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The Modern Dramatic Hero

As Seen in the

Plays of Brecht and Betti

By

William T. Graves

Both Bertolt Brecht and Ugo Betti are concerned with the possibilities of heroic characters in modern drama. With the breakdown of strict codes of morality and the growing acceptance of a relativistic ethic, the conventional conflict of the hero with his society and with other heroes no longer provide dramatic situations where vital, relevant, contemporary comment is possible. A new kind of hero must be developed. In Brecht's and Betti's works we see two different, even opposed responses to this difficulty. Because of this difference, however, a critical juxtaposition of the Brechtian and Bettian hero will shed mutual light on each author's particular development of the heroic character as well as on modern drama's attempt to cope with and explain the human situation in the mid-twentieth century.

The essential quality of Brecht's hero is the ability to survive. Galy Gay "makes it" when he abandons the notion of maintaining his old individuality. He sells an absurdly fake elephant as real. He denies his wife. He is, indeed, the giant of the army. And just as easily he can reverse any of his roles. If necessary, it seems he can take back his wife. He can return to his porter's job. He can desert the whole army. Why can he make these changes? He is adaptable. He has the courage and interests *not* to be a Bloody Five.

Bloody Five, the old line soldier, is so set on being the famous warrior, with all the regalia, that he loses the game. He wants so much to be a definite someone that he ends up being a nobody.

These two characters, Galy Gay and Bloody Five from *A Man's A Man*, are useful as extreme prototypes of Brecht's concept of the modern and the old fashioned heroes respectively. Times have changed and so must men. An earlier play, *In The Swamp*, contains many of the seeds for the development in *A Man's A Man*. The later works, those following this second play, are mainly variations on the Galy Gay - Bloody Five theme. We can thus use *A Man's A Man* as a focal point.

The later characters are often not so purely typed. Mother Courage is a heroine but her play ends on a note of pessimism as far as her future goes. She has lost her possessions, one after another. Very early Eilif goes off with the recruiting officer, ultimately to be shot. Swiss Cheese, her other son, is also eventually killed. Mother Courage places too much trust in the future of the war, and finds herself over-bought. Financially she is in a very bad state when the final

outrage comes: her daughter is murdered. The combined result of these losses is that Mother Courage is left with insufficient funds, and no one but herself to pull the wagon. She is surviving, but at the rate she is going one is inclined to see her own destruction as not far off.

Using the ability to survive as the criterion for judging who is the heroic type, Mother Courage is seen as partly the modern hero, but also to a fatal degree the possessor of old-fashioned weaknesses. She is at times sentimental, and moreover lacks sufficient foresight. She cannot adapt to the changes brought about by either a real or threatened peace. She does not appreciate what the sergeant says at the conclusion of the first scene: "When a war gives you all you earn/One day it may claim something in return!"

Mother Courage is still basically, however, in the Galy Gay tradition, whereas her two sons and daughter act primarily, but again not solely, in the manner of Bloody Five. Eilif is bold. He gets the peasants' cows during the hostilities. Unfortunately, he does not know when he should stop, and so is shot. Swiss Cheese is too honest, and Katrin is too noble. They are also both shot. When the children are under the influence of their mother, however, they absorb some of her wits. If Mother Courage had managed to accompany her children constantly, perhaps events would have occurred differently. Mother Courage is busy selling to the sergeant when the recruiting officer signs up Eilif. Again Mother Courage