Samuel Johnson and the "Shackles of Lexicography"

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In recent Johnsonian scholarship, mention of Johnson's "shackles" or "fetters" leads in two well-documented directions. In one, as in a note that Johnson made, in Latin, in his diary in March 1771, they point towards a fear of madness.[1] "De pedicis et manicis insana cogitatio", he states, a line which is appended to a supplication written on Easter Day and variously translated as "Insane thoughts about foot-fetters and manacles" or "Mad thoughts on manacles and shackles" or "mad reflection on shackles and hand-cuffs".[2] Madness is itself figured, courtesy of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, as a form of imprisonment in Johnson's *Dictionary* ("have we eaten of the insane root, | That takes the reason prisoner?"),[3] but it was physical rather than metaphorical constraint that, as Johnson was well aware, remained a conventional treatment for those whose wits had, in various ways, deserted them. Shackles, manacles, and fetters were, Roy Porter documents, all instruments of confinement.[4] As

[1] Samuel Johnson, *Diaries, Prayers, and Annals,* ed. Edward L. McAdam, with Donald Hyde and Mary Hyde (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1958), 140.

[2] William McCarthy, *Hester Thrale Piozzi, Portrait of a Literary Woman* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 99; David Nokes, *Samuel Johnson: A Life* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 253; Johnson, *Diaries, Prayers, and Annals*, 140.

[3] Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language; in which the Words are deduced from their Originals and illustrated in their Different Significations by Examples from the Best Writers*, 2 vols. (London: W. Strahan. 1755), s.v. "speak" (v.), sense 4.

[4] See e.g. Roy Porter, *Mind-Forg'd Manacles. A History of Madness in England from the Restoration to the Regency* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 215: "he was fastened to the floor by means of a staple and iron ring, which was tied to a pair of fetters about his legs, and he was hand-cuffed". As Porter adds (214), "they were at best necessary evils, commonly overused and abused".

Edward L. McAdam, and Donald and Mary Hyde suggest in their edition of Johnson's *Diaries, Prayers, and Annals*, the "mad reflection" which his hand-written note attests was a manifestation of "pathological melancholy".[5]

For other critics, however, shackles and fetters are allied with the padlock that, in Hester Thrale's effects, was auctioned in 1823 and contextualised by its accompanying note in Thrale's hand: "Johnson's padlock, committed to my care in 1768".[6] As Katharine Balderston memorably argued in *The Age of Johnson*, images of constraint informed an exchange of letters between Thrale and Johnson at Streatham Park in 1773 in ways which signal a sexual subtext and a form of "erotic maladjustment".[7] Johnson comments, in French, on "the servitude which you well know how to render happy" ("vous me tiennez dans l'esclavage que vou[s] sçavez si bien rendre heureuse"),[8] as well as presenting further images in which Thrale might act as beneficial gaoler enforcing his own captivity. "It seems inescapably evident that his compulsive fantasy assumed a masochistic form, in which the impulse to self-abasement and pain predominated", Balderston contends.[9] "The Fetters &

[5] Johnson, *Diaries, Prayers, and Annals*, 141, note.

[6] See R. W. Chapman (ed.), *The Letters of Samuel Johnson, with Mrs. Thrale's Genuine Letters to Him* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984). I: 324, note.

[7] Katharine Balderston, "Johnson's Vile Melancholy," in *The Age of Johnson: Essays Presented to Chauncey Brewster Tinker* ed. Frederick Hilles and Wilmarth Lewis (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1949), 11.

[8] See Samuel Johnson, *The Letters of Samuel Johnson* II: *1773-1776*, ed. Bruce Redford (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 39. The letter is undated but is thought to have been written in early June 1773. Redford's accompanying translation (cited above) is on pp.38-9. See likewise Johnson's invitation (39), to Thrale to "tourner le clef dans la porte, deux fois par jour" ("to turn the key in the door twice each day").

[9] Balderston, "Vile Melancholy," 11.

Padlocks will tell Posterity the Truth", the *Thraliana* enigmatically confirms in a marginal annotation made in May 1779.[10]

"Posterity" has, in this, nevertheless remained conflicted. The nature of Johnsonian constraint – and the meanings that 'fetters' and 'shackles' might claim – is a biographical set-piece which is negotiated to very different effects in work on Johnson and Thrale alike. For Jeffrey Meyers in 2008, it was judged to provide an erotic charge to their lengthy relationship.[11] "Man of Fetters", Adam Gopnik announced in the *New Yorker*, reviewing recent biographical work in this respect: "[Johnson's] letters hint at his distinctly masochistic tastes".[12] "It is impossible to doubt a strong element of erotic attachment", Leo Damrosch concurred.[13] "The likelihood", Peter Martin contends, is that Johnson asked Thrale "to chain him with them, fearing perhaps sleepwalking … and insanity".[14] As Jack Lynch stresses, "The case remains unproved – not because, as Meyers puts it, Johnson's modern acolytes have been unable 'to reconcile his obsession with their exalted image of the great moralist and stern philosopher,' but because unsupported speculation is always reckless".[15]

In this essay, however, 'shackles' or 'fetters', and Johnson's interest in the processes of constraint, will be explored to rather different ends. In ways that problematize some of the critical history given above, 'shackles' are, for example, often used by Johnson in evoking

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[10] Hester Thrale, *Thraliana: The Diary of Mrs. Hester Lynch Thrale (later Mrs. Piozzi) 1776-1809*, ed. Katharine Balderston. 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), I: 323.

[11] Jeffrey Meyers, *Samuel Johnson: The Struggle* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 7 ff.

[12] Adam Gopnik, "Man of Fetters. Dr Johnson and Mrs Thrale," *The New Yorker*, 8 December, 2008.

