversation. Wagstaff has so much material that nearly every line in the dialogues must be devoted to demonstrating one such proverb, and later in his opening treatise, he recalls dismissing the idea of using “one, two, or even six Comedies to contain them” (41), for there would not be enough space. The language of the proverbs is opaque, almost exclusively figurative. Each line is concatenated with the next according to the rules of alienating language games:

*Nev.* Ay, Miss will say any Thing but her Prayers, and those she whistles.

*Miss.* Pray, Colonel, make me a Present of that pretty Knife.

*Nev.* Ay, Miss, catch him at that, and hang him.

*Col.* Not for the World, dear Miss, it will cut Love.

*Lord. Sp.* Colonel, you shall be married first, I was just going to say that. (71)

The conversations circle aimlessly, driven by slight, trivial incidents; sallies of wit interrupt the deepening of conversation, whenever characters refer to their surroundings: when Miss asks to see the Colonel’s snuff box, he replies, “Madam, there’s never a C. upon it” (64). When Lady Answerall asks Lord Spark, “did you walk through the Park in this Rain?” Lord Spark replies, “Yes, Madam, we were neither Sugar, nor Salt, we were not afraid the Rain would melt us, He, he, he. *[Laughs]*” (60). Wagstaff says that his book is a guide for putting an end to “tedious Story-tellers,” for this book supplies all the ways to “perpetually interrupt them with some sudden surprising Piece of Wit” (36). Once, Neverout stops the conversation to confront another character about having used one of the phrases twice: “Fye, Miss, you said that once before” (98) he says.
Swift has exposed readers to the difficulty of reading through what might be scanned or selected in dictionary form—non-repeating, non-narrative items that accumulate with daunting breadth: although each line seems somewhat disconnected from the last, the dialogue holds them artificially together. “Swift was wise not to make [the conversations] longer,” one critic notes, and another that “it goes on too long.” 270 One thinks of Sianne Ngai’s aesthetic study of boredom, where she coins the word “stuplimity” to designate a textual encounter characterized by processes of incomprehensible “buildup” and fatiguing “duration.” 271

Gulliver’s object lists are notable for their demands on the attention. He makes a full description of the implements and outcomes of war, delivered in a speech to his Houyhnhnm master. The list reads with tensions and surprises, like a continuous, twisted thread:

I gave him a Description of Cannons, Culverins, Muskets, Carabines, Pistols, Bullets, Powder, Swords, Bayonets, Sieges, Retreats, Attacks, Undermines, Countermines, Bombardments, Sea-fights; Ships sunk with a Thousand men; twenty Thousand killed on each side; dying Groans, Limbs flying in the Air: Smoack, Noise, Confusion, trampling to Death under Horses Feet: Flight, Pursuit, Victory; Fields strewn with Carcases left for Food to Dogs, and Wolves, and Birds of Prey; Plundering, Stripping, Ravishing, Burning and Destroying. And, to set forth the Valour of my own dear Country-men, I assured him, that I had seen them blow up a Hundred Enemies at once in a Siege, and as many in a Ship; and beheld the dead Bodies drop down in Pieces from the Clouds, to the great Diversion of all the Spectators. (230)

The first of several grammatical ripples in the fabric of this list occurs when Gulliver mentions the “Ships sunk with a Thousand men” and “twenty Thousand Killed on each side.” These two phrases which seem to name events constitute, in the context of this list, solid objects. “Trampling to Death under Horses Feet” is a verbal noun, an action that has become a common thing. That is why, despite the evidently sobering quality that these phrases bring

270 Quoted in Eric Partridge, “Introduction” to Swift’s Polite Conversation, 16.
to this list as a result of their thematic content, their surprise results, to a great extent, from where these phrases occur in the list of objects, from their situation and the story they tell. The fetishization of weapons makes the events of war familiar, part of a predictable narrative, items in a list. In his classic study of Swift’s rhetorical style, however, Martin Price argues that the sudden shifts toward “greater abstractness or concreteness . . . violate expectation.” “[T]his very inequality of status creates an interaction;” the items on the list “move toward fusion . . . yet never quite settle.”

In 1967 Louis Milic used the IBM 1620 to analyze Swift’s “plain style,” including the grammar and frequency of lists in Swift’s writing. *A Quantitative Approach to the Style of Jonathan Swift* used punch cards to encode a corpus of Swift’s texts, assigning two digits to each “word-class” or part of speech, and several other items, such as the presence of quotations or appellatives. Where Gulliver says, “Before I proceed to give an Account of my leaving this Kingdom,” the digitized text reads, “42 11 02 61 05 31 01 51 31 07 31 01.” Lists such as Gulliver’s enumeration of military weapons are themselves counted, as well as the number and sort of items constituting each list. Milic argues that computing these frequencies in Swift’s work would reflect exactly how his “mental bent impresses itself indelibly and despite himself on all his writing.” The usefulness of the “stylometric” approach is obvious: Milic can make a convincing case that a text with doubtful attribution, such as *A Letter of Advice to a Young Poet*, quoted throughout this chapter, belongs to Swift’s pen. But it may be argued against the computer that it has no difficulty reading through tedious lists of things.

---


274 Ibid., 154.
Reading with the Lagado Computer

One of the language projects in the Academy of Lagado is at odds with the other. In the School of Language, the “Scheme for entirely abolishing all Words” (172) has messengers carry objects on their backs while language breaks down. In the part of the Academy reserved for “Projectors in speculative Learning” (171), however, resides the literary turning machine, Swift’s most memorable reading device, a great frame containing words on squares of wood that spin. The inventor of this machine, a “Professor,” (171) “had emptied the whole Vocabulary into his frame,” re-distributing the words severally, one on each square (172). In a bewildering, absurd twist, however, the machine is designed to put words back together into new combinations. The machine flips the squares and onlookers read the results aloud: “Six and Thirty of the Lads [were commanded] to read the several Lines softly as they appeared upon the Frame” (171). When they “found three or four Words together that might make Part of a Sentence, they dictated to the four remaining Boys who were Scribes” (172). Over time the collected words will produce a new, “complete Body of all Arts and Sciences” (172).

Walter Scott, in his 1814 annotated edition of Swift’s works, glosses the “machine for making books” as a reference to the device of Majorcan theologian Ramon Llull (c.1232-1316). 275 Llull’s tool consisted of several disks, one fixed and several rotating around it, that would yield in their mechanical combinations “the general principles of all sciences.” 276 Llull’s machine became notorious, however, for reducing argumentation to such discrete combinations: the fixed central disc has the nine attributes of God inscribed on it (aspects such as “Goodness” and “Power”), like so many rays going out of the center. These line up in different combinations with the nine comparative terms (e.g. “Greater” and “Lesser”) inscribed on the next disc, which allow divine attributes to be considered among those of another order: the next wheel supplies earthly subjects (“Imagination” and “Skills”); still another disc has terms that allow these comparisons to be framed as questions—“Whether”

and “Why.” Thus one asks “whether the skills of God’s subjects are beneath the Power of God?” With the algorithm, the device discovers all permutations of arguments that can be created from the set of terms. The wheels arrange the questions.

Scott thinks this device too automatic to yield knowledge: he criticizes Llull because the latter thought that “knowledge was to be acquired by the art of a mechanical instrument, much resembling a child’s whirligig.” Indeed, Llull’s combinations have no connection to textual authorities. Borges argues that the device seems “unrewarding” only because its topics are no longer of importance, and suggests including the relevant authorities with their respective scientific discourses on the discs:

we now know that the concepts of goodness, greatness, wisdom, power, and glory are incapable of engendering appreciable revelation. We (who are basically no less naïve than Llull) would load the machine differently, no doubt with the words Entropy, Time, Electrons, Potential Energy, Fourth Dimension, Relativity, Protons, Einstein. Or with Surplus Value, Proletariat, Capitalism, Class Struggle, Dialectical Materialism, Engels.

Isaac Disraeli mentioned “the famous Lullian method” as a kind of tool for “distant reading,”—Franco Moretti’s methodological program for converting language texts into information for visualizations in maps, data tables, and diagrams. By means of Llull’s device, Disraeli says, one may bypass “knowledge of the individual parts” of books—the situation of specific passages from “authorities,” “references,” and “witnesses.” Rather than read books, one might use Llull’s reading device, which helps one formulate “generalizing” statements and “bird's-eye views of philosophy” when one is attempting to write. Disraeli is less dismissive than Scott, entertaining the use of this device for the purpose of summarizing

---


knowledge at times when one would not be reading books on particular subjects: with Llull’s device, it was “as if things were seen clearer when at a distance and en masse!” Llull’s machine represents just one perspective, used “when” one desires distance. Disraeli marvels at the rotating discs, which he imagines were mounted on “two tables” that are “worked about circularly in a frame.” Like Leibniz’s reading device, the characteristica universalis, which provides the building blocks of potential arguments, the Llullian device spins while writers take their pencils in their hands . . . and to say to each other . . . Let us calculate.” Llull’s device “enabled any one to invent arguments by a machine . . . to write on without any particular knowledge of their subject!”

Checking references to Llull’s device later in the century, we see that in Volume V, Chapter XLII of Tristram Shandy, Llull is mentioned in support of Walter Shandy’s theory that “the auxiliary verbs” allow one to “discourse with plausibility upon any subject, pro and con, and to say and write all that could be spoken or written concerning it.” Tristram calls this method a “great engine” that can “set the soul a going by herself” and “make every idea engender millions.” Walter Shandy reads the family a lecture from Walker’s Of Education, and indeed Sterne has copied several parts of Walker which suggested the use of grammatical categories to generate discourse and knowledge: popular verbs that help express states of being, possession, and action, as well as wishes, abilities, obligations, and habits. These verbs, conjugated with others, are then modified by tense, and questions resembling Llull’s “Whether” and “Why” follow: “Is it? . . . Would it be? May it be?” Combining these elements of being and chronology, one is able to make assertions, Walter argues, that spark invention: “no one idea can enter his brain how barren soever, but a magazine of conceptions and conclusions may be drawn forth from it.” Here follows Walter’s “White Bear” speech:

A WHITE BEAR! Very well. Have I ever seen one? Might I ever have seen one? Am I ever to see one? Ought I ever to have seen one? Or can I ever see one? Would I had seen a white bear? (for how can I imagine it?) If I should see a white bear, what should I say? If I should never see a white bear, what then? If I never have, can, must

---

or shall see a white bear alive; have I ever seen the skin of one? Did I ever see one painted?—described? Have I never dreamed of one? Did my father, mother, uncle, aunt, brothers or sisters, ever see a white bear? What would they give? How would they behave? How would the white bear have behaved? Is he wild? Tame? Terrible? Rough? Smooth?—Is the white bear worth seeing?—Is there no sin in it?—Is it better than a Black One? 282

The reading machine’s job is to invent or “find” out the argument by testing combinations. The inventor of the frame in Lagado is intent on generating arguments out of the words themselves, though, not, like the users of Llull’s system, merely a set of logical elements. That is, the literary turning frame aims not only to construct arguments, but to write books, to craft language. Rather than locate interesting combinations of concepts, it manipulates words. The synthesis of mathematical combination with language leads to a breakdown as readers come up against the limits of intelligibility.

The literary machine in Lagado is gigantic compared to Llull’s device, a collective enterprise rather than a gadget, “Twenty Foot square, [and] placed in the Middle of the Room” (171). Square-shaped “Bits of Wood” have Papers pasted on them; “and on these Papers were written all the Words of their Language in their several Moods, Tenses, and Declensions . . . .[the professor] had emptied the whole Vocabulary into his frame.” (171-72). The machine’s square frame and wires are constraints that shape the combinations of words that appear. While Llull uses a hierarchy of elements distributed on multiple discs that encircle one another, and Walter Shandy deploys grammar’s structuring categories, perhaps there are set places in the Lagado machine for noun subjects, verbs, and objects. The professor has developed a scheme for positioning the word squares in space, along the wires: “he had made the strictest Computation of the general Proportion there is in Books between the Numbers of Particles, Nouns, and Verbs, and other Parts of Speech.” That is, while Llull and Shandy use logical rules for their programs, the professor has developed a syntactic template from a statistical analysis of corpora. While it is impossible, from Gulliver’s sketch, to tell how his

282 Sterne, Tristram Shandy, 322-23.
calculations govern the placement of the words, it is clear that this “computation of the general Proportion” increases the intelligibility of the combinations. Because the words appear “without any Order,” by which Swift possibly means that there are no necessary semantic connections between the words, grammar ostensibly acts as a mode of constraint, increasing the probability of sense by reducing randomness.

