

Samuel Johnson's preliminary plan for his celebrated Dictionary.

Samuel Johnson. *The Plan of a Dictionary of the English Language...* (London: J. and P. Knapton, T. Longman and T. Shewell, C. Hitch, A. Millar, and R. Dodsley, 1747.) 10 1/4 inches x 8 3/16 inches (260 mm x 208 mm), 36 pages.

Johnson's *Dictionary*, like the works of Shakespeare, is one of those rare monuments of literature that embodies its language and culture while retaining the distinctiveness and immediacy of its creator's personality. No dictionary so vast is so thoroughly marked with the stamp of its compiler: what required an academy in other nations was achieved in eighteenth-century England by a solitary self-styled "harmless drudge" in only nine years. A small undertaking—a little dictionary in octavo or duodecimo—may be conceived without deliberation, growing by accident or by accretion from private glossaries, endpaper notes, and marginalia. Larger dictionaries require planning and foresight—and usually the assistance of an institution, a government or an academy.

The Plan of a Dictionary of the English Language (1747) supplied the missing academic infrastructure, at least on paper. Johnson's manifesto took two forms: a preliminary manuscript "A Short Scheme for compiling a new Dictionary of the English Language" (1746) and an enlarged public *Plan*. The "Scheme," which is now in the Hyde Collection at the Houghton Library at Harvard University, was essentially a grant proposal; as a pitch to the booksellers who united to sponsor the work, it was perforce a strategic document composed in terms understandable to commercial interests. The published *Plan* was a revision of the "Scheme," an announcement to the public, as personified by Lord Chesterfield, the arbiter of taste of his time. It was here that Johnson declared his "chief intent" to be "to preserve the purity and ascertain the meaning of our English idiom." The deferential references to Lord Chesterfield in the *Plan* reflect Johnson's conviction that a lexicographer must impose an authority on his materials, fortified by history, taste, and convention.

Many of the features discussed in the Preface of the *Dictionary* are present in the *Plan*, and in sufficient detail to show that Johnson had made more preliminary soundings of the relevant material. The *Plan* assesses, often with examples, the questions of orthography, range of coverage, projected audience, phraseology, technical terms, accent, etymology, pronunciation, and syntax that a conscientious lexicographer must address. In doing so, Johnson was able to compile the most authoritative dictionary, consistent and transparent in technique and intent. He achieved this in the clarity of his definitions, and above all, by the careful and systematic use of examples. The incisive definitions, supported by extracts from the best works of the preceding centuries, give Johnson's *Dictionary* enduring appeal. These examples were ready and waiting in his head, so the immense task of checking his references, which might have delayed the *Dictionary* for another decade, could be skimmed. Johnson's objectives—to capture the whole vocabulary of received English, and to preserve it at its peak—may have been unreachable, but his methods were good. He was the right man for the job; and in him English lexicography had the first of several mammoth strokes of luck.

The Stanford copy of Johnson's *Plan* is bound in blue/gray paper-covered boards. The armorial bookplate of a previous owner, Fleming Crooks, is on the front pastedown, and a label identifying the donor as Dr. Frank Rodin is opposite.

This Samuel Johnson volume is now in the Cecil H. Green Library, which comprises roughly a third of the Stanford University Libraries' 8.5 million volumes. The Green Library houses special collections amounting to a quarter million rare volumes; among the rarities are an extensive collection of Aldine editions and numerous incunables.