[13] Leo Damrosch, *The Club*: *Johnson, Boswell, and the Friends who Shaped an Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 126.

[14] Peter Martin, *Samuel Johnson: A Biography* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2008), 388.

[15] Jack Lynch, "Lives of Johnson," *Claremont Review of Books*, 4 March, 2010. https://www.claremont.org/crb/basicpage/lives-of-johnson/

the opposite of desire. Relocated in Johnson's earlier writing to dictionary-making and the conflicted practices which eighteenth-century lexicography can present, shackles, as we will see, serve as images of intellectual duty (and self-discipline) rather than potential eroticism and pleasure in ways which find parallels in a number of other Johnsonian texts. By extension, while the eighteenth-century dictionary can, in various ways, also be presented as an object of desire – not least in its potential for linguistic control – the 'shackles of Lexicography' that Johnson dons in this respect interestingly enforce rather different forms of constraint, both in relation to language and the power the dictionary-maker might wield, as well as the processes that Johnson himself comes to adopt.

The dictionary-maker and the problems of desire

In some ways, of course, Johnson's *Dictionary*, whether in the first edition of 1755, or the revised text of 1773, arguably presents us with little resolution for the debates outlined in the opening of this essay. *Padlocks* are defined with entirely pragmatic intent ("A lock hung on a staple to hold a link"). In practice, readers need to turn to Johnson's earlier entry for *lock* to gain full comprehension ("An instrument composed of springs and bolts, used to fasten doors and chests").[16] Associations with powerful or overwhelming emotional attachment can, as under *enfetter*, indeed be unambiguous – "His soul is so *enfetter'd* to her love, | That she may make, unmake, do what she list", as a citation from Shakespeare's *Othello* attests. Nevertheless, meanings of this kind, as Johnson reminds us in 1773, were moving into obsolescence in ways that are ensured their distance them from on-going practice. Other revisions within the fourth edition might, even so, be used to suggest a continued (and particular) interest in the processes of physical constraint. Johnson crafts, for example, a new

[16] Johnson, *Dictionary* (1755), s.vv. "padlock" (n.); "lock" (n.), sense 1.

entry for *gives* ("Shackles or fetters for the feet"), as well as adding further clarification under *fetter* (if "properly used of the feet", it is, in practice, he states, "applied to other restraints" as well). New citational evidence inserted under *empty* (adj.) -- "Himself he frees by secret means unseen, | His *shackles* empty left, himself escaped clean" – grants, too, additional aspects of representation.[17] Yet in reality, Johnson's processes of revision are general rather than particular. These, and other, changes exist as part of a pattern by which a wide range of entries were subject to renewed scrutiny.

Dictionaries – and Johnson's own work in this domain – nevertheless present, as the bookseller Robert Dodsley makes plain, other schema in which desire, and its mediation, might usefully be explored. We are, perhaps, more accustomed to thinking of Johnsonian dictionary-making in relation to dullness and drudgery. "*To make dictionaries is* dull *work*", states an invented example, famously deployed in illustrating sense 8 of *dull*: "Not exhilaterating; not delightful". Dodsley's construction of the dictionary as an object of desire – "a Work which of all others we most want" – underpinned, in critical ways, the project on which Johnson found himself engaged.[18] "Want" foregrounds a sense both of absence, and a needful reform in relation to what English lexicography might henceforth provide. As John Hawkins, Johnson's early biographer, affirms, the London booksellers, had "long mediated the publication of a dictionary" on the model of that produced by the Académie Française by which English, too, might be made subject to prescriptive, and proscriptive regulation.[19] Variability, and a regrettable propensity for change in the national tongue were, in popular

[17] Johnson, *Dictionary* (1773), s.vv. "empty" (adj.), sense 2: "Evacuated; no longer full".

[18] [Robert Dodsley], "Review of *The Plan* of a DICTIONARY of the English Language," *The Museum: Or, the Literary and Historical Register* 3 (1747): 389.

[19] John Hawkins, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* ed. O. M. Brack, Jr. (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 105.

language attitudes, alike deemed undesirable. A work written with a strongly normative remit, as Dodsley stressed, would undoubtedly "be well received by the Publick".[20]

Writers such as George Snell, Ambrose Philips, and Jonathan Swift had long lamented to linguistic instability that English revealed.[21] In the immediate pre-history of Johnson's work, we can see similar expectations articulated by Lord Chesterfield, Samuel Richardson, David Mallet and Thomas Edwards. "You know [Johnson] is writing a Dictionary, that will be an Attempt to bring the English language to somewhat of a Standard", Richardson stated, for example, in a letter to Edwards in 1753.[22] That Edwards had markedly prescriptive interests of his own, not least with reference to the kind of writers who might be deemed authoritative for English usage, was by no means irrelevant in this context. Mallet, writing to Chesterfield in 1747, compared the latter to Richelieu whose academy remained as public testimony to desires for an ordered state of words.[23]. By that point moreover, Chesterfield was established as Johnson's patron, actively intervening, as we

[20] Cited in James Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, rev. and enlarged L. F. Powell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1791), I: 182.

[21] See e.g. George Snell, *Right Teaching of Useful Knowledg, to Fit Scholars for Som Honest Profession* (London: John Stephenson, 1649); Jonathan Swift, *A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue in a Letter to the Most Honourable Robert, Earl of Oxford and Mortimer, Lord High Treasurer of Great Britain* (London: Benjamin Tooke, 1712). An advertisement for Philips's *Proposals for Printing an English Dictionary … explaining the Whole Language* (1724) outlined his intention to establish "The Distinction of Words, and Phrases, in relation to their *Propriety* and *Impropriety*", as well as "the genuine and proper *Signification* of each Word" (and "the proper Use and different Significations of the English *Particles*"). See Mary Segar, "Dictionary-making in the Early Eighteenth Century", *Review of English Studies* (1931): 210-13.