It must be noted that because the Lagado machine deploys a template for syntax rather than a logical system, its scientific pretensions are groundless. The frame has little consequence as a philosophical tool. Its manipulation of language is underwritten by the Epicurean theory of the universe, which gives ontological priority to matter, and particularly to the motion of atoms. The Lagado frame in *Gulliver’s Travels* has all potential books in its pieces of wood. The problem with this approach to words—to words as particles—according to Swift, is that language must be intelligible and thus predictable. The Lagado frame, we shall see, is compromised by a low level of intelligibility or redundancy. Borges’s library of Babel engages with similar tensions, as it explores the relationship between books and the infinite.²⁸³ Borges’s “total” library is composed of “all the possible combinations of the twenty-odd orthographic symbols” in the universe. While the teeming library of Babel expands, however, the Academy in Lagado has simplifying aims: “out of those rich Materials” of “broken sentences . . . piece[d] together” will come one single book title, “a complete Body of all Arts and Sciences” (172) amounting to “several Volumes in large Folio” (172). Borges’s library is “limitless,” and he “rejoices in this elegant hope” that an “eternal voyager” might find at last that there is “order” in it all: at the end of the story, we learn of “periodic” repetitions of unique word sequences (88). Swift’s machine, on the other hand, is not interested in repetitions. Forty readers turn handles attached to the wires, so that “the whole Disposition of the Words” might be “entirely changed” and each new combination of words erases its relationship to the last (171). The peculiar disposition of the words in the frame at any given moment is of less importance than the final result of “piec[ing] together” these “rich Materials” for “Six Hours a-Day” (172). Unlike Gulliver’s lists, which are tense and surprising, the results of the machine lack formal connections.

The students read the words off the frame. Whenever there are “three or four Words together that might make part of a Sentence,” the scribes jot down a meaningful arrangement of them. The frame’s output is less intelligible to the students than the sentences they are used to recognizing in books. While Llull’s device can handle information at a distance from the particular language used in books, Swift imagines a device that does little more than disrupt that language. The moving words in the Lagado frame appear to disturb eighteenth-century readers. The 1761 German edition of *Gulliver’s Travels* illustrates this scene with a sketch by Salomon Gessner. Jeanne K. Welcher notes that Gulliver “is not at ease” in this image, as “seen in the taut left shoulder, upper arm, gesturing hand, and knotted leg muscles.” Gulliver’s body is bent slightly over, while the corner of the machine “points thrustingly, like an arrow, at Gulliver, specifically at his groin.”284 The students gather around the table, but their eyes go all over the room. A student who sits behind the professor is possibly sleeping, yawning, or groaning—his head is wrenched backwards, his mouth wide open. The student behind him is crouching and grinning widely. Another possesses an exaggerated frown, the corners of his mouth turned down.

If Swift’s reading devices engage with “the epistemology that quietly governs the digital texts and tools that humanists work with today”—with the epistemology, that is, of information—we have seen that information cannot be equated with knowledge in the eighteenth century.285 While legitimate knowledge remains tied to textual authorities and the idea of their durable immediacy, information has perhaps a stronger association with mysticism and magic tricks than with reading. If information is now a quantity of something that one finds in a text, the relationship of books and language to this volatile substance was a persistent question in the eighteenth century. On the other hand, the frames of Llull and Lagado suggest that “algorithmic criticism” is not the exclusive property of the electronic computer, and that it has a past. Algorithmic criticism, according to Stephen Ramsay, seeks readings inspired by the “radical transformation” of a text “in which the data has been

284 *Visual Imitations of Gulliver’s Travels 1726-1830* (Delmar, New York: Scholars’ Facsimiles & Reprints, 1999), 243

paraphrased, elaborated, selected, truncated, and transduced.” Using data on word frequencies, for instance, computers can transform texts into visualizations or tables that emphasize information which interests readers. Swift’s reading devices show that algorithmic criticism has a long history of handling the unwritten, deep structures of texts. Swift’s *Modest Proposal* and *Gulliver Travels* pose an intriguing alternative: computing can be performed or enacted, not as a mode of scientific knowledge, but as an art whose operations model the experiences and values of those who read and interpret texts.

Swift’s reading devices reveal some resistance to the belief that language contained a number of informational things. Like the information theorists writing for Bell telephone, however, some eighteenth-century Britons argued that English contained a certain number of redundant or superfluous words which might be dispensed with—this was “synonymy” in the language. As I will show in the final chapter of my thesis, the idea that English had synonymy, or duplicate words, was a crucial support for the use of English as a medium of disembodied information. In the eighteenth century, “synonymy” evoked the idea that language was made of a corporeal material, as well as the idea that languages tended to work in customary ways that could not be easily adjusted or translated. While Swift deplored abbreviations that cut up the fabric of English, Joseph Addison in the *Spectator* encouraged readers to practice retrieving information from books by spotting the language in books that was unnecessary and worth reducing or translating. Writers of long books and speeches only lengthened their discourses by re-stating the same ideas again in different words, pursuing

---


empty rituals of language. According to Addison’s *Spectator*, different forms of language were ultimately insignificant in themselves.

My final chapter situates Hester Lynch Piozzi’s little-known work, *British Synonymy* (1794), within the context of eighteenth-century attempts to put English to work as a medium of information that required economy, or the use of fewer words. *British Synonymy* recuperates the resonance of words as corporeal bodies that are used to fill paper and make conversations flow smoothly, without awkwardness or pain. A synonym usually occupied a special place in the idiom, doing work that another synonym could not do. In Piozzi’s account, the medium of English elicited habit-forming behaviours from readers and listeners, a need to use synonyms a certain way again and again. No two synonyms were alike to those who handled them. The English-language work of Piozzi taught polite readers at the end of the eighteenth century to privilege their knowledge of the peculiar flow of language in British texts, their acquired ability to anticipate the word that came next while reading aloud or making eloquent conversation with illustrious friends.
Chapter Four

Piozzi’s *British Synonymy*: Appreciating English

When Homer mentions blood, blood is *black*. When women appear, women are *neat-ankled* or *glancing*. Poseidon always has the *blue eyebrows of Poseidon*. God’s laughter is *unquenchable*. Human knees are *quick*. The sea is *unwearying*. Death is *bad*. Cowards’ livers are *white*. Homer’s epithets are a fixed diction with which Homer fastens every substance in the world to its aptest attribute and holds them in place for epic consumption. There is a passion in it but what kind of passion?

“Consumption is not a passion for substances but a passion for the code,” says Baudrillard.—Anne Carson, *Autobiography of Red.*

After the publication of Lord Chesterfield’s infamous puff-piece promoting Johnson’s *Dictionary* in the *World* appeared another, lesser-known essay: in it, Chesterfield, the arbiter of polite language, declared that he “seriously advise[d]” Johnson “to publish” a second, supplementary dictionary of “female eloquence” used in the “dressing-room,” a repository of the “favourite words” of ladies and their guests, used “in the several occasional purposes of the day.”

“Commonly used and sometimes understood by the Beau Monde,” words of female eloquence like “Flirtation,” “Fuzz” (“the most used word in our language”), and “Vastly” were elliptical: used often enough to be familiar “favourite[s]” to insiders who used them, the words were not understood as the signs of ideas to outsiders.

The supplementary language of the dressing-room was difficult to parse, “especially,” Chesterfield says, because ladies speak “in the vituperative way . . . and bear away in one promiscuous heap, nouns, pronouns, verbs, moods, and tenses.” This tangle of grammar-


290 The eloquence of the dressing-room presents a significant challenge to the rule of communication established by John Locke in his theory of language, which Johnson was about to put into practice in the *Dictionary*: words according to Locke must be “Signs of internal Conceptions.” See the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 402.
defying language material represented another model of language entirely, a form of expression that used material forces rather than ideas, but Chesterfield made clear to Johnson that he patronized not only the learned lexicographer, but his “fair fellow-subjects” whose “eloquence” was, “if not of legitimate birth . . . at least of fair extraction.”  

Perhaps Chesterfield was thinking of what he called “habitual eloquence” in the letters he wrote privately to his son: habitual eloquence was the practice of paying “attention,” Chesterfield said, “to the choice of my words” in company, “to please instead of informing” company, with “the harmony and roundness of my periods.” Chesterfield suggested that Johnson’s dictionary would leave behind an important part of what it meant to know English words in the middle of the eighteenth century, a knowledge of how multiple words are chosen together in “heaps,” a familiarity with the way that words take place, “occasional[ly],” with special reference to their material life—an “attention” to the place of words in forms that have “roundness” and “harmony” with, or alongside of other words. Rather than lay stress on ideas, Chesterfield suggested, Johnson should accommodate a passion—whether “vituperative” or “pleasing”—for good diction, for the “favourite” word and the well-formed or highly effective phrase.

Chesterfield asked whether the significance of “favourite” words, words with particular histories and uses, could be registered at the margins of grammar, studied in an English word book, or mediated to an outside audience. For instance, Chesterfield pondered the recent neologism of dressing-room eloquence, “flirtation.” “Flirtation” was not “synonimous with” “coquetry,” he said, but “short of” it, because “flirtation” “intimates only the first hints” of “subsequent coquetry.” According to Chesterfield’s idea of a dictionary supplement, it would be unacceptable to define “flirtation” by the synonym “coquetry,” because the use of “flirtation” depended on the context. 

---

291 The World, 606.


293 The World, 607.
Chesterfield’s simple statement in the *World* essay—the claim that one, eloquent, dressing-room word was “not synonimous” with the other, common, dictionary term—had wide-ranging implications that I would like to explore in this chapter. In eighteenth-century Britain, “synonymy” was a hard, uncommon Latinate term used to identify a rhetorical figure of speech. Quintillian’s *Institutes of Oratory* numbered synonymy among the rhetorical figures that accomplish the effect of “amplification” by physical “addition” of more synonyms. Like Homer’s fixed adjectival epithets, the “latches” in the “surface” of words mentioned in the first chapter of *Autobiography of Red*, synonymy satisfied a superficial “passion” for the code that required more words to be added to a line. Synonymy was seen in Cicero’s Catiline Orations, in the line “He departed, he went hence; he burst forth, he was gone.” The synonyms did not elucidate Cicero’s meaning, or explain it. Quintillian insisted that synonyms were never “repeated to reaffirm the same meaning.” Rather, the use of synonyms enacted crucial formal repetitions or physical additions that the audience appreciated.

By Quintillian’s definition, synonymy belonged to a legitimate repertory of rhetorical figures for achieving copious eloquence. Chesterfield’s dressing-room words, spoken in forceful, copious heaps, belonged to an analogous order of expression, whereby words had particular relations among themselves and cumulative effects when they were used together, as well as audiences who expected repetition and formal fulfillments. But Chesterfield worried about the ways in which Johnson’s *Dictionary* might pose a threat to eloquent diction. There was the problem of mediating individual “favourite” words to outsiders, for instance, the danger that readers would be using lexicographical “synonymy” to choose words now. If Johnson defined “flirtation” as “coquetry,” readers might choose the word “flirtation” where the synonym “coquetry” would be more appropriate. Words had uses—ways of being combined with one another—which the *Dictionary* would be muting.

---

294 Instances from the OED under “synonym, n.” include 1a., 1609 R. Bernard *Faithull Shepheard*, “many words signifying againe one thing”; 2. 1589 G. Puttenham’s *Arte Eng. Poesie*, “When so euer we multiply our speech by many words.”

Perhaps Chesterfield’s “favourite” English word resembles the word “whiskers” in Volume V of *Tristram Shandy*. “Whiskers” was “ruined” by repeated use in “The Fragment” of La Fosseuse. The ladies of the court of Navarre used the word on too many “occasions” with “an accent which always implied something of a mystery,” so that through “such combinations” of “accessory ideas” that were added by the “prints” of the “eyes and eye-brows,” the word lost its original significance, and became an elliptical “text” in itself. Like the dressing-room eloquence that could not be parsed or translated by dictionary definitions, “whiskers” must be read “without a dictionary,” Tristram says, not as a single term, but as a combination of signs (one cannot forget the “eyes and eye-brows”) that made it no longer synonymous with “beard.”

