

INTRODUCTION.

Of Johnson's Dictionary, and of the manner in which the following work is executed.

Dr. Johnson was one of the greatest men that the English nation has ever produced; and when the exhibition of truth depended on his own gigantic powers of intellect, he seldom erred. But in the compilation of his dictionary, he manifested a great defect of research, by means of which he often fell into mistakes; and no errors are so dangerous as those of great men. The authority created by the general excellence of their works gives a sanction to their very mistakes, and represses that spirit of inquiry which would investigate the truth, and subvert the errors of inferior men. It seems to be owing to this cause chiefly that the most obvious mistakes of Johnson's Dictionary have remained to this day uncorrected, and still continue to disgrace the improved editions of the work recently published.

In like manner, the opinions of this author, when wrong, have a weight of authority that renders them extremely mischievous. The sentiment contained in this single line

Quid te exemplum juvat spinis de pluribus una?

is of this kind; that we are to make no corrections, because we cannot complete the reformation; a sentiment that sets itself in direct opposition to all improvement in science, literature and morals; a sentiment, which, if it had been always an efficacious principle of human conduct, would have condemned not only our language, but our manners and our knowledge to everlasting rudeness. And hence whenever a proposition is made to correct the orthography of our language, it is instantly repelled with the opinion and *ipse dixit* of Johnson. Thus while the nations on the European continent have purified their languages and reduced the orthography to a good degree of regularity, our enemies of reform contend most strenuously for retaining the anomalies of the language, even to the very rags and tatters of barbarism. But what is more extraordinary, the very persons who thus struggle against the smallest improvement of the *orthography* are the most ready to innovate in the *pronunciation*, and will, at any time, adopt a change that fashion may introduce, though it may infringe the regularity of the language, multiply anomalies, and increase the difficulty of learning it. Nay, they will not only innovate themselves, but will use their influence to propagate the change, by deriding those who resist it, and who strive to retain the resemblance between the written and spoken language.

A considerable part of Johnson's Dictionary is however well executed; and when his definitions are correct and his arrangement judicious, it seems to be expedient to follow him. It would be mere affectation or folly to alter what cannot be improved.

The principal faults in Johnson's Dictionary are

1. The want of a great number of well authorized words belonging to the language. This defect has been in part supplied by Mason and Todd; but their supplemental list is still imperfect even in common words, and still more defective from the omission of terms of science.

2. Another great fault, that remains uncorrected, is the manner of noting the accented syllable; the accent being laid uniformly on the vowel, whether it closes the syllable or not. Thus the accent is laid on *e* in *te'nant* as well as in *te'acher*, and the inquirer cannot know from the accent whether the vowel is long or short. It is surprising that such a notation should still be retained in that work.

3. It is considered as a material fault, that in some classes of words, Johnson's orthography is either not correct upon principle or not uniform in the class. Thus he writes *heedlessly*, with *ss*, but *carelessly*, with one *s*; *defence*, with *c*, but *defensible*, *defensive*, with *s*; *rigour*, *inferiour*, with *u*; *be rigorous*, *inferiourity*, without it; *publick*, *authentick* with *k*, but *publican*, *authenticke*, without it; and so of many other words of the same classes.

4. The omission of the participles or most of them, is no small defect, as many of them by use have become proper adjectives, and require distinct definitions. The additions of this kind in this work are very numerous. It is also useful both to natives and foreigners, to be able, by opening a dictionary, to know when the final consonant of a verb is doubled in the participle.

5. The want of due discrimination in the definitions of words that are nearly synonymous, or sometimes really synonymous, at other times not, is a fault in all the dictionaries of our language, which I have seen. *Permeate*, says Johnson, signifies, to pass through, and permeable, such as any be passed through. But we pass through a door or gate; although we do not permeate it, or say that it is permeable. *Obedience*, says Johnson, is obsequiousness, but this is rarely the present sense of the word; so far from it that obedience is always honorable, and obsequiousness usually implies meanness. *Peculation*, says Johnson, is robbery of the public, theft of public money. *Robbery* and *theft* are now understood, it is neither. Inaccuracies of this kind are very numerous.

6. There are in Johnson's Dictionary, some palpable mistakes in orthography, such as *comptroller*, *bridgroom*, *redoubt*, and some others, where being no such legitimate words in the language. In other instances, the author mistook the true origin of words, and has erred in the orthography, as in *chymistry* and *diocess*.

7. The mistakes in etymology are numerous; and the whole scheme of deducing words from their original is extremely imperfect.