[22] Samuel Richardson to Thomas Edwards, 21 April 1753. In Samuel Richardson, *Selected Letters of Samuel Richardson, 1689-1761*, ed. John Carroll (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 226.

[23] David Mallet, *Amyntor and Theodora: or, the Hermit* (London: Paul Vaillant, 1747), iii.

will see, in the shape the dictionary project might assume, while Johnson had signed the contract for the *Dictionary* with Dodsley and his fellow publishers. “May we not flatter our hopes that some such scheme” of language reform or, indeed, “one yet more extensively useful, will take place, so as to be rendered effectual under your Lordship’s influence”, Mallet deferentially urged, referring indirectly to the dictionary project.[24] To *hope*, as the *Dictionary* explains, is “to expect with desire”, a *hope* “an expectation indulged with pleasure”. Hill Boothby, writing privately to Johnson two years before the *Dictionary* appeared, eagerly anticipated the point “when you have put into their hands the means of speaking and writing the English language with as much purity and propriety as it is capable of being spoken and wrote”.[25]

Opinions about Johnson’s lexicographical practice can, of course, present their own complexities, yielding diverse arguments in relation to his prescriptive and descriptive inclinations, and their co-existence in what he does. The drafted versions for what would become Johnson’s *Plan of a Dictionary* of 1747 nevertheless prove a highly useful resource in this regard, exposing a history of conflicting desires in which both *hope* and *expectation* are conspicuous – and especially in relation to the “shackling” of language that Johnson is expected to carry out. We can, in other respects, also discern the attempted “shackling” of Johnson himself, both by the contract he had endorsed, as well as by a patron whose own interests in language were orientated in strongly normative directions. Significant, too, are the bonds of obligation that language and its representation might also impose -- and to which Johnson proves equally alert.

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[24] Mallet, *Amyntor and Theodora*, iv.

[25] Samuel Johnson, *An Account of the Life of Dr. Samuel Johnson, from his Birth to his Eleventh Year, Written by Himself, to which are added, Original Letters to Dr. Samuel Johnson by Miss Hill Boothby* (London: Richard Phillips, 1805), 37.

From the beginning, it is clear that Johnson raised certain caveats in relation to what he was in principle to perform. As he indicates in the hand-written holograph manuscript of the early "Short Scheme for Compiling a New Dictionary of the English Language" (dated to 1746), the remit of such a work might indeed be "supposed no other than preserving the purity and fixing the use of English words". Desires of this kind were, as we have seen, prominent in public rhetoric. "Everie word thenceforth to bee used, by anie native of *England*, contrariant to the edict for English language' might be 'adjudged and condemned for non-English", as Snell had early advocated.[26] But, as Johnson pointed out, "A Dictionary so formed would be of little use but to Critics". It would, of course, be possible to "reject all foreign words" in response to existing concerns about the border territories of use, and the on-going influx of non-native forms. Yet in so doing, Johnson warned, the lexicographer might merely create a fictional version of the national tongue, as well as abdicating fundamental responsibilities in a work of reference whose prime role is to "serve the use" of those who lack particular forms of knowledge.[27]

Across the "Scheme" – and, indeed, in the *Dictionary* itself – Johnson instead chose to pay careful attention to the on-going naturalization of non-native words, while iterated comments on frequency as an index of assimilation problematized the projected salience of lexicographical edict on the model of Richelieu's Académie.[28] "Those who have been persuaded to think well of my design, will require that it should fix our language, and put a

[26] Snell, *Right Teaching*, 38.

[27] Johnson, *Johnson on the English Language*, 379.

[28] See further Lynda Mugglestone, "The End of Toleration? Language on the margins in Samuel Johnson's Dictionary," in *Standardising English: Norms and Margins in the History of the English Language*, ed. Linda Pillière, Wilfred Andrieu, Valérie Kerfelec, and Diana Lewis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 89-105.

stop to those alterations which time and chance have hitherto been suffered to make in it without opposition", Johnson stated in 1755.[29] Yet, as these early comments on loan words, representation, and the processes of naturalization suggest, desires can be acknowledged but not necessarily fulfilled. Even in 1746, the feasibility of linguistic control prompted cautious reconsideration.

Johnson's early modelling of the projected *Dictionary* in terms of spelling is equally revealing, while the value of the holograph manuscript is particularly plain. Deletions and emendations on the latter visibly inscribe the pull, and push, of different agendas. Johnson's original text, for example, had commended the growing stasis of English spelling while manifesting an expressed tolerance for such variation as continued to exist. "The Orthography, which was long very vague and uncertain" is now "at last in many cases settled, and settled with such propriety that it may be generally received", he commented.[30] Subsequent emendation records the interpellation of rather different perspectives, as well as new forms of linguistic deference. Chesterfield's desires for a strongly regulative model of English are accommodated in the finished *Plan* in ways which elide Johnson's original inclinations. "Your Lordship observes that there is still great uncertainty among the best writers", the revised text concedes.[31] If English is "settled", it is now deemed to be "by accident" in ways which clearly present opportunities for normative reform.

Annotations by Johnson's external readers, whose comments record their own passage through the "Scheme", likewise repeatedly redirect his attention to prescriptive control, and the desirable perfecting of English. Stigmatization – a process of eradication, by censure, of that which is, for whatever reason, undesired – is often perceptible. Discussing

[29] Johnson, *Johnson on the English Language*, 104.

[30] Johnson, *Johnson on the English Language*, 385.