Over the course of the eighteenth century, “synonymy” became more strongly associated with the sameness of ideas than with different varieties of expression. Synonymy became the pragmatic tool for explaining the ideas carried or conveyed within words, insofar as words made up a medium that was, as many eighteenth-century Britons believed, corporeal in nature—made of matter. Synonyms now provided more examples, more names for things. In this chapter I argue that “synonymy,” understood to denote equivalent expressions, was important for thinking about language as a conveyer of immaterial information in eighteenth-century Britain. As late as 1739, Daniel Turner’s *Abstract of English Grammar and Rhetoric: Containing the Chief Principles and Rules of Both Arts* discussed synonymy in the section on rhetorical figures (among the figures of apostrophe and periphrasis): synonymy was recorded as it had been by Quintillian, as a figure that “takes words” together.

One of the earliest challenges to the dressing-room practice of taking words together can be glimpsed in Joseph Addison’s *Spectator* papers. In his daily periodical, Joseph Addison enforced an etiquette of word reduction. Addison’s periodical essays exposed bad synonymy,

297  Ibid., 277.
or useless repetition, in the copious speech of a pedant, and in the unnecessary elaborations of Abraham Cowley’s folio volume, *The Mistress* (1647). The outcome of Addison’s examination of bad synonymy in the *Spectator* was a social ritual in which the information of different forms of language was reduced to the essay and displayed on the broadsheet.

With increasing frequency during the eighteenth century, synonymy works (titles on the topic of “synonymy”) began to be published for different national languages throughout Europe.  

The second half of this chapter deals with a *British Synonymy* (1794) written by Hester Lynch Piozzi, the woman writer who was renowned for her friendship with Samuel Johnson. Piozzi attempted to show how English words that are “alike in their general signification, [are] yet easily diversified by the manner of applying them in familiar life.” Piozzi’s *Synonymy* was the Dictionary supplement that according to Chesterfield had been needed in the middle of the century, a work which was not begun until after Johnson’s death and after the decline of the “golden age” of conversation in the 1770’s and 1780’s, in which Britons had cultivated the arts of eloquent exchange in visiting spaces such as the dressing-room.

In *British Synonymy*, Piozzi explored the ways that synonyms embodied what was distinctive about the way Britons used English words. Piozzi’s work called for special attention to synonyms as corporeal mediums of different local, historical patterns of expression:

299 Werner Hullen reports that “books of synonyms” were published all over Europe in the eighteenth century in “Roget’s Thesaurus, Deconstructed,” in *Historical Dictionaries and Historical Dictionary Research: Papers from the International Conference On Historical Lexicography and Lexicology* (Tubingen: M. Niemeyer, 2004), 84. Piozzi’s *British Synonymy* was the British version of Gabriel Girard’s landmark publication, *La Justesse de la langue francoise* (Paris, 1718). Girard records the unique behaviour of synonymous French words, the identity that each word acquires from its random external relations with other words, and the resulting special senses that come with the word, but not with the translation or definition. Girard distinguishes *Recevoir* from *Accepter* for instance by the context that commonly surrounds the terms (”On Reçoit les graces: On Accepte les services”[168]). For these random habits of combination, there is no grammatical rule, nor is there an equivalent pattern in another national language. Peter Mark Roget’s *Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases*, the first English work of its kind, was not published until 1852.

300 *British Synonymy: or, an Attempt at Regulating the Choice of Words in Familiar Conversation* (1794; reprint, Ecco Print Editions), 4. *British Synonymy* was published in 2 octavo volumes “in boards” in April of 1794 for twelve shillings. A Dublin edition appeared that year, and a third edition was printed in Paris. Subsequent citations are in my text.

redundancy in language should be celebrated, for it echoed the past. *British Synonymy*, a nationalistic project written during the war with Revolutionary France, represented the durability of cultural forms and distinctions that were difficult to explain to outsiders but crucial to use in life: “let no one say synonymy is of small importance” Piozzi warned, “for if foreigners, when they see a sea-boy mount the mast in a hard gale, attentive to his duty and reckless of the storm, say he is a man of Valour, they mistake the phrase, and must begin to learn from custom, more than science, perhaps, to call him (as he certainly is) a Brave little fellow” (44-45).

Piozzi’s *British Synonymy* taught readers to consider the medium through which knowledge was communicated as a “code” whose formal patterns should be appreciated. Cultivating an appetite for words, Piozzi insisted that readers could learn by immersing themselves in language. While Chesterfield had championed the favourite words of the dressing-room, Piozzi’s supplementary knowledge of language was what her contemporaries might have called “literary.” Just as “Flirtation” was appreciated by those who knew it was of “fair extraction,” “rambler” would be recognized, by readers familiar with Johnson’s writing, as a synonym that “vagabond” could never replace.

The Virtue of Periodical Essays

*The Spectator* papers played a crucial role in the portability of enlightenment. In paper no. 10 for March 12, 1711, Addison boasts that the *Spectator* is single-handedly responsible for having “brought Philosophy out of Closets and Libraries, Schools and Colleges, to dwell in Clubs and Assemblies, at Tea-Tables, and in Coffee-Houses.”302 Addison calculates that “Twenty Readers” (44) at a time could share every *Spectator* sheet printed, positing that their accessibility depended on their size and weight. Mark Cowan has noted that the papers “were often enclosed in letters from metropolitan readers to their correspondents in the

The British achievement of publicly circulated information can be traced to unfolded folio sheets: the *Spectator* paper put book learning into an inexpensive format that could travel, carrying wisdom away from socially exclusive places into conversable spaces that “join,” as Hume would later put it in his essay “Of Essay Writing,” “a taste for pleasure” with “an inclination for the easier and more gentle exercises of the understanding.” The wisdom of books was brought into spaces where “every one displays his thoughts in observations in the best manner he is able, and mutually gives and receives information.”

In this part of the chapter, I will be asking how readers of the *Spectator* could receive information in the form of sheets as a replacement for books, and how synonymy helped to consolidate the practice of shrinking learning. How did the *Spectator* paper display the information of libraries so that readers could conveniently receive it, with pleasure? In addition to the weight and size of the broadsheet, how did the language displayed in the broadsheet stand in for the language in books that were placed in libraries and colleges?

The *Spectator*’s essays were not strictly economical. An unfolded folio sheet was used to distribute a single essay of only about 1,000 words. One quarter of the sheet was devoted to the title, the motto, and the margin. The essay often reached its conclusion in the first column on the verso side, so that the second column would be luxuriantly filled with advertisements for products like ribbons and shoe black.

The periodical essay spread learning by purporting to shrink another product, the language used in books. In no. 124 for July 23, 1711, Addison suggests that under the covers of the book, where learning resides, there are inoperative passages—“Nodding-places” (506)—or empty bibliographic language rituals like the introductory “Preamble”—containing mere “Words of Course” (504). *The Spectator* dispensed with the redundant words intelligibly, giving readers the same “matter” in a form that they could access more readily: “Knowledge,


instead of being bound up in Books, and kept in Libraries and Retirements, is thus obtruded upon the Publick” and “exposed upon every Table” (507). The language of shrinking and exposure imagines the obsolescence of books in the eighteenth century: “Were all Books reduced thus to their Quintessence, many a bulky Author would make his Appearance in a Penny Paper: There would be scarce such a thing in Nature as a Folio: The Works of an Age would be contained on a few Shelves; not to mention Millions of Volumes that would be utterly annihilated” (506-507).

Addison asked readers to see the “virtue” of dispensing with uses of language that were designed to suit the material form of books. The technique of the Spectator papers was comparable to the new “Chymical Method” in pharmacy, which dispensed with the “Galenick” preparation of plant matter (506). The “Chymical” preparation of essences and distillations gave “the Virtue of a full Draught in a few Drops” (506). Punning on the word “virtue,” Addison separated the outcome of reading books—the virtual text—from the book material—the “full Draught,” with the “Nodding-places” and “Words of course.” Books had a salubrious substance in them—he calls it “Virtue”—that could be separated from bibliographic forms, processes, rituals, or places. The “virtue” of the book was retrieved in new instruments of consumption—in liquid vehicles, “Drops,” or broadsheet essays. The “quintessence” of an author could make its “appearance” in a few of Mr. Spectator’s words.

I want to ponder Addison’s passing remark in paper 124 for July 23, 1711, where he claims that the “Matter” of essays “must lie close together” on the page, or else the paper is “thrown by” (506). Addison suggests that the “closeness” or accessibility of information depends on avoiding “Repetitions, Tautologies, and Enlargements” (506): Addison recommends semantic diversity. We are more familiar with Addison’s opposition to the repetition of sounds in paper number 61 that was published May 10, devoted to the “Examination” (260) of an offensive form of empty eloquence—“a Sound, and nothing but a Sound”—the pun, and those who used it—Cicero, Shakespeare, Bishop Andrews, and, even in Mr. Spectator’s own day, longwinded pedants (263). The pun was the object of a “Test” (263) for the

---

305 Addison’s papers on wit follow a narrative of cultural refinement, in which printed, sociable commerce carries British culture away from the perils of punning which overwhelmed the ancients. See Jonathan Brody
presence of sensual repetition where there should be the mental “Delight” of resemblance (264). Addison taught readers to detect the meaninglessness of repetitions, directing them to “translate” witty expressions “into a different Language,” so that if the wit “vanishes in the Experiment, you may conclude it to have been a Punn . . . nothing but a Sound” (263).

Less familiar is Addison’s elevation of semantic novelty in the paper published the following day on May 11th, where Addison expanded on John Locke’s concept of wit by issuing a rule for writing. Using Locke’s theory of the mind, Addison gave some rules for managing resemblances, showing how to adjust the “Resemblance of Ideas” to the capacities of readers (264). Similar ideas should “lie close” together in the text only if they do “not lie too near one another in the Nature of things”—if they are not too similar (264). “Thus when a Poet tells us, the Bosom of his Mistress is as white as Snow, there is no Wit in the Comparison; but when he adds, with a Sigh, that it is as cold too, it then grows into Wit,” giving “Delight and Surprize to the Reader” (264).

Thus, Addison suggested that in order for language to be “close” or accessible to readers looking to receive information the text must not only be brief; the language must refer to things that do not “lie close,” to things that are pleasingly dissimilar, or varied. The Spectator devoted space in the previous paper to breaking this rule of novelty in writing. An example of bad synonymy was printed. Five words occurring in a single paragraph of the Spectator were near-synonyms oriented around the idea of “punning,” and the synonyms were a tedious array of Latinate “hard Names”:

I remember a Country School-master of my Acquaintance told me once, that he had been in Company with a Gentleman whom he looked upon to be the greatest Paragrammatist among the Moderns. Upon Enquiry, I found my learned Friend had dined that day with Mr. Swan, the famous Punnster; and desiring him to give me

some Account of Mr. Swan’s Conversation, he told me that he generally talked in the
Paronomasia, that he sometimes gave into the Plocé, but that in his humble Opinion
he shined most in the Antanaclasis.” (261)

“Paragram” and “paronomasia” are synonyms for “pun”; Plocé and antanaclasis are
synonyms denoting repetition of a word or phrase for emphasis. But the hard words
possessed a repetitive aspect in the crude sense of shared impenetrability. “Conversation”
was a loaded term, however, a prompt to consider whether Mr. Swan possessed the sociable
virtues of “easy exchange” as well as an impressive command of words. For Addison and his
readers, the “conversation” of a speaker reflected his or her manner of bestowing or gaining
information at the London coffee house, the tavern, or tea table.306

Spectator numbers 61 and 62 established that the periodical paper was a space for translating
books and speeches into information through the exposure of repetitive language. As the
broadsheet was exchanged for Mr. Swan’s eloquent synonymy, a paragraph of printed words
pinned down and measured the repetitive rhetoric. The “quintessence” of the speech was
nothing compared to its length. Addison’s experiment of printing Mr. Swan’s synonymy
suggested that mediation improved knowledge of the original text. Mr. Swan’s wit flourished
in the presence of learned companions who appreciated copious figures of speech, but his wit
did not travel or appear in print for examination. If the significance of the speech “vanishes”
in the “experiment” of printing it, it is because readers can see the repetition.