8. The manner of defining words in Johnson, as in all other dictionaries, is susceptible of improvement. In a great part of the more important words, and particularly verbs, lexicographers, either from negligence or want of knowledge, have inverted the true order, or have disregarded all order in the definitions. There is a primary sense of every word, from which all the others have proceeded; and whenever this can be discovered, this sense should stand first in order. Thus the primary sense of *make* is to force or compel; but this in Johnson's Dictionary is the fifteenth definition; and this sense of *facio* in Ainsworth, the nineteenth.

9. One of the most objectionable parts of Johnson's Dictionary, in my opinion, is the great number of passages cited from authors, to exemplify his definitions. Most English words are so familiarly and perfectly understood, and are so safe of them so little liable to be called in question, that they may be as safely left to rest on the authority of the lexicographer, without examples. Who needs extracts from three authors, Knolles, Hilton and Berkeley, to prove or illustrate the literal meaning of *hand*? Who needs extracts from Shakespeare, Bacon, South and Dryden, to prove *hammer* to be a legitimate English word, and to signify an instrument for driving nails? So under *household*, we find seven passages and nearly thirty lines employed to exemplify the plain interpretation, a family living together.

In most cases, one example is sufficient to illustrate the meaning of a word; and this is not absolutely necessary, except in cases where the signification is a deviation from the plain literal sense, a particular application of the term, or in a case, where the sense of the word may be doubtful, and of questionable authority. Numerous citations serve only to swell the size of a Dictionary, without any adequate advantage. But this is not the only objection to Johnson's exemplifications. Many of the passages are taken from authors now little read, or not at all; whose style is now antiquated, and by no means furnishing proper models for students of the present age.

In the execution of this work, I have pursued a course somewhat different; not however without fortifying my own opinion with that of other gentlemen, in whose judgment I have confidence. In many cases, where the sense of a word is plain and indisputable, I have omitted to cite any authority; in others, where the sense is in many instances, where the sense of a word is wholly obsolete, and the definition useless to the antiquary, or in some instances, definitions are given without authority, merely because I had neglected to note the author, or had lost the reference. In such cases, I must stand responsible for the correctness of the definition. In all such cases, however, I have endeavored to be faithful to the duty of a lexicographer; and if in any instance, a mistake has escaped me, I shall be happy to have it suggested, that it may be corrected.

In general, I have illustrated the significations of words, and proved them to be legitimate, by a short passage from some respectable author, often abridged from the whole passage cited by Johnson. In many cases, I have given the whole sentence, or even the whole paragraph, in which the word most frequently occurs, and often presenting some important maxim or sentiment in religion, morality, law or civil policy. Under words which occur in the scriptures, I have often cited passages from our common version, not only to illustrate the scriptural or theological sense, but even the ordinary significations of the words. These passages are short, plain, appropriate, and familiar to most readers. In a few cases, where the sense of a word is disputed, I have departed from the general plan, and cited a number of authorities.

In the admission of words of recent origin, into a Dictionary, a lexicographer has to encounter many difficulties; as it is not easy, in all cases, to determine whether a word is so far authorized as to be considered legitimate. Some writers indulge a licentiousness in coining words, which good sense would wish to repress. At the same time, it would not be judicious to reject all new terms; as these are often necessary to express new ideas; and the progress of improvement in arts and science would be retarded, by denying a place in dictionaries, to terms given to things newly discovered. But the lexicographer is not answerable for the bad use of the privilege of coining new words. It seems to be his duty to insert and explain all words which are used by respectable writers or speakers, whether the words are destined to be received into general and permanent use or not. The future use must depend on public taste or the utility of the words; circumstances which are not within the lexicographer's control.

Lexicographers are sometimes censured for inserting in their vocabularies, vulgar words, and terms of art known only to particular artisans. That this practice may be carried too far, is admitted; but it is to be remarked that, in general, vulgar words are the oldest and best authorized words in language; and their use is as necessary to the classes of people who use them, as elegant words are to the statesman and the poet. It may be added that such words are often particularly useful to the lexicographer, in furnishing him with the primary sense, which is no where to be found, but in popular use. In this work, I have not gone quite so far as Johnson and Todd have done, in admitting vulgar words. Some of them are too low to deserve notice.

The catalogue of obsolete words has been considerably augmented by Mason and Todd. I have, though somewhat reluctantly, inserted nearly the whole catalogue, which, I presume, amounts to seven or eight,