[31] Johnson, *Johnson on the English Language*, 35.

morphology, Johnson had drawn attention to the "numberless varieties" that characterised the conjugation of English verbs. "To Shake, I Shook I have Shaken or Shook", he had noted, recording the co-existence of different participial forms. "I have shook ought to be stigmatised", a hand-written annotation instead contends.[32] Johnson's interest in, and documentation of, contemporary variation merely prompted further directives for revision.

Other normative concerns intervened in relation to phrasal verbs. "You cannot say He died *of* Love, but he died *for* love", a further annotation on this page declares. Johnson – and the evidence he had objectively adduced in support of constructions of this kind – was again made subject to correction. "At the Conclusion of each word there ought to be Examples 1 of the Elegant Uses of each Word & Phrase in which it is employed. 2. Examples of the Abuse of each Word &c. wth Cautions how to correct & avoid it", he was further advised by the anonymous reader of the text.[33] An early concern for – and interest in – evidential authority as articulated by Johnson can elicit similar critical response. In the manuscript as originally drafted, citations from Milton had been used to draw attention to the use of *scathe* (in "scath'd to Heav'n") and *buxom* in the collocation *buxom air*. Features of this kind, Johnson suggested, might usefully be used in illuminating language change itself, in a model of lexicography which inclines to that which we now associate with the historical principles of the later *OED*: "By this method every word will have its history and the reader will be informed of the gradual changes of the language and have before his eyes the rise of some words and the fall of others".[34] The readers of the manuscript text evidently disagreed. If the dictionary is to foster linguistic immutability, information that might aid the understanding of

[32] Johnson, *Johnson on the English Language*, 397-9.

[33] Johnson, *Johnson on the English Language*, 425. The hand-written annotation by an anonymous reader appears on the verso of folio 18 of the "Scheme".

[34] Johnson, *Johnson on the English Language*, 423.

earlier historical processes is irrelevant. Milton's evidence on *scathe* disappears from the *Dictionary*, as does *scathe*'s status as a potential headword.

These early narrative versions of the *Plan* are, as such, intriguingly dialogic. Their conflicting trajectories render dictionary-making, and the forms it might assume, into a site of change and on-going debate. More particularly, however – and especially as seen in relation to the dialectic between desire, restraint, and enforced control – they also lead to Johnson's earliest image of the "shackles" which might, in lexicography, need to be adopted or cast aside. The relevant passage appears in what is known as the "Fair Copy" of the earlier "Scheme". Written by an amanuensis, it represents a stage of thought antecedent to the finished *Plan of a Dictionary* of 1747 but one that still remains open to revision and exchange. The surviving manuscript text, complete with additional annotations by Chesterfield himself (as well as by one other reader who remains unknown), can therefore be used to explore a further stage in this on-going narrative by which both dictionary-maker, and projected dictionary, were made subject to potential redirection, while what is desired, and desirable, elicits overt reconsideration.

As Allen Reddick has observed, the "principal changes Johnson made in transforming the "Scheme" into the published *Plan* … address aspects of a larger concern: the nature and imposition of the lexicographer's authority".[35] In terms of the "Fair Copy", however, it is Johnson's own authority that is, in fact, often made a target for conspicuous dissent. Normative interventions are prominent. "Can one properly say the Dialect of a profession?", Chesterfield queries, in ways that suggest the presence of undesirable infelicities in Johnson's own forms of expression.[36] The use of *inflexion* (rather than *inflection*) is surely awry,

[35] Allen Reddick, *The Making of Johnson's Dictionary, 1746-1773*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 18.

[36] Johnson, *Johnson on the English Language*, 438.

another annotation on the verso of folio 22 suggests. Johnson's interest in pronunciation, and the processes by which polysyllabic words such as *reverend* or *Chancellor* are contracted in connected speech, prompts other forms of suggested redress. Are words of this kind "ever pronounced accurately" in this way, Chesterfield queries.[37] "If the author quotes in his dictionary, this and simialar [*sic*] forms of expression, should he not brand them with some mark of reprobation", a further aside demands.[38]

Johnson's "shackles" – and his contemplation of the role they might assume – appear therefore at a critical juncture in the manuscript text. They are moreover deployed in ways which illuminate a fundamental crux in lexicographical practice, and in the very nature of the authority he might assume. "Might I break for a moment the shackles of Lexicography, and let my imagination wander after the Phantoms of Desire", Johnson writes. If granted such freedom, he adds, then he "would wish" for the immutability of discourse in which words might for ever "remain essentially the same".[39] In this important but often neglected passage, he posits, in effect, two potential narratives. In one "the shackles of Lexicography", which bind the dictionary-maker to the factual (and empirical) investigation of words and meaning, are hypothetically rejected. In this state of linguistic liberation, as Johnson explores, the lexicographer can pursue "Desire" as he wishes, in a utopian realm in which fixity and stasis lie within his power. It is as part of this process that the "fundamental atoms of our speech might obtain the firmness and immutability of constituent particles".

"Imagination", as Johnson also indicates, is, however, an equally critical component of visions of this kind. As his later definition in the completed *Dictionary* confirms, this relies

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[37] Johnson, *Johnson on the English Language*, 448-9.

[38] Johnson, *Johnson on the English Language*, 436. The annotation, which appears on the verso of folio 7 of the extant text, is by an unknown reader.

[39] Johnson, *Johnson on the English Language*, 461-2.

for its operation on its "power of forming ideal pictures" and on "the power of representing things absent to one's self or others".[40] Seen in this light, "Desire" is indeed capable of conjuring an ideal and idealised state of language in which stability is assured – but this is, by means of "imagination", inevitably distinct from the realities that more pragmatic consideration will reveal. That "Desire" in the "Fair Copy" is itself depicted as a "Phantom" – a "fancied vision", as Johnson later clarifies in the *Dictionary* – provides, in this, its own illumination. Desires might indeed tempt while "fancy", as elsewhere in Johnson's writing, enables us to construct models of existence which are far more congenial that those of real life. Yet, by the same token, such "fancied visions" do not exist.