Synonymy was used to visualize the content of language. Addison’s page invited readers to
measure the number of ideas available for consumption by sensing the lack of semantic
differentiation in the given paragraph: there were four synonymous hard words, but only one
or two ideas. This “experiment” in transforming repetitive, abundant forms of speech was
also used in Spectator number 62 to expose the underlying information of a folio volume of
verse. In a single repetitive paragraph, seventeen metaphors were displayed that were based
on “flame” as a synonym for “love,” collected from thirteen poems that were included in
Abraham Cowley’s collection of eighty-four love poems, The Mistress. The Spectator

306 Mee, Conversable Worlds, 43.
devoted one quarter of his sheet on one side to showing how Cowley managed to extend a single proposition—that love resembles fire—into what seemed like “an infinite Number of Witticisms” (266). With the metaphors transplanted from the book and printed in one paragraph, Cowley’s expansive wit became a list of considerable duration without transitions or breaks; the figures were revealed to contain the same essential meaning in deceptively different forms:

*Cowley* observing the cold Regard of his Mistress’s Eyes, and at the same Time their Power of producing Love in him considers them as Burning-Glasses made of Ice; and finding himself abler to live in the greatest Extremities of Love, concludes the Torrid Zone to be habitable. When his Mistress has read his Letter written in Juice of Lemmon holding it to the Fire, he desires her to read it over a second time by Love’s Flames. When she weeps, he wishes it were inward Heat that distilled those Drops from the Limbeck. When she is absent he is beyond eighty, that is, thirty Degrees nearer the Pole than when she is with him. His ambitious Love is a Fire that naturally mounts upwards; his happy Love is the Beams of Heaven, and his unhappy Love Flames of Hell. When it does not let him sleep, it is a Flame that sends up no Smoak; when it is opposed by Counsel and Advice, it is a Fire that rages the more by the Wind’s blowing upon it. Upon the dying of a Tree in which he had cut his Loves, he observes that his written Flames had burnt up and withered the Tree. When he resolves to give over his Passion, he tells us that one burnt like him for ever dreads the Fire. His Heart is an *Aetna*, that instead of *Vulcan’s* Shop encloses *Cupid’s* Forge in it. His endeavouring to drown his Love in Wine, is throwing Oil upon the Fire. He would insinuate to his Mistress, that the Fire of Love, like that of the Sun (which produces so many living Creatures) should not only warm but beget. Love in another Place cooks Pleasure at his Fire. Sometimes his Heart is frozen in every Breast, and sometimes scorched in every Eye. Sometimes he is drowned in Tears, and burnt in Love, like a Ship set on Fire in the Middle of the Sea. (266)

The forms of verse in which the metaphor varieties were printed in the folio did not make a difference to Addison. Cowley had “taken an Advantage” (266) of the synonymy of “love” and “the Word Fire” “to make” metaphors, amplifying his idea: love is like “Burning”
Glasses,” the “Torrid Zone,” the “Beams” of the sun, “Hell” and various other situations involving heat and flames. This compressed passage suggests that Cowley’s essential point is not diversified by the formal arrangement of the Mistress, not “sometimes,” not “in another Place,” nor “when his Mistress has read his letter,” not even “when she is absent.” The Spectator’s list is bewildering in its comprehensiveness, in the amount of proof it provides of Cowley’s monotony. In the folio book, the metaphors were located in different places, but in the Spectator, they are part of a list that exposes the poverty of ideas in Cowley. A number of the metaphors Addison quoted were included in lyrics to melodies written by William King and William Turner, who were probably part of Cowley’s social circle at Oxford (as well as lyrics to songs by Henry Purcell, and Pietro Reggio).<sup>307</sup> Woven through Cowley’s massive folio collection, or sung out as lyrics, the metaphors had taken the form of a gloating “compendium” of rakish wit, so that the predictable crudity of the fire that “cooks Pleasure” or “mounts upward” had a place in the social milieu in which these metaphors were probably recited and shared with deliberate copiousness.

The tedium of Cowley’s metaphors came from having to read the same ideas at once in the Spectator. However, with these selected excerpts, The Spectator attempted to visualize or simulate the implicit monotony of Cowley’s folio volume. Addison’s experiments in information suggested that reading a paragraph could give readers crucial knowledge about a book. The result was not only a humorous exercise in tedium, but a “test” or “Experiment” which proved that different formats shared information patterns—one in long form, the other in short.

The Error of Synonymy and the Use of Synonyms

What is fascinating about Addison’s “virtual” texts is the way in which they are explicitly presented as commodities designed to appeal to readers’ desire for novelty and pleasure.

---

Addison seemed content to rely on his readers’ sense of what was worth knowing, and what was better thrown away. After the *Spectator*’s heyday, synonymy came to be associated with forms of copious eloquence that were unwanted on paper. In a 1733 essay “On Literary Style,” in an issue of the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Benjamin Franklin warned against using “Synonima” to amplify the printed text, especially in the periodical papers. “The Art of saying Little in Much, should only be allowed to speakers,” he advised. Considering oratorical amplification from the perspective of transatlantic print culture, Franklin noticed that the need to lengthen was specific to the speech’s occasion: speakers have to fill up intervals of time. In the courtroom, where a lawyer was allowed to “talk so much and long,” the jury could believe that his volubility had meaning—he “must be in the Right” because his speech was abundant. When the speech was printed, however, time and distance created a “calm leisurely” perspective from which the “needless” “Thing” could be seen or detected on paper. Franklin expected there to be an “affront” in the sight of synonymous words on the page—the “needless” *printed* “synonima” must “give Offense.”

Thinking about the rhetorical figure of synonymy in a print setting allowed Franklin to separate an amount of thought from a “vehicle” that it was conveyed in. There was spoken eloquence on one hand, where the speaker had need to lengthen, repeat, and otherwise form the speech to suit the time and place, and on the other hand, the examined space of the page, where the reader judged what was needed and what to overlook. The very same “naked Thoughts” of the speaker could be conveyed in printed form, and readers could count the needless words and weigh the ideas present. If “Synonya” belonged to the “Art of saying Little in much”—rhetoric—print was used by readers to measure how much had really been said. Alexander Pope satirized printed amplifications as violations of the ethos of the book trade. Writers using synonymy to expand their expressions could hardly deny that there was profit to be made in longer printed commodities. While Longinus, in the *Peri Hypsos*, had merely discussed the difference between sublime *height* and amplification’s addition of *weight*, Pope’s amplifying writer was the prolific woman writer of many a “vast romance”

---

and “many a fair volume.” Anyone could see that she “draws out and spreads” her “half a dozen thin thoughts over a whole Folio.”

In 1749 Benjamin Martin attempted to negotiate a space for receiving information that involved the reduction of the physical appearances of synonymous or semantically similar words. Martin arranged the English language in a dictionary according to the rule that there was no need to print words with similar meanings on paper. The *Lingua Britannica Reformata* eliminated the appearance of derivative adjectives, participles, and verbal nouns. Perhaps Martin’s devotion to the essential meaning of the “radical word” (“*to Abuse*” rather than “*Abusive, Abusively, Abusing, Abusiveness*” as he explains) was not unusual, but Martin insisted on making “room” in his book only for the space which would be required for the reader’s “understanding.” His formula for this use of paper was inexact, but went something like this: the English lexicon should require enough space for the language’s radical meanings to be “well explained,” but not so much space as to constitute, by the listing of too many words, an “Affront to the Reader.” Like Johnson in his dictionary, Martin made a point of listing *multiple* significations, *under* each word, distinguishing *different* meanings of a single term, but he was intent on avoiding the “redundancy” of too many related terms to spread through the dictionary. Thus Martin defined “To Abuse” as “1 to use improperly, or contrary to design. 2 to rail at or affront. 3 to injure or hurt,” but he did not include or define the term “abusive” as a headword.

Martin reserved a “room” in the dictionary for ideas that had not already been covered in other dictionaries, prioritizing novelty and avoiding material duplication. His worry about affronting readers with repetition pointed to a confidence that readers used printed language to negotiate new knowledge effectively. The need to limit the material reproduction of English (to mute word varieties and the ramifications of the “radical” meaning in the

---


310 *Lingua Britannica Reformata* (London, 1749), iv.
different parts of speech) suggested that ideas could be retrieved through the lexicographer’s vigilance, his effort to dedicate space appropriately.

“Synonymy” the rhetorical figure—a group of words—was gradually replaced by the individual synonym. The English language dictionaries of Nathan Bailey and Samuel Johnson depended on synonyms to define English words. At the point that synonymous abundance was received as redundant or tedious print, English synonyms (countable, individual terms referred to in the singular “synonym” or plural “synonyms”) were being used in the practice of lexicography. In his Preface to the Dictionary, Johnson acknowledges that he had followed the lexicographical practice of using one synonym to define another, presenting the interchangeability of different words as a realistic compromise: “To interpret a language by itself is very difficult . . . . The idea signified” by multiple “synonimes” had “not more than one appellation.” According to Boswell’s Life of Johnson, Johnson wanted to insist that “originally,” there could not have been any “perfect synonimes” in any language. It was only over time, as occasions arose for “using words negligently, or in poetry,” according to Johnson, that “one word [came] to be confounded with another.” In the practice of English lexicography, however, the confusion of different words serves a purpose: the uniqueness of words, as Chesterfield suggested, could not be read in the English dictionary definition. Eighteenth-century English lexicographers “negligently” defined one word by printing others: Johnson defines “To Machinate” with “To plan; to contrive”; “Sad” with “Sorrowful”; “Yawn” with “Gape.” The casual interchangeability of synonyms as dictionary words explained and clarified meaning. Synonyms did in dictionaries what Quintillian insisted they should never do—“reaffirm the same meaning.”

Bad synonymy—discouraged in periodical essays and avoided in Martin’s succinct lexicon—was made good in the Dictionary. As Janet Sorensen points out in The Grammar of Empire,


312 Cited in the Oxford English Dictionary under “synonym, n.” l.a. As I want to show, Johnson’s explanation for why synonyms differ semantically would not have been sanctioned by Piozzi, who believed that synonyms acquired their distinctions in use.
the eighteenth-century dictionary attempted to mobilize “thought” “across time and space without modification”—with “detachment from material embodiment.”

Johnson in his practice of lexicography actually capitalized on the historical confusion of words. A “Yawn” was a “Gape,” to be “Sad” was to be “Sorrowful.” Although the terms presented slightly different connotations and contexts, their meanings were roughly equivalent.

Synonymy became the everyday underpinning of mobile ideas. Once there was “more than one appellation” for an idea, then ideas could be said to “pass . . . through a Medium which is corporeal,” John Harris argued in Hermes (1751), a work on grammar and long-distance communication. According to Harris, arbitrary signs (as opposed to imitative sounds) did a better job of moving ideas with “ease and speed,” through a medium that “knows no trouble or fatigue.”

Johnson took notice of the way the different synonyms had to be rendered arbitrary by force, in the attempt to give access to “a language by itself.” Johnson (echoing Harris) declared in 1755 that “Language is only the instrument” of truth. Synonymy was useful in its profusion, yet almost redundant in its varieties because “words are the daughters of earth . . . things are the sons of heaven.”

