

There's a joke about a fellow who read a dictionary from cover to cover. Asked his opinion of it, he allowed that it had a fabulous cast of characters, but a lousy plot. There can be few people brazen-gutted enough to tackle a whole dictionary; yet buried in its tedious pages there can be surprises. One of the most famous of English dictionaries is that of the "Great Cham of Grubstreet", Samuel Johnson, published in 1755; it has often been mined by biographers for revelations of the Doctor's character. For example, his opinion of patrons may be gathered from the relevant entry: "Patron. One who countenances, supports or protects. Commonly a wretch who supports with insolence, and is paid with flattery"; or of politics, from this pair of notices: "Tory. One who adheres to the ancient constitution of the state, and the apostolical hierarchy of the church of England, opposed to a whig... Whig. The name of a faction." (Guess which one Johnson was.) The most famous entry describes his own activity: "Lexicographer. A writer of dictionaries; a harmless drudge, that busies himself in tracing the original, and detailing the signification of words."

Dr. Johnson was anything but a harmless drudge. Nor was he the only lexicographer in history who did not confine himself merely to hunting etymologies. One of the many dictionaries or lexica to survive in whole or part from the ancient world is one written by Julius Pollux in the 170's of this era, during the reign of Marcus Aurelius. The work was dedicated to Commodus, the emperor's son, who was so impressed that he arranged for Pollux's appointment in 178 to the Professorship of Rhetoric in Athens, a very prestigious post established by the emperor Hadrian and fostered by Marcus Aurelius. Such a position was not

won without fierce competition. Pollux was no stranger to the academic wars of his age.

The great mark of learning and culture in the ancient world was the ability to deliver a public oration. The style of these performances was really more important than the content, which, if it did not deal in vapid moralizing, offered odd facts about the glorious figures of old or entertained the audience with allusions to classic authors. Pollux's dictionary was meant to help students of this art; mainly it is a huge compilation of synonyms or words of similar application arranged by subject. Of this design Pollux was especially proud; indeed, its ease of consultation made the dictionary very useful, so that it, and not the conventionally ordered, alphabetical dictionary of Pollux's chief rival Phrynichus, has survived. If, for example, you need to praise a king, Pollux can give you 52 laudatory adjectives. (That there are 78 such words for the good orator reveals his scale of relative values!) If you have a bald man on your hands, Pollux has 17 words to describe his condition; if it's a sex fiend, there are 28 words for that. If it's insulting words you need, he has terms of abuse for every occupation under the sun - like the 33 choice epithets for a tax-collector: "oppressive, vulgar, strangler, highway robber, embezzler, more savage than the sea, more violent than a tempest, dasher of hopes, misanthrope, odious, insatiable, intemperate, greedy, thug, choker, crusher, footpad, thief, rapacious, pilferer, fraudulent, insolent, shameless, brazen, impossible, uncivilized, brutish, antisocial, beastly; a sunken reef, a hidden shallow, a wrecker of ships; unsociable animal; and" - not to put too fine a point on it - "generally, all the abuses of character you have at your disposal."