Importantly, "shackles" and "Desire" are rendered antithetical in ways that can problematize later assumptions about their inevitable consonance in Johnson's use. "Desire" (seen in terms of the prescriptive remit that Chesterfield both urged and expected) is fulfilled only by releasing the bondage which Johnson's sense of dictionary-making proper entails. "Shackles", in contradistinction, are assumed at the exclusion of "Desire", and in ways which instead give precedence to pragmatic obligation, binding the writer to hard work and duty, while temptations and delusory pleasures are forcibly resisted.

Shackled lexicography

The "shackles" of the "Fair Copy" can therefore offer an interesting problematization of how the rhetoric and reality of eighteenth-century lexicography in Johnson's hands might be approached, as well as illuminating other aspects of his thinking on desire and its own beneficial control. "Desire", with its imagined pleasures and satisfactions, can easily lead astray. Duly "shackled", the lexicographer is, in contrast, powerless to exert his own will on

[40] Johnson, *Dictionary* (1755), s.v. "imagination" (n), sense 1.

language, as well as to pursue a fictional prospect of perfection. A commitment to observation rather than invention might indeed be seen as "toilsome Drudgery", as Johnson's earlier biography of Herman Boerhaave had made plain. Nevertheless, as he stressed, this also lay at the heart of attempts to advance human understanding. "All the Knowledge we have is of such Qualities alone as are discoverable by Experience", Boerhaave had proclaimed; those who choose to "consult their own Imaginations" rather than "enquiring into nature" are unequivocally condemned for the folly this reveals.[41] The echoes in the later "Fair Copy" are plain. Here, the dictionary-maker – with his "shackles" voluntarily retained – is, as Johnson indicates, committed in similar ways to evidence of "the minutest subdivisions" and the details of "elemental principles" by which English exists (and in which the salience of "Imagination" is dispelled).[42] In lexicographical models of this kind, investigation of the realities of discourse must displace the airy realm of fancy. The dictionary-maker, as Johnson later verifies, is, by definition, "the slave of science" – and bound, as such, to knowledge rather than invention.[43]

Johnson is, of course, often depicted in the making of his *Dictionary* as being engaged in his own journey of discovery such that the prescriptive hubris evident in the 1747 *Plan* is, by 1755, firmly rejected in consequence of the linguistic experience he had gained.[44] The "Fair Copy", and the irreconcilable tensions of "Desire", imagination, and actuality that Johnson explores, suggest, however, issues of this kind were fully understood before work on

[41] Samuel Johnson, "The Life of Dr. Herman Boerhaave," in *Early Biographical Writings of Dr. Johnson*, ed. David Fleeman (Farnborough: Gregg International, 1973), 30.

[42] Johnson, *Johnson on the English Language*, 461.

[43] Johnson, *Johnson on the English Language*, 73.

[44] See e.g. Howard Weinbrot, *Aspects of Samuel Johnson: Essays on his Arts, Mind, Afterlife, and Politics* (Newark, N. J.: University of Delaware Press, 2005), 17.

the *Dictionary* proper began. The fact that Johnson's vivid imaging of the conflicted processes of practical lexicography, and the 'shackles' this might involve, was itself deleted in a further stage of revision can, in this respect, also usefully remind of Johnson's enforced understanding of the other compromises that commercial dictionary-making might require.

As the cancelled text indicates, considerations of this kind were, in effect, themselves deemed undesirable. Johnson's qualms about the potential dissonance between duty and desire, and imagination and linguistic actuality, are, at least on the surface, supressed. In patronage, as Johnson later declared, "[an author] must say what pleases his patron"; it is "an equal chance whether that be truth or falsehood".[45] That "design" and "execution" are, in authorship, by no means synonymous forms, in this, another familiar Johnsonian trope. The final text of the *Plan* would hence set out a remit in which, as Johnson now affirms, "one great end of this undertaking is to fix the English language". In contrast to his earlier comments, it is now, for instance, made plain that "care will be taken to determine the accentuation of all polysyllables by proper authorities, as it is one of those capricious phænomena which cannot be easily reduced to rules".[46] To pronounce *reverend* with two syllables is likewise deemed a "metrical licence" in the revision s of the text, and distanced from contemporary use. "This, my Lord, is my idea of an English dictionary, a dictionary by which the pronunciation of our language may be fixed, and its attainment facilitated; by which its purity may be preserved, its use ascertained, and its duration lengthened", as Johnson deferentially proclaims.[47]

Even so, for the careful reader, other equivocations are still apparent. Johnson as a metaphorical foot-soldier, and shackled politically to Chesterfield's "Caesar", might indeed

[45] Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, 5:59.

[46] Johnson, *Johnson on the English Language*, 38.

[47] Johnson, *Johnson on the English Language*, 57.

approach the state of language as instructed, ready to invade and bring a new process of rule. Yet reservations linger. “Like the soldiers of Cæsar, [I] look on Britain as a new world, which it is almost madness to invade”, he notes. Johnson’s advance is also a form of retreat. The “coast” might be discovered, and “some of the inhabitants” civilised by the work he will undertake. But the full subordination of English to autocratic edict is, as Johnson makes plain, to be left for some other “adventurer” to establish. “Triumph” is not envisaged.[48]

“Shackled” reading: evidence, authority, and lexicographical process

To *cancel*, as the *Dictionary* later explains, is itself polysemous. In one sense, it means “To efface; to obliterate in general”. In another, it signifies “To cross in writing”, a process for which the “Fair Copy” might itself serve as appropriate illustration.[49] In both, something is obscured by design. Yet, in the latter, palimpsestically, the underlying text or artefact still remains, providing its own testimony of a change of mind or the imposition of a corrected reading, whether this is by the original writer or a reader of a different bent. In 1746, Johnson might therefore consent to cancel the “shackles of Lexicography” in relation to the drafted text. But, importantly, their legacies remain not only in the “Fair Copy”, and the patterns of textual recovery it permits, but in the underlying processes of lexicography Johnson had already decided to adopt, and which were maintained across the making of the *Dictionary*.