The use of printed synonyms began to be identified with negligence and tautology at the end of the eighteenth century. Thus, while George Campbell in The Philosophy of Rhetoric (1776) acknowledged “synonymy” as a valid figure for demonstrating inexpressible feeling in speeches before an audience, he declared that synonyms “add nothing” to books: “coupling words together or nearly synonymous” in print was “tautology,” a form of negligent composition “to be found even in our best writers.” Campbell said that there was a lack of significance in the use of multiple written synonyms: “there are certain synonyms which it is become customary with some writers regularly to link together, insomuch that a reader no sooner meets with one of them than he anticipates the introduction of its usual

---

attendant . . . Such are, *plain and evident, clear and obvious, worship and adoration, pleasure and satisfaction, bounds and limits, suspicion and jealousy, courage and resolution, intents and purposes.*\(^{316}\) Added to the confusion was the “ tiresome sameness” of “redundancy” in words “invariably strung together” by habit.\(^{317}\) However, in speeches when “the impassioned speaker . . . refers to repetition and synonymy,” the audience was “carried along with him” in “sympathy” because there was a great deal of “expression in the very effort shown by recurring to synonyms.”\(^{318}\) Campbell’s use of the term “sympathy” suggests that eloquent repetitions borrowed meaning from the audience. In books, however, synonymy had no “advantage” to “be made of it” for “the furtherance of knowledge,” except “as explications of the words.”\(^{319}\)  

**Vacuous Writing**

Hester Lynch Piozzi’s work as a writer bordered on that of the secretary: her *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson* (1786) was an appealing document of “conversation,” the instructive verbal exchanges which took place in Britain’s distinguished households. At Streatham, Piozzi hosted eloquent conversations where the most celebrated wits played the “game” (as she once called it) of talk.\(^{320}\) Piozzi’s published work as a reporter of conversation was criticized for negligent amplifications of the sort which Campbell censured. Piozzi is now known as the diarist of the “Thraliana” manuscript books, of whose pages, she said that she

---

\(^{316}\) *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (London, 1776), 2:274.  
\(^{317}\) Campbell,296  
\(^{318}\) 2:274-275. Written as a series of lectures over a twenty-five year period, the *Philosophy* shows Campbell to have been revising his approach to a number of his topics, according to Arthur E. Waltzer in “On Reading George Campbell: ‘Resemblance ‘ and ‘Vivacity’ in the *Philosophy of Rhetoric*” in *Rhetorica* 18.3 (2000): 321-42. Part II, where this part on synonymy occurs, appears to have been written at an earlier stage of Campbell’s thinking. Part III, where Campbell undertakes a second discussion of synonymy and sentiment with a very different approach, reflects a significant change in his thinking on many subjects, Waltzer argues.  
\(^{319}\) Ibid, 2:105-106.  
would “endeavour to fill it with nonsense new and old”: from 1776 to 1809, the books were what she called a “repository” of “the conversation of every person of almost every class with whom I have had intercourse; my remarks on what was said; downright facts and scandalous on dits; personal portraits and anecdotes of the characters concerned; criticism on the publications and authors of the day, &c.”321 Piozzi was known in her time for putting the conversation of her famous houseguest, Samuel Johnson, into print, in a book that Horace Walpole called “a heap of rubbish”—The Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson (1786).322

Piozzi—then called “Mrs. Thrale” in the papers—was the woman writer whose husband provided a home to Johnson from 1766 until 1781. There at Streatham, with Piozzi’s companionship and the visits of Oliver Goldsmith, Edmund Burke, and Frances Burney, among others, an era of “conversational greatness” emerged that would finally end when Piozzi sold the house and “bound down” the talk in a book commodity, the Anecdotes. Readers could not deny their “nostalgic sense of the 1770’s and 1780s as a golden age of talk.”323 But the Anecdotes were criticized for failing to censor some of Johnson’s negligent language and the sounds of the house surrounding him. A review in the Town and Country Magazine acknowledged that the printing of Johnson’s domestic speech “conveys much information” to readers beyond the circle of his friends. However, readers struggled with the “effusions” of Piozzi’s pen that surrounded the wisdom of Johnson, with the unwanted “colloquial barbarisms” of the language heard at Streatham every day.324 This “effusive” flow of talk was not simply the background of Johnson’s words, but seemingly the only form in which Johnson’s wisdom could be preserved, the mundane “world that enable[d] the great man’s writing,” as Helen Deutsch argues: readers of the Anecdotes were made to feel “Johnson’s dependency on the feminine world of household economy.”325

---

323 Mee, Conversable Worlds, 98.
324 Town and Country Magazine 18 (May 1786): 288
325 Loving Dr. Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 185.
In the *Anecdotes*, Piozzi recalls a time when she and Johnson had been talking about “old age,” and Piozzi records her memory of Johnson’s remark that “a man commonly grew wickeder as he grew older.” At that moment there was an occurrence that tempted Johnson to make an unfortunate witticism: “While we were talking, my mother’s spaniel whom he never loved, stole our toast and butter; Fye, Belle! said I, you used to be upon honour; ‘Yes madam (replies Johnson), *but Belle grows old*.’” Continuing the theme, Piozzi takes Johnson’s crude observation in stride and expands on the general conduct of Belle: “The truth is, Belle was not well behaved, and being a large spaniel, was troublesome enough at dinner with frequent solicitations to be fed.” She adds that Johnson was particularly offended by “superfluous attention to brutes,” but Johnson’s own thoughts in the *Anecdotes* responded to the noise.326

Piozzi’s “florid” style offended reviewers who were looking for knowledge communicated through Johnson’s conversation: their expectations of finding Johnson’s wisdom brought them into close encounters with Piozzi’s superfluous words. Piozzi’s *Observations and Reflections Made in the Course of a Journey through France, Italy, and Germany* (1789) was similarly praised for “accurate” and “spirited” sentences that would “not discredit the pen of a Johnson or a Gibbon,” but criticized for allowing those sentences to be “surrounded by a context crowded with familiar phrases and vulgar idioms.” The *European Magazine* provided examples of the offensive, “vacant terms” in its review, carefully preserving the words that should have been deleted—“‘to be sure,’ ‘sweet creature,’ ‘lovely theatre,’ ‘though,’ ‘vastly,’ ‘exactly,’ ‘so,’ ‘charming,’ ‘dear, dear.’”327 These words exemplified Piozzi’s tendency to write with the phrases that were required in company (to signal one’s possession of unthreatening emotions), but that in print were inserted needlessly, or “crowded.” A friend of Piozzi claimed that “to read 20 pages and hear Mrs. P talk for 20 minutes is the same thing,” an acknowledgement which suggested that her style was discussed among allies.328 However,

---

326 *Anecdotes*, 144-145.
327 *European Magazine*, 16 (Nov. 1789), 332.
Piozzi’s contemporaries counted pages and listed words when they felt that she was talking in a book.

The superfluous, “vacant” terms that were printed in the *Observations* and re-printed in the *European Magazine* violated the informational mandate to reduce language and display ideas. Piozzi’s redundant words belonged to the negligent “flow” of idiomatic phrases—to collocations like “sweet creature,” “dear, dear,” and “to be sure.” Her readers regarded these customs of language as errors in print, expecting that speech would be revised. Printed books required a unique choice of words, not an adherence to the same. Her writing style preserved the “heaps” of familiar combinations, the tendency of “creature” to go with “sweet,” “dear” with another “dear.”

In Piozzi’s writing are the phrases which Piozzi used to talk to Johnson: her language as a secretary of habitual eloquence was the corporeal medium of domestic relationships. It is true that the *Anecdotes* were written when Piozzi was abroad in Europe without her notebooks, meeting the demand of her publisher; Johnson’s language was not exactly recorded. Nor did she write conversation down in company. She claimed, in the *Anecdotes*, never to have performed the “trick . . . played on common occasions, of sitting steadily down at the other end of the room to write at the moment what should be said in company. . . A set of acquaintances joined in familiar chat may say a thousand things, which (as the phrase is) pass well enough at the time, though they cannot stand the test of critical examination . . . all talk beyond that which is necessary to the purposes of actual business is a kind of game.” Nevertheless, Piozzi preserved Johnson by writing in the vacuous style,


331 *Anecdotes*, 74.
rehearsing the “familiar chat” that had been used while living in “intimacy with the manners of Dr. Johnson.”

In the Anecdotes, there is a story about how Johnson was once surprised by his surroundings and unable to choose the right word himself. He was walking near the Thames, where a group of men at a tavern wanted to settle a dispute by stepping outside and consulting the author of the Dictionary: “As he was walking along the Strand a gentleman stepped out of some neighbouring tavern, with his napkin in his hand and no hat, and stopping him as civilly as he could—I beg your pardon, Sir; but you are Dr. Johnson, I believe. ‘Yes, Sir.’ We have a wager depending on your reply: Pray, Sir, is it irrèparable or irrepàrollable that one should say?” Johnson is reported to have said that “you had better consult my Dictionary than me, for that was the result of more thought than you will now give me time for.” While Johnson appeared to stand by his printed work, Piozzi’s anecdote reports a critical breakdown in the enlightenment fantasy of education, where the public intellectual fails to summarize the same contents of his book on the street. Piozzi’s Johnson, confronted by a hatless man with a pronunciation question, discloses multiple options at the limits of the Dictionary. Or perhaps the lexicographer’s bafflement suggests that the Dictionary’s information was constructed in the peculiar setting of that book, not in Johnson’s memory.

**British Synonymy and Obscurity**

In the spring of 1791, Hester Lynch Piozzi re-visited Addison’s mandate to avoid superfluity in print. In one part of the “hundred and forty-nine pages” of dialogues on literature and philosophy that she never printed, the interlocutors “Una” & Duessa,” Spenserian allegorical characters representing truth and corporeality, debated the value of “amplified” books. Could writing amplified by rhetorical decorations be defended on grounds of style, or was all amplified writing incorrect? Should writers “cull every Flower of Rhetoric” and call this “plentitude”? Or did verbal abundance merely fill books with confusing material: “Words too much accumulated—notes too much confused, & cluttered all together”? Una points out that

---

332 Ibid, 59.
333 Ibid, 136.
“something will always be wanting” in laconic books, because their ambiguities give reader-Antagonists an opening to respond. By adding words, elaborations draw a “Boundary” that prevents readers from taking “Advantag[e].”

Duessa wanted to challenge the idea that printed superfluity created obscurity that was incorrect or erroneous, that readers should resist “flowers” of “Rhetoric” and a “plenitude” of words. In the *Elements of Elocution* (1781), John Walker stated that amplification could be used to slow down the apprehension of ideas: in the phrase “Alexander wept,” for instance, the words “convey only two ideas, which are apprehended the moment they are pronounced; but if these words are amplified by adjuncts of specification, as in the following sentence—*The great and invincible Alexander, wept for the fate of Darius*”—there must be a “pause” so that the “complex nominative and verb may . . . be more readily and distinctly conceived.”

Una argued that writers could “err from Redundance” when the words were too numerous, if readers could not “readily and distinctly conceiv[e]” the idea. But Duessa maintained that this stricture against written abundance merely derived from Addison, who went too far in “recommend[ing] Simplicity as the only Charm” of good writing.

The plain style of Addison was being re-thought at the end of the century. The new discipline of British “literature” created a space for the appreciation of amplified writings. According to Robin Valenza’s *Literature, Language, and the Rise of the Intellectual Disciplines in Britain, 1620-1830*, “literature” had become a separate category of reading by the end of the century. In Piozzi’s time, literature was understood as “writing that can be read literarily as opposed to informationally.” Una admits that simple language has its genres: “For Historical, Political or Moral Truth, the plainest Diction is the best—Information is clouded by

---

334 Quoted from James Clifford’s transcription of the manuscript. See *Hester Lynch Piozzi*, 361.

335 *Elements of Elocution* (London, 1799), 41.