As in the case of *dull* cited above, invented examples can, of course, also form part of Johnson’s supporting material such that he draws on a communality of usage in stating that, e.g. “we say, properly, the *shore* of the sea, and the *banks* of a *river*, *brook*, or small water” (under *bank*), or that “we say, you are much *beloved* by me, but not, I *belove* you” (under *beloved*). Nevertheless, examples of this kind are typically embedded within the definition

[48] Johnson, *Johnson on the English Language*, 58.

[49] See Johnson, *Dictionary* (1755), s.v. “cancel” (v.), senses 1 and 2.

rather than being proffered as evidence *per se*. In contrast, the core of each entry resides in an extensive citation file, laboriously assembled across the dictionary years by means of a set of "fortuitous and unguided excursions into books".[50] As Robert DeMaria notes, reading of this kind can be categorized as "perusal" – a means of paying attention to the text that remains distinct from, say, the contemplation of aesthetic pleasure or the reward of narrative engagement. It is, he adds, both "intensive" and deliberative. [51]

Here, too, imagined pleasure, and other "Phantoms of Desire" – had, as Johnson admits, initially intervened. "When first I engaged in this work", as he reflected in 1755, "I … pleased myself with a prospect of the hours which I should revel away in feasts of literature, the obscure recesses of northern learning, which I should enter and ransack, the treasures with which I expected every search into those neglected mines to reward my labour, and the triumph with which I should display my acquisitions to mankind".[52] In contrast, reading for the *Dictionary* came to underpin a collective process in which scrutiny is directed to the minutiae of usage and of sense. For Johnson as for Locke, DeMaria notes, language is made "the conduit of knowledge" while citations reinforce a process in which detailed knowledge about language and its use is privileged.[53]

Johnson's self-imposed "shackles", and the lexicographical duties these comport, are particularly visible in processes of this kind. His scepticism about the existence of a range of lexemes as attested in previous dictionaries is, as other comments affirm, undeniable ("of

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[50] Johnson, *Johnson on the English Language*, 84.

[51] Robert DeMaria, *Samuel Johnson and the Life of Reading* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), 10.

[52] Johnson, *Johnson on the English Language*, 100.

[53] Robert DeMaria, "The Theory of Language in Johnson's Dictionary," in *Johnson after Two Hundred Years*, ed. Paul Korshin (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 160.

these I am not always certain that they are seen in any book but the works of lexicographers").[54] Evidential processes of the kind he implemented during the dictionary years provide deliberately corrective measures. Like the critical readers who perused Johnson's preliminary versions of the *Plan*, he reads with pencil in hand. The annotations which result are functional and pragmatic – a means of identifying potential headwords, and the supporting evidence in which they are contained. Across the fourteen surviving marked-up texts that Johnson used in making of the *Dictionary*, we can still see his diligent progress across the page. As in Figure 1 [@@ Insert FIGURE 1 NEAR HERE @@], inserted diagonal or vertical lines disrupt the continuities of the print text, demarcating what, courtesy of his amanuenses, was now to be copied out and duly filed as evidence, ready for what Johnson referred to as the "rigour of interpretative lexicography".[55] Underlining meanwhile draws attention to the suggested headword under which such information is to be ordered; capital letters in the adjacent margin confirm the appropriate alphabetic division. In "shackled" reading of this kind, Johnson is bound to textual evidence, and its authority, in distinctive ways.

In the interests of the "common reader", Johnson's reading encompasses texts such as Cocker's *Arithmetick* (the source of evidence for words such as *addable, notation,* and *quotient*) or William Holder's *Elements of Speech* (citations from which appear under e.g. *labiodental* or *palatick*, defined as "Belonging to the palate; a roof of the mouth"), as well as established and canonical writers such as Dryden, Shakespeare, and Pope. "Some of the examples have been taken from writers who were never mentioned as masters of elegance or

[54] Johnson, *Johnson on the English Language*, 85.

[55] Johnson, *Johnson on the English Language*, 90.

models of stile", Johnson stresses: "words must be sought where they are used; and in what pages, eminent for purity, can terms of manufacture or agriculture be found?".[56]

"Shackled" reading was nevertheless presumably easier to bear on some occasions than on others. Johnson had, for example, commended the value of Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* to Boswell. It was, he noted, "the only book that ever took him out of bed two hours sooner than he wished to rise".[57] Whether this was true of the rereading Johnson undertook for the *Dictionary* remains unknown. Here, Burton was to be made exemplary in different ways. Rereading a passage on "Poverty and Want" as "sources of Melancholy", Johnson's pencil marks out Burton's use of words such as *oligarchy* and *mutter* ("All *Oligarchies*, wherein a few rich men domineer, do what they list … no man dare accuse them, no not so much as mutter against them").[58] A passage headed "Concupiscible Appetite, as Desires, Ambitions, and Causes" yields, as Figure 1 illustrates, a cluster of annotations in which, tellingly, the fleeting pleasures of delight are themselves anatomised. "This Concupiscible appetite … may seem to carry with it a shew of pleasure and delight", Burton warned: "*Desire hath no rest*".[59] Johnson underlined *concupiscible* ("Impressing desire; eager; desirous; inclining to the pursuit or attainment of any thing", as the relevant entry in the *Dictionary* later confirms) as well as, in subsequent paragraphs, words such as *slavish* and *fleer*. Elsewhere, *whistle* and *exornation* are underlined, as are, e.g. *stomachous* and *quacksalver*, *cock-boat*, *caterwaul* (v.) and *coster-monger*, *attenuate*, *dilate*, and *plain-*

[56] Johnson, *Johnson on the English Language*, 94.

[57] Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, 2:121.

[58] Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (London: Peter Parker, 1676), 97. Ms annotation by Samuel Johnson. Bodleian Library, Oxford. Dep. C.25/1. The copy, owned by Johnson, was sold with Johnson's other books after his death.

[59] Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, 67.

dealing-man, *giddy-headed*, *addle*, *dogged*, and *drum*, as well as *muck-hill*. Johnson's lexical selection is diverse, spanning native and loan words, and core vocabulary alongside potential rarities. As in another citation Johnson extracted from Burton, it is a *gallimaufry* of evidence.[60] Some pages remain pristine; others prompted careful examination. If the role of reading as an interpretative act remains important, Johnson's focus moves to the interpretative potential of English at the level of the word and its immediate environs. Marginal annotations are tailored to the matter in hand.

Rereading, as Belinda Jack has recently observed, is not "a dry academic procedure" but a process of rediscovery by which the reader, too, may find themselves.[61] "Shackled" reading of this kind is perhaps different. Reading is made a collective act, a process by which examples of use are identified, abstracted, and made part of the semantic exegesis which lies at the heart of Johnson's lexicographical method, and from which the subsequent specifications of sense and sense-division derive. Seen in this light, the fact that Johnson's annotations direct attention to *curb* as used by Burton in a passage on "counsel and persuasion" (encompassing "miseries of marriage" and "events of lust"), while in the dictionary, *curb* is instead illustrated by citations from Milton, Dryden, Collier, and Roscommon is irrelevant.[62] "Let him wisely stave himself off at the first, curb in his inordinate passion, and moderate his desire, by thinking of some other subject", Burton had stated.[63] We can recover similar processes in, say, the evidence for *collegiate* as adjective that Johnson abstracted from p.2 of Burton's text, or that for *mummery* he annotated on the same

[60] Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, 68: "A Courtiers life … *is a Gallimaufry of ambition, lust, fraud, imposture, dissimulation, detraction, envy, pride; the Court, a common conventicle of flatterers, time-servers, politicians*".

[61] Belinda Jack, *Reading. A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 113.

[62] See Johnson, *Dictionary* (1755), s.v. "curb" (v.).

[63] Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, 340.

page ("Now come tidings of weddings, maskings, mummeries, entertainments, jubiles, embassies, tilts and tornaments"). Burton's use of *fellow-feeling* that Johnson marked on p.4 ("I would help others out of a fellow-feeling, as that virtuous lady did of old"), or, indeed, that of *gallimaufry*, underlined on p.60, provide other examples, Like the "shackles" which had appeared in the antecedent versions of the *Plan*, evidence of this kind might no longer be visible in the finished text of the *Dictionary*. But it contributed nonetheless to the inductive practices on which Johnson relied. The illustrative examples which appear in print are merely part of the story.[64]

Reconsideration of "shackled" reading of this kind can therefore usefully remind us of the nature and extent of what Johnson originally remarked, as well as the ways in which, across the *Dictionary*, these underlying processes imposed their own constraints on what might be attested and endorsed. Even given diligent reading, exemplification was at times, as Johnson admits, limited. What is, or is not, found hence underpins what he feels able to say under *baldrick* ("By some *Dictionaries* it is explained a bracelet; but I have not found it in that sense") or *conduce* ("To conduct; to accompany in order to shew the way. In this sense I have only found it in the following passage"). *Geason*, meaning "Wonderful" is, Johnson notes, "A word which I find only in Spenser". In similar ways, Johnson can express doubt as to the validity of *convolute* as a verb ("of the verb I have found no example"), or point out his reservations on the use of *cursorary* in English ("hasty; careless. A word, I believe, only found in the following line. I have but with a cursorary eye / O'erglanc'd the articles"). First-

[64] Equally important here is the fact that analysis of this kind would have taken place in relation to the full span of the citation Johnson selected, rather than the truncated forms which, because of pressures of space, he was at times compelled to use for the purposes of illustration. On Johnson's "clipping" of citations, see e.g. Lynda Mugglestone, *Samuel Johnson and the Journey into Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 89 ff.

person statements of this kind repeatedly direct attention to reading as a process bound to evidence and its collection, as well as the problems that this can reveal.

The productive challenge of constraint

Johnson's contemplated divide in the "Fair Copy" between imagination and actuality, and a type of industry driven by facts rather than fiction, stands, on one level, as a reprise of earlier concerns in relation to the enterprise of scholarship. As in the "Preface" to his translation of Lobo's *Voyage to Abyssinia* in 1735, Johnson's thesis had already centred on the imaginative latitude which writing could exhibit. Purveyors of "romantick absurdities or incredible fictions" were nevertheless made subject to critical review. It was, in contrast, "the diligent and patient enquirer", who is shackled to evidence rather than "imagination" such that he has "described things as he saw them", who Johnson commends.[65] Similar principles are evident across the dictionary years. As in *Adventurer* 34, Johnson can draw attention to the ethical fallibilities by which the "persuit of pleasure" can lead astray, displacing the "shackles" of duty and faith such that a dangerously unconstrained freedom results.[66] Dick Minim's misguided rejoicing, in *Idler* 61, that, in terms of form, "genius has, in our days, shaken off the shackles which had encumbered it so long" encounters pointed irony.[67]

Across Johnson's writing, the question of where, and how, shackles are to be applied, prompts related forms of consideration. "Great Xerxes" in the "Vanity of Human Wishes" -- written three years after Johnson signed the contract for the *Dictionary* -- exemplifies the

[65] Samuel Johnson, A *Voyage to Abyssinia* ed. Joel J. Gold (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), 3.