337 See Robin Valenza’s account, which “encompasses ‘literature’ in the sense of general learning and moves toward the moment in which ‘literature’ can no longer fill this semantic role because it refers to a special quality of some kinds of writing that can be read literarily as opposed to informationally.” *Literature, Language, and the Rise of the Intellectual Disciplines in Britain, 1680-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 26.
Multiplicity of ideas however elegantly expressed, while the Reader looks in vain for his lost Position, & receives only Delight in lieu of the Instruction he sought for.”\textsuperscript{338} “Information” gave readers a “position” in the book, where the “Instruction” “sought can be found”—or “lost”—hindered by amplification’s “Multiplicity” of words that “only Delight” the senses.\textsuperscript{339} With an idea that reading literature was a distinct activity, Piozzi attempted to preserve the “flowers” of rhetoric for more complicated forms of appreciation: “I will not call it Redundance,” Duessa maintains mysteriously, not saying what “it” is.\textsuperscript{340}

In her “Una & Duessa” dialogue, Piozzi brought forward the special value of “accumulated” words and defended the “multiplicity” of different styles. Piozzi had an aesthetic basis for elevating superfluity in what Hugh Blair had earlier called “the diversity of tastes” in his \textit{Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres} (1783): if one reader prefers “Poetry most, another takes pleasure in nothing but History . . . One admires the simple; another, the ornamented style.” While matters of “Reason” demanded the same response from all readers universally, matters of style called for the consideration of different verbal “Objects” seen or felt for their “Beauty,” depending on the reader’s “turn of mind.”\textsuperscript{341}

After scrapping “Una and Duessa,” Piozzi began \textit{British Synonymy}.\textsuperscript{342} An answer to Chesterfield’s rallying cry for the colloquial dressing-room terms that were “not synonymous” with dictionary words, \textit{British Synonymy} was a collection of words that were

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{338} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{339} Clifford, \textit{Hester Lynch Piozzi}, 361.
\item \textsuperscript{340} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{341} \textit{Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres} (London, 1783), 27-28.
\item \textsuperscript{342} An entry in the Thraliana for “Streatham Park: 1: June 1792” suggests that the \textit{Synonymy} was under way: See volume II, ed. Katharine C. Balderston (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1942), 837-838. Piozzi mentions working on “a two Volume Book of \textit{Synones} in English, like what the Abbé Girard has done in French, for the use of Foreigners, and other Children of six feet high: such a Business well manag’d would be useful, but I have not depth of Literature to do it as one ought.—a good parlour-Window Book is however quite within my Compass, and such a one would bring me Fame for ought I know, & a hundred Pounds which I want more . . .”
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
used in the “familiar conversation” of Britain’s authors. In the Preface, Piozzi allowed herself to remark that she had composed British Synonymy “near the banks of that Thames which Sir John Denham describes [in Cooper’s Hill], in terms so closely allied though never synonymous, so truly beautiful, though approaching to redundancy”: “Tho’ deep yet clear, tho’ gentle yet not dull, Strong without rage, without o’erflowing—full” (viii). Piozzi’s quotation suggested British Synonymy dealt with the natural flow of English speech rather than the ideas communicated by words, just as Denham used redundant words to imitate the motion of the river: “O could I flow like thee, and make thy stream/My great example, as it is my theme!” In his “Life of Denham” Johnson found fault with the well-known line because the “material” qualities of the river “cannot be translated” into the “intellectual operations” of the speaker—into the theme of “rage.” But Johnson admitted that the “flow” of words had a “beauty peculiar to itself.” In fact, Denham’s peculiar flow led Johnson to speculate about the moment in which Denham had written the poem. Johnson claimed that the word choices must have been “felicities which cannot be produced at will by wit and labour.” Distinctive lines such as Denham’s “must arise unexpectedly in some hour propitious to poetry.”

Piozzi’s British Synonymy opened with a quotation that had been discussed in Johnson’s “Life of Denham” as a moment in which English words were allowed to open up to history. The combination of words in Denham’s lines existed as a relic preserving the remains of a poetic time and space which had brought them together. For the accidental beauty of this verse, Johnson relaxed his critical rule that the Thames not be addressed in terms that were “useless and puerile” (a rule which he used to denounce Gray’s “supplication to father Thames,” in a Prospect of Eton College, in which the speaker asks the river “to tell him who drives the hoop or tosses the ball,” despite the fact that “Father Thames has no better means of knowing than himself.”) Johnson took a moment to appreciate the useless words that he called the “daughters of earth” in the Dictionary as words inspired by the writer’s British

343 Jon Mee mentions that Piozzi kept a score chart of her friends’ conversation based on their “‘general knowledge,’” “‘person and voice.” See Conversable Worlds, 89.
surroundings. Opening her book with Denham’s couplet, Piozzi suggested that redundant words were “never synonymous” because the words had taken place within literary forms.

Synonyms were supposed to occupy a space in the national language that was akin to common, unenclosed land: Campbell mentioned that synonyms were to be used according to “distinctions” resembling the customary “barriers use hath erected” within local parishes.\(^\text{346}\) Unenclosed land, as Evan Gottlieb and Juliet Shields have noted, “required an insider’s knowledge of the terrain” to navigate its use: the “individuating features” of the land were traditionally recognizable to inhabitants alone.\(^\text{347}\) The language-land metaphor held that English synonyms were distinguishable with contextualized use over time. Outsiders, however, the “foreign friends” to whom Piozzi directs British Synonymy, could not distinguish their true significance. Piozzi’s article on “Fortune, Fashion, Family, Rank, Birth, Nobility” made such a warning to readers: “Strangers in England, who hear us hourly celebrating acquaintances as people that possess some one if not all of these shining though casual advantages, are apt of course to confound them, while we residents know nothing with more certainty than that they are not synonymous” (151).

The title page identifies the readers of British Synonymy as the “foreign friends” of Piozzi while the Preface declares that the work jettisons the “power of thinking” (vii). In its methodology of language instruction, British Synonymy distinguished itself from its predecessor—the “Frenchman’s volumes”—Girard’s La Justesse de la Langue Françoise. Girard had insisted that the material differences among synonyms are trivial, and that it was the ideas attached to the words that made them significant: “chaque page” of Girard’s book was devoted to variety that was neither seen nor heard “matiere nouvelle”—“chacun d’eux [the synonyms] y ajoute . . . quelques idées accessoires, qui diversifient la principale” (my emphasis).\(^\text{348}\) Girard boasted of the great “nombre des pensées” in his synonymy book—not

\(^\text{346}\) Campbell, Philosophy of Rhetoric, 1:478.

\(^\text{347}\) “Introduction” in Representing Place in British Literature and Culture, 1660-1800, ed. Evan Gottlieb and Juliet Shields (Farnham, Surrey: 2013), 5.

\(^\text{348}\) La Justesse de la Langue Françoise, xxiiij, xxvij.
of the number of words. Piozzi, on the other hand, asked for protection from “the votaries of pleonasm” (vii), an example of which erroneous figure was furnished by Anne Fisher in her Practical New Grammar, with Exercises of Bad English (1762), “I saw it with my Eyes.”

Language instruction for Piozzi involved readers in a process of filling or completing the regular forms, perhaps with deliberate patience for obscurity. What made “family” different from “birth”? “No one but a British subject, who has in their minds claim to neither, could ever think of separating the ideas of Birth and Family” Piozzi says. “We keep them apart, however, and call Sir Roger Mostyn for example a man of ancient and respectable Family, no more, though nineteenth in descent from Edward the First, king of England, and thirteenth if I mistake not from John of Gaunt, called the great duke of Lancaster, father to Henry the Fourth. Elizabeth Percy meantime, late duchess of Northumberland, boasted and justly her illustrious Birth; nor can we deny that compliment to the Howards.” Piozzi recites such examples of use before coming to her main point: “In a word, Birth conveys to us more the idea of majestic dignity—the term Family pays more peculiar respect to venerable antiquity” (153). Delaying the explanation of ideas, Piozzi dilates on habits of word choice (relishing an opportunity not to “deny” her compliments to the royal family), putting emphasis on the tone that words have among her allies and friends. Later in the book, Piozzi knowingly quoted Pope’s satire of feminine books that had been prevented from serving their household function in “tapers” and “pies”: Book I of the Dunciad, where the Goddess with: “Her ample presence fills up all the place; / A veil of fogs dilates her awful face” (l.156, 261-62). Piozzi filled her short articles on synonyms with in-group talk and ceremonious recitations that showed readers how to talk.

In Piozzi’s article on “to extend” “to stretch,” “to amplify” “to dilate,” she speaks with vague, shifting referents: “if gold for instance does admit of easily being Extended, we can scarce call that Amplifying which rather implies diminishing its parts, even in the very act of

349 Ibid, Xxxv.

350 Practical New Grammar (Newcastle, 1762), 120.
Dilating them, although by dint of Stretching them forward, space certainly becomes occupied in a longer not wider direction” (124). Despite the attitude of precision and the deictic, demonstrative language in the passage—“for instance,” “that,” and “the very,” when we attempt to grasp the meaning of these individual synonyms, we are instead confronted by ironies and tensions that are not explained. Consulting Johnson’s Dictionary, we find there that “Amplify,” “Dilate,” and “Extend” tend to be defined with the word “enlarge,” while to “Dilate” and to “Extend” are defined with the “diffuse.”  

Perhaps Piozzi refers to the paradox of overlapping yet opposed meanings. Piozzi’s voice, however, is that of one intimately familiar with the words she discusses, rather than of one who examines them at a distance. Like the anecdote of Mr. Swan in the Spectator, who rattled off several obscure words whose subtly overlapping meanings his audience failed to appreciate—Paragrammatist Paronomasia, Plocé, Antanaclasis—Piozzi simulated a kind of alienating immersion in elliptical British talk, treating her subject with a familiarity that readers were not supposed to possess.

Gathered in British Synonymy were the English terms which were used to translate one another in the ritual of the gloss in dictionaries. Here their differences were brought into play, without the lexical resources to tell them apart: all synonyms were in use. Despite the obscurity of the passage, however, Piozzi adopted the familiar first person “we” to refer to the synonyms as objects that came before the senses. With its alienating, familiar approach to English, Piozzi’s British Synonymy resembled those editions of Scots vernacular poetry discussed by Janet Sorensen as producing “senses of the local” through the use of obscurity, constructing barriers to the exchange of polite knowledge. An edition of Robert Burns’s Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect (1787) contained a glossary in which relevant definitions were left out, suggesting “the limits of glossaries as sites of disclosure.”

---

351 “To Amplify” is “To enlarge, or extend any thing incorporeal,” “To Dilate” is “To extend; to spread out; to enlarge” and “To relate at large; to tell diffusely and copiously,” “To Extend” is “To spread abroad; to diffuse; to expand” and “To enlarge; to continue”; Dictionary of the English Language (London, 1755), n.p.

352 “Local Language: Obscurity and Open Secrets in Scots Vernacular Poetry” in Representing Place in British Literature and Culture, 1660-1830, 50, 63, 56.
Piozzi’s foreign readers were invited to tolerate obscurity in order to acquire a local knowledge of *British* language.

The Medium of Amplified Language

There is no explicit theory of language in *British Synonymy* (grammar is the “province of men” [iv] she says). However, “Copiousness” had a casual association with the idea of “fluency” in the eighteenth century. Pope used this sense of “fluency” in the *First Epistle of the Second Book of Horace*. “Fluent Shakespear scarce effac’d a line”: the bard failed to observe the rule that writing and spoken eloquence must be different, the eighteenth-century stricture to write less and treat the page as a filter. Piozzi mentioned that “fluency” carried “an idea as if eloquence were put in the place of instruction” (147). In the article on “Fluency, Smoothness, and Volubility,” copious language is a channel or a “stream whose Fluency . . . carries some grains of gold into that ocean,” the “ocean” being the public for which a text was destined (147). The “grains” hint at traces of context picked up and preserved in print. Piozzi says that “Fluency” in print preserves language customs of certain places and times “like a strain of sweet Volubility in talk, it takes up the valuable part of every land through which it flows” (147).

The variety of synonyms in English was an archive of British usages. In her articles, Piozzi used each synonym as a finding device to pick up strands or “streams” of British words: “flowers” were usually evoked by the term “Exuberant,” while “fragrance” was often collocated with “Superfluous” and “rains” were more often “Redundant” than any other synonym (126). The British said “Action” when they were speaking of the “theater,” but “Gesticulation” when discussing a “room” (157). One synonym carried a remembered set of words with it, providing the context that rendered each English synonym unique.

During the late eighteenth century, manuscript (rather than print) was imagined more readily as a site of contact between paper and the habits of common language. Alvaro Ribeiro argues

---

that Piozzi and Charles Burney liked to think of their epistolary correspondence as “‘chat’ or ‘prattle,’... [with] allusions, and echoes of remembered conversation.” Johnson once wrote a letter to Piozzi in which he accused himself of “prattle[ing] upon paper”—(in 1778), filling paper up with words rather than putting ideas down in words: “I have prattled now till the paper will not hold much more.”

Eighteenth-century print, by contrast, was thought to eschew the sounds of the voice and the flow of its words: writers typically debated the merits of speech versus writing. Nick Hudson has shown that in the sixties and seventies, it became “a prominent and fashionable opinion” that the intonations of the voice were essential to meaning, and writers asked whether print could completely replace the practices of eloquence. Piozzi suggested that print versus oral expression was a false choice: the point was to make books hold everything that manuscript letters and notebooks did.

In Piozzi’s book of English’s redundant words, mediation was a natural phenomenon rather than an intellectual selection of arbitrary signs. Piozzi’s understanding of mediation is known to have been influenced by the theory of James Harris, who posited that there were two forms of “Medium”: not only that of the “arbitrary” “Symbol,” but that “derived from Natural Attributes, which “is an Imitation.” While symbols were arbitrary, and followed the rule that the medium should differ from what it delivered, imitative sounds were the same—analagous. Harris suggested that imitative language (“Sounds . . . thro the Medium of Sounds,” rather than through arbitrary symbols) would be “perfectly superfluous,” since it would consist of the very thing we want to “communicate” or “pass” along to others. His

357 Hermes or a Philosophical Inquiry Concerning Universal Grammar (London, 1765), 331.
358 Ibid., 333-335.
theory of communication fosters the distance it is supposed to overcome, privileging the delivery of information from afar over the repetition of language, which is superfluous and immediately visible.

Piozzi’s book contained echoes of patterns of remembered speech. *British Synonymy* imparted the knowledge of a native language to foreigners, but it did so in a manner that can be contrasted with contemporary projects that documented oral speech in the book. Synonymy differs from the phonetic symbols used by Thomas Sheridan in the *General Dictionary* to guide pronunciation, or the dashes and flourishes provided by Tristram Shandy, whose “writing” was “but a different name for conversation.” Sheridan’s dictionary had phonetic spellings and symbols guiding the pronunciation of vowels, while Tristram’s dashes guided the reader to pause in the articulation of the book’s voices. Piozzi pointed to the way in which words already preserved impressions of the places they had been used. Printed words were tried first in different places: “bullion is not current till ‘tis coined” (147). Like pieces of money, British words could not be useful in isolation—they could only be repeated, or identified in relation to other words in context. Piozzi’s metaphor suggested that synonyms, like eighteenth-century British coins, were *things* whose bodies were seen, rather than symbols that were arbitrary. Synonyms acquired different identities by recalling (to Britons) the ways they had been used: in *Chrysal: or, the Adventures of a Guinea* (1760), the coin says that circulation “deprived me of a fourth part of my weight, and all of my beauty,” and in the *Tatler*, a coin reports that circulation “retrenched my Shape.” “Fluency” suggested the pragmatic ability of a native speaker to feel the proper “weight” and “shape” of words given the context of their regular use, to hear when a word was out of place or to feel that the word order was wrong: “[O]ne says good Habits grow up into a settled Custom of doing right, and it does not sound so well or proper if we reverse the words” (163). One should “commend” “virtue,” “celebrate” “knowledge,” “praise” “learning” and “extol” “genius” (125). Piozzi added that “we feel disposed” to choose a word—“we feel disposed to

---

359 Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 83

"Praise a man’s learning” (125, emphasis mine). Printed words resonated with practices of use that felt right.

While Piozzi’s understanding of mediation was oriented around the idea of imitation, and the sense that words naturally echoed and fit their surroundings, *British Synonymy* was nonetheless an attempt to transmit knowledge about language across a language barrier governed by geographic distance: Piozzi was granting access to a “grain” of gold, to some local quantity or thing that synonyms documented or recorded, and her aim was to instruct her “foreign friends,” possibly the particular French and Italian friends met during her travels or the friends of her second husband, Italian singer Gabriel Piozzi, who visited them in England or Wales.

While Harris thought that individual, arbitrary symbols formed the easiest and quickest long-distance medium, Piozzi used the material of each synonym to transmit a feeling for local word usages. Britons naturally heard and saw synonyms as they participated in distinctive national rituals of literary culture, arranging words in the “proper” manner. Recognizing synonyms was a habit of associating words with specific occasions or styles. Perhaps Piozzi was influenced by James Beattie’s comments on the importance of “accidental association in giving significance” to words (she referred readers to the *Essays on the Nature and Immutability of Truth* but refused to say much more, because “Quotation only mangles books like those[,] they should be read carefully, and read through” [127]). Beattie explained that “words” gain their “effect from association. We are accustomed to meet with [poetical words] in sublime and elegant writing; and hence they come to acquire sublimity and elegance” elsewhere. The association of words was “accidental”—a result of acclimating one’s self to literature. But Beattie argued that introducing variety into the customary patterns of association would produce “surprising incongruity,” and laughter: when custom had prepared listeners to hear assemblages, the deviations of choice or solecism risked causing social pain.361

Throughout *British Synonymy* Piozzi conveys a strong impression of the social force that holds words together in connected threads of conversation inspired by literature and other topics: she warns that the wrong synonym will bring about the laughter of polite British company. One may say “Wholesome advice,” or “a little Wholesome correction with a rod,” but “Were the other word [Healthy] to be substituted here,”—“healthy rod,” “the sentence would not only be vulgar, as it certainly is now—but laughable, and would subject a foreigner who should use it so, to derision” (166). One may speak of “an old Flame . . . which men do commonly enough,” but “should the uninformed stranger in a spirit of imitation think it a good notion for him to call her his Blaze, not the gravest of the whole party would probably forbear to laugh, though not one person in the company could give a reason why—but that it is not customary” (31). Piozzi writes that “if a foreigner speaking of the London CRIES called them the EXCLAMATIONS of the City, all would laugh.”

The popular *Cries of London*, “one of the oldest genres in British art” had “deluged the London book market” at the time with the cadences of the city’s street vendors. The custom of using “cries” on title pages for the series had made the term part of an enduring corporate ritual of street souvenirs. While the French had a cognate *Cris de Paris*, Augsburgers had *Ausruf*, Amsterdamers *Kaufrufe*, and Bolognians *L’ Arti*.

The interruption caused by the wrong synonym is repeatedly rehearsed in interesting anecdotes that enliven *British Synonymy* while teaching the associations that Britons feel. In the article for “Wayless, Pathless, Untracked” Piozzi relates the embarrassing story of Prince Gonzaga di Castiglione’s use of an inappropriate synonym on a visit, when “he dined in company with Doctor Johnson at the house of a common friend; and, thinking it was a polite, as well as gay thing to drink the Doctor’s health with some proof that he had read his works,

---

362 Although the *Cries* had traditionally celebrated the international presence of the milk maid, the cooper, and other pedlars by transcribing their cries in English, French, and Italian, after 1760, the captions were exclusively English. See Sean Shesgreen, *The Criers and Hawkers of London: Engravings and Drawings by Marcellus Laroon* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 52.

363 Ibid., 12, 47.

called out from the top of the table to the bottom, that table filled with company—*At your good health, Mr. Vagabond*, instead of Mr. *Rambler* . . . it put every body in the room out of countenance” (481). The prince’s attempt at a personal compliment to the author in his company proved that the Italian prince might have read Johnson in translation. Fleeman’s bibliography of Johnson’s works does not list an Italian translation of *The Rambler* published before 1826, but the French translation of *Le Rôdeur* had more of the “roamer” or “vagabond.” The Italian should have read the British *Rambler*.

**Touching the Medium**

How did readers use *British Synonymy*? Piozzi calls her work “a talking book” (39), not a book to search, but to read aloud. The length of the articles, most being about 500 words, suggests that the work was meant to entertain. Piozzi pauses to make quick observations about the applications of synonyms: in the case of “Honesty” and “Justice” she notes that “we find perhaps upon examination one word more elegantly adapted to persons,” as in the “the Honesty of . . . country gentlemen” and “one [word] to things,” as when “Justice seems the characteristic of Great Britain” (172). In spite of such observations, however, Piozzi reminds readers that “we must not suffer ourselves to be so detained” by analysis. By reading *British Synonymy* aloud, foreign readers were allowed to practice the forms which “each native however uninstructed *feels*” (172).

*British Synonymy* had little search capacity for its implied readers. One could only find “secret” and “private,” for instance, under the term “close” (x) and there were no cross-references in the Table of Contents. Although the articles were arranged by alphabetic order, the synonyms were distributed randomly, as in “Principle, Element, Rudiment, Primordial Substance” (xvii). The term “Bleak” was placed under the word “Cold”(xi), “Power” under “Ability” (vix), and “Contrition” under “Affliction” (vix). In the Preface, Piozzi directs readers to place the book in the “parlour window” rather than the “library shelf,” to keep the book out during conversations and interruptions from visitors (v). As a book for the parlour window, *British Synonymy* partook of the novel’s reading atmosphere discussed by Deidre Lynch, in which the book’s content was linked with the “circumstances of its reception”: the
parlour window book was ready to form a part of the necessary rituals of “everyday life,” like taking medicine or drinking tea. The entrance of books into company was a familiar part of eighteenth-century “domestic education,” where “hearing with partial, even passive, understanding” was a counterpart of formal education and study. In the parlour, the book could be kept out for short daily lessons in the manner that Maria Edgeworth recommended in her *Rational Primer* (1799): “each day about four minutes . . . . without sighs and tears.”

Piozzi suggested that reading taught people how to choose words. In the article on “Commend,” “Celebrate,” “Praise,” “Esteem” and “Extol,” for instance, prolonged exposure to Johnson’s *Lives of the Poets* (which was, like *British Synonymy*, comprised of separate parts that rehearsed commendatory statements about English literature) left readers in a position to choose among similar words—“a foreigner might, after perusing what our greatest critic has thought fit to say of our greatest poets”—have said that

Doctor Johnson Commends Isaac Watts with delight, and celebrates with pleasure the superiority of Dryden, that he praises Pope and Addison with deliberate and calm esteem of their great merit, while Shakespeare’s general powers and Milton’s *Paradise Lost* are by him justly and zealously Extolled above them all. (125)

Although Johnson used the synonyms throughout his writing, he did not use the word “commend” in his discussion of Watts, nor did he use the word “extol” with Milton, or “celebrate” and “praise” to represent his own attitude toward the writers. Piozzi could not have meant that Johnson furnished *examples* himself of the individual words in context but

---


rather that “after” repeated readings, one had an inclination to handle the word “commend” in a peculiar way. In Piozzi’s regimen for learning English, readers simply gain propensities to apply the words differently, without requiring examples or grammatical rules.

Piozzi’s *British Synonymy* attempted to simulate an experience of immersion in books that was like being in the rooms where English was seen and heard. In fact, when the third edition of *British Synonymy* was printed by the Parisian couple Anne Parsons and Giovanni Galignani in 1804, the book was presented in its original English as a form of “casual linguistic immersion.” Parsons and Galignani re-printed *British Synonymy* in English, Lisa Berglund writes, as part of their immersion project, and possibly used the book at “linguistic breakfasts and teas” as an alternative to grammars and dictionaries.\(^{368}\)

Galignani added numerous illustrative quotations which, Berglund argues, “position English as particularly the language of Shakespeare.”\(^{369}\) Perhaps Jane Austen’s later depiction of reading from a drawing-room book of Shakespeare in a scene of *Mansfield Park* (1814) may illustrate how reading “the language of Shakespeare” from *British Synonymy* may have worked.\(^{370}\)

The volume at the center of the scene in *Mansfield Park* “had the air of being very recently closed,” its aspect showing the use it had in the room just a moment before: Fanny had been using the volume to protect Lady Bertram from the feeling of silence. Then Henry Crawford picks up the book, “carefully giving way to the inclination of the leaves,” and begins to read “with the happiest knack, the happiest power of jumping and guessing.” With his “knack” for anticipating the coming word or phrase, Henry’s “reading” of Shakespeare in the drawing-room resembles what Chesterfield called “habitual eloquence,” an acquired skill for selecting the best words in company, “to please (instead of informing)” with “the harmony and roundness of my periods.” Henry admits to not having “had a volume of Shakespeare in [his]


\(^{369}\) Ibid, 85.

\(^{370}\) The untitled volume obviously contains *Henry VIII*. 
hand before”: his reading comes out of the air. He calls it “falling into the flow” of Shakespeare, whose “thoughts and beauties are so spread abroad that one touches them every where.” The play in Henry’s hands furnishes a test of proficiency in guessing what word or phrase comes next. His success confirms a proper enmeshment with the atmosphere surrounding the book, especially the words which would still be fresh in Fanny’s mind. His intuitive measurement of the phrases and lines on the page (“jumping and guessing”) is a form of access. Henry channels the bard’s style and awakens the personal habits of listeners as they remember the feeling of Shakespeare’s “beauties.” A “charm” or spell can be placed on personal acquaintances with language in the drawing-room (Henry is using the book to inspire an “attraction” in Fanny). 371 William Godwin believed that Shakespeare’s language could spread like fire to the places where books were not being handled. Godwin argued in his essay “Of Choice in Reading,” that Shakespeare was available to “the poorest peasant in the remotest corner of England.” The bard could be “communicat[ed]” through the medium of a privileged reader who spread a “portion of the inspiration all around him.” 372 British Synonymy worked like a “charm” to communicate what Britons knew about English.

Conclusion

By offering particular readings of eighteenth-century information’s rhetoric, I have tried to suggest that literary critics have methodologies for unpacking the history of information. In the eighteenth century, the rhetorical figure of synonymy helped readers to imagine information travelling through the medium of language. While modern information is understood to be ubiquitous, eighteenth-century information was carefully displayed. Addison claimed to inform readers of the Spectator in essays on false wit and bad poetry. Complex metaphors were involved in the construction of information retrieval: the process of chemical extraction and medicinal ingestion helped readers to imagine forms of knowledge


372 The Enquirer, Reprints of Economic Classics (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1965), 140.
that could be taken away from books. Authors were stripped of their possessions in the process, Swift claimed, and language was made into a clunking machine.

Swift’s imaginative representations of reading devices ask us to ponder not only the dissemination of printed shortcuts to learning in the eighteenth century, but the ways in which a satirist like Swift could critique the epistemological claims of information in persuasive ways. Swift believed that he could see the flaws in the designs of scientists, the impracticality of their plans to discover truth outside of cultural traditions that ensure knowledge is useful. One could not use information to make clothes or to improve Irish manufacture. Piozzi’s work on synonyms bore witness to the way in which readers were already attached to their instruments of communication, to the surface of the mediums that they handled repeatedly. Her writing expressed the knowledge of a set of readers who had the right words at their fingertips and on their tongues, anticipating the discipline of English literature and its specialized knowledge of language with a social context that can be recuperated and rehearsed.

Information was anything but abundant in eighteenth-century Britain. Public information on the English language was cited in the voice of Samuel Johnson, whose authoritative presence in the Dictionary elicited the faith of readers without giving them access to what Johnson knew. Moreover, the readers who looked at books “merely for information,” as Eliza Haywood put it, for “knowledge . . . not rhetoric,” were engaging with the idea that some forms of learning were unnecessary for their purposes, rather than the idea that there was too much to know. When Addison attempted to imagine knowledge being brought out of libraries and shared at tea-tables and coffee-houses, he believed that informing the public would eventually lead to the annihilation of most books. What can Mr. Spectator’s belief teach us about the twenty-first century haunts of information?

See Eliza Haywood, *The Female Spectator* vol. 3 (Glasgow, 1775), 149-150.
Works Consulted

Primary Works


———. “A Short Scheme for compiling a new Dictionary of the English Language.” Houghton Library, Harvard University. MS Hyde 50 (38).

———. “To the Right Honourable Philip Dormer Earl of Chesterfield one of his Majestey’s Principle Secretaries of State.” Houghton Library, Harvard University. MS Hyde 50 (39).


———. British Synonymy: or, an Attempt at Regulating the Choice of Words in Familiar Conversation. London, 1794.


———. Key to the Lock. London, 1715.


Secondary Works


Williams, Raymond. Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society. London: Flamingo, 1984.


Appendix

Bibliography of Nathan Bailey Dictionaries

The bibliography aims to list every edition of a language dictionary attributed to Nathan Bailey, including editions revised after his death as well as those translated into German. The single-author scope has allowed me the time to handle every book listed, to compare multiple copies, and to record editions that have not been tallied before, updating lists of Nathan Bailey dictionaries that have been part of multiple-author bibliographies.

Several bibliographies oriented my search for Bailey dictionaries: R. C. Alston and Gabriele Stein’s bibliographies as well as Cordell Collection catalogs compiled by David Vancil and Robert Keating O’Neill were checked. The British Library was my base, and editions or issues I had not seen there I found at the Cordell Collection, The University of Toronto Robarts Library and the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library. I have been strict in the definition of “issue.” When two or more copies of the same edition issued in the same year listed different booksellers on their title pages, I treated them as “another issue,” not another state. However, I did not systematically compare copies of the same edition unless they bore different dates. The catalogues of the libraries I visited were consulted with the aim of seeing every edition, not every copy at the library. Multiple issues of the same edition that bear the same year on their title pages were recorded when they were discovered or brought to my attention, when previous bibliographies noted or I noticed it.

Every edition listed is attributed on its title page to Nathan Bailey. Each individual title is in bold, but some new titles were sold as new editions of older titles, such as The New Universal English Dictionary (no. 48), the “fourth edition” of The New Universal Etymological English Dictionary (no.35). All editions are numbered continuously, and issues receive lower-case letters beside their number. The edition numbers that were reported on title pages are retained in the titles.
Although I have arranged the titles according to date, and listed all editions of that title before the next title, I have not attempted to arrange issues of the same year in chronological order. The first three bookseller names or partnerships are listed. Printers are not. Capitalization and italicization of words in title pages has not been observed except where modern English and German orthography require it. Information about editors or translators is quoted without ellipsis after the number of the edition listed on the title page, unless words are omitted within a quotation. Each item references the corresponding entry in the Alston bibliography and page number of entry in Stein (who does not number entries), but newly identified editions have no reference.

1. *An universal etymological English dictionary: comprehending the derivations of the generality of words in the English tongue, either antient or modern* . . . London, E. Bell, J. Darby, A. Bettesworth [et al], 1721. 8º; Alston V, 94, Stein lix.

2. Second edition, London, E. Bell, J. Darby, A. Bettesworth [et al], 1724. 8º; Alston V, 95, Stein lx.


7a.[another issue], London, J.J. and P. Knapton, D. Midwinter, A. Bettesworth and C. Hitch [et al], 1735. 8º


9.Ninth edition, London, D. Midwinter, R. Ware, C. Rivington [et al], 1740. 8º; Alston V, 102, Stein lxiv.

10.Tenth edition, London, R. Ware, A. Ward, J. and P. Knapton [et al], 1742. 8º; Alston V, 103, Stein lxiv.


There is no known “twelfth edition.”


14.Fourteenth edition, London, R. Ware, J. and P. Knapton, T. Longman [et al], 1751. 8º; Alston V, 107, Stein lxvi.


16.Sixteenth edition, London, R. Ware, W. Innys and J. Richardson [et al], 1755. 8º; Alston V, 109, Stein lxvii.


21. Twentieth edition, London, R. Ware, W. Innys and J. Richardson [et al], 1764. 8°; Alston V, 114, Stein lxx.


23. Twenty-first edition, London, R. Ware, W. Innys and J. Richardson [et al], 1770. 8°; Alston V, 116, Stein lxxi.


26. Twenty-first edition, London, R. Ware, W. Innys and J. Richardson [et al], 1775. 8°; Alston V, 119, Stein lxxii.

27. Twenty-fourth edition, London, R. Ware, W. Innys and J. Richardson [et al], 1776. 8°; Alston V, 120, Stein lxxiii.

27a. [another issue], London, R. Ware, W. Innys and J. Richardson [et al], 1776. 8°; Stein lxxiii.

27b. [another issue], London, R. Ware, W. Innys and J. Richardson [et al], 1776. 8°; Stein lxxiii.

27c. [another issue], London, R. Ware, W. Innys and J. Richardson [et al], 1778. 8°; Stein lxxiii.

29. A new edition, being the twenty-fifth, Edinburgh, J. Bell, C. Elliot, and the other booksellers, 1783. 8°

I have not been able to see an issue listed by Stein (lxxiv) and Alston (122): A new edition, being the twenty-fifth, Edinburgh, D. Baxter, J. Duncan, sen., J. Bryce [et al], 1783.

29a. [another issue] Edinburgh, J. Duncan sen., J. & W. Shaw, J & M Robertson [et al], 1783. 8°; Stein lxxiv.

29b. [another issue], Edinburgh, J. & M. Robertson and J. Duncan, 1783. 8°; Stein lxxv.

29c. [another issue], London, P. Ogilvie, Ware, and Innys, 1783. 8°; Stein lxxv.

30. Twenty-sixth edition, Edinburgh, C. Elliot and J. Hunter, J. Duncan, sen. [et al], 1789. 8°; Alston V, 123, Stein lxxv.

30a. [another issue] Edinburgh, Charles Elliot, and . . . all the booksellers in town and country, 1789. 8°; Stein lxxv.


32. Twenty-seventh edition, London, J. and A. Duncan, J. and M. Robertson, and J. and W. Shaw, 1794. 8°; Alston V, 125, Stein lxxvi.


I have not seen the twenty-eighth edition printed for Wilson & Spence listed in Stein (lxxvi) and Alston (126).

33a. [another issue], Edinburgh, J. Fairbairn and Mundell & Son, 1800. 8°; Stein lxxvii.

33b. [another issue], Edinburgh, Bell & Bradfute, 1800. 8°; Stein lxxvi.
33c. [another issue], Edinburgh, W. Creech and P. Hill, 1800. 8º; Stein lxxvi.

34. Thirtieth edition, Glasgow, J. & A. Duncan, 1802. 8º


38. Dictionarium britannicum: or a more compleat universal etymological English dictionary than any extant . . . collected by several hands, the mathematical part by G. Gordon, the botanical by P. Miller, London, T. Cox, 1730. 2º; Alston V, 136, Stein lxxxii.

39. Second edition, assisted in the mathematical part by G. Gordon; in the botanical by P. Miller; and in the etymological, &c. by T. Lediard, London, T. Cox, 1736. 2º; Alston V, 137, Stein lxxxiii.

40. Mr. Nathan Bailey’s English dictionary, shewing both the orthography and the orthoepia of that tongue . . . translated into German and improved . . . by Theodore Arnold. Leipzig, the heir of the late Mr. Gross, 1736. 8º

41. A compleat English dictionary, oder vollständiges Englisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch . . . von Nathan Bailey, zweiten Auflage, vermehret von Theodor Arnold, Leipzig, Großsischen Handlung, 1752. 8º

42. Dritten Auflage, vermehret von Theodor Arnold, Leipzig und Züllichau, 1761. 8º

43. Vierte Auflage, vermehret und verbessert von Anton Ernst Klausing, Leipzig und Züllichau, Kosten der Waysenhaus und Frommannischen Handlung, 1771. 8º

44. Fünfte Auflage, vermehret und verbessert von Anton Ernst Klausing, Leipzig und Züllichau, Kosten der Waysenhaus und Frommannischen Buchhandlung, 1778. 8º
45a. [another issue] Sechste Auflage, vermehret und verbessert von Anton Ernst Klausing, Leipzig und Züllichau, Kosten der Waysenhaus und Frommannischen Buchhandlung, 1783. 8º

45. Siebente Auflage, vermehret und verbessert von Anton Ernst Klausing, Leipzig und Züllichau, Nathanael Sigismund Frommanns Erben, 1788. 8º

46. Achte Auflage, vermehret und verbessert von Anton Ernst Klausing, Leipzig und Züllichau, in der Frommannischen Buchhandlung, 1792. 8º

47. *A new universal etymological English dictionary . . . assisted in the mathematical part by G. Gordon; in the botanical by P. Miller; and in the etymological, &c. by T. Lediard . . . revised and corrected by Joseph Nicol Scott, M.D.* London, T. Osborne and J. Shipton, J. Hodges [et al], 1755. 2º; Alston V, 173.


49a. [another issue], carefully corrected by Mr. Buchanan, London, James Rivington and James Fletcher, 1759. 8º


49c. [another issue], London, William Cavell, 1775. 8º; Alston V, 133, Stein lxxxi.

49d. [another issue] Sixth edition, London, William Cavell, 1776. 8º
49e. [another issue] Seventh edition, London, William Cavell, 1776. 8°

50. Nathan Bailey’s dictionary, English-German and German-English . . . Wörterbuch. gänzlich umgearbeitet von D. Johann Anton Fahrenkrüger, Neunte Auflage, Leipzig und Züllichau, Friedrich Frommann, 1796. 8°

51. Zehnte, verbessert und vermehret Auflage, Leipzig und Jena, Friedrich Frommann, 1801. 8°

52. Elfte, verbessert und vermehret Auflage, Leipzig und Jena, Friedrich Frommann, 1810. 8°

53. Bailey-Fahrenkrüger’s Wörterbuch der englischen sprache, Zöwlfte Auflage, umgearbeitet von Adolf Wagner, Jena, Friedrich Frommann, 1822. 8°