[66] *Adventurer* 34. Saturday, 3 March, 1753, *The Idler and The Adventurer*, ed. W. J. Bate, John M. Bullit, and L. F. Powell, 2nd ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970), 340.

[67] *Idler* 61. Saturday, 16 June, 1759, *Idler and Adventurer*, 191.

delusions of human power in his endeavours to fetter the forces of nature ("The waves he lashes, and enchains the wind; New pow'rs are claim'd, new pow'rs are still bestow'd").[68] It is an image that Johnson tellingly reprised in 1754 when, in *Adventurer* 137, the arbitrary dictates of unreasoned opinion are compared to Xerxes's endeavours "to scourge the wind or shackle the torrent".[69] As in the "Vanity", history brings its own corrective lessons. As Xerxes comes to understand, the "pow'rs …claimed" do not exist, Nature remains unshackled, presenting lessons of its own.

The echoes of this dialectic which reappear in the *Dictionary* "Preface" are, in this light, by no means accidental. Johnson returns, once more, to metaphor. Evoking the image of lexicography as prescriptive process, Johnson's shackles are hypothetically transferred, as a form of bondage, to words themselves. On one level, this is made to refract the human desire for stasis and immutability as exemplified by Richelieu's Académie Française. On another, it also, disturbingly, suggests a violent and untenable enslavement. "Sounds are too volatile and subtile for legal restraints; to enchain syllables, and to lash the wind, are equally the undertakings of pride, unwilling to measure its desires by its strength", Johnson makes plain.[70] The causes of change, he adds, remain "as much superiour to human resistance, as the revolutions of the sky, or intumescence of the tide".[71] If tropes of language as sea pervade Johnson's work, here and elsewhere, Xerxes's delusions are not shared.

Johnson's own *Dictionary*, as we have seen, might therefore have been commissioned in response to similar desires for stasis and control. Nevertheless, as the 1755 "Preface"

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[68] Samuel Johnson, "The Vanity of Human Wishes", ll.232-3, *Poems* ed. Edward L. McAdam, Jr., with George Milne (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1975), 103.

[69] *Adventurer* 137, 26 February, 1754, *Idler and Adventurer*, 487.

[70] Johnson, *Johnson on the English Language*, 105.

[71] Johnson, *Johnson on the English Language*, 105-6.

indicates, these, too, are now distanced, along with Chesterfield's patronage. "With equal justice may the lexicographer be derided, who being able to produce no example of a nation that has preserved their words and phrases from mutability, shall imagine that his dictionary can embalm his language, and secure it from corruption and decay", Johnson famously declares.[72] Instead, on-going change and variation are depicted as products of intellectual and linguistic freedom – and of "a mind unchained from necessity" and "left at large in the fields of speculation" where "as any custom is disused, the words that expressed it must perish with it; as any opinion grows popular, it will innovate speech in the same proportion as it alters practice".[73]

Even so, this does not, for Johnson, mean that desire – and imagination – are entirely curtailed. Temptation can be difficult to resist. Dictionaries are, as Ladislav Zgusta reminds us, fundamentally human products.[74] As a result, in Johnsonian lexicography, memory – and a partially imagined form of words – can, through exigencies of time and need, sometimes take the place of accurate citations.[75] A range of entries, in other ways, reflect "human wishes" of their own such that, if Johnson's "shackled" reading remains in evidence, so, too, does a sense of the "ideal visions" by which usage might henceforth be shaped. *Pictorial*, judged by Johnson to be both "elegant and useful", was, as yet, "not adopted by other writers", as he notes with evident regret. *Effumability* ("the quality of flying away, or vapouring in fume") elicits a similar response ("An useful word but not adopted"). *Imbue*

[72] Johnson, *Johnson on the English Language*, 105.

[73] Johnson, *Johnson on the English Language*, 106.

[74] Ladislav Zgusta, *Lexicography Then and Now*, ed. Fredric Dolezal (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 2006), 6.

[75] On Johnson's use of memory in making the *Dictionary*, see Mugglestone, *Journey into Words*, 88 ff. The fact that citations from Burton in the *Dictionary* outnumber those in the marked-up text suggests that memory may here, too, have intervened.

attracts other "Phantoms of desire" such that, while "our writers seem not willing to receive it", its elegance and utility are extolled: "This word, which seems wanted in our language, has been proposed by several writers, but not yet adopted by the rest". Johnson's proscriptive impulses, which reveal corresponding forms of tension, are perhaps more familiar. "A custom has prevailed of writing *plumb*, but improperly", he notes under *plum*. Usage is both registered and made subject to correction. *Bizantine* is "more properly spelt *byzantine*", he advises (under an entry for *bizantine* itself). *Viz* is declared "a barbarous form of an unnecessary word" (in spite of extensive evidence he provides to the contrary).[76] Janus-like, Johnson can, in effect, exemplify the crux he had identified in the earlier "Fair Copy". "Desire" points in one direction, conjuring a prospect of perfectibility. Meanwhile, the "shackles of Lexicography" tether information to what is and has been attested in the praxis of English use, and urge the duty of committed observation.

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[76] On Johnson's prescriptive impulses, see e.g. Anne McDermott, "Johnson the Prescriptivist? The Case for the Defence," *Anniversary Essays on Johnson's Dictionary*, ed. Jack Lynch and Anne McDermott (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2005): 113-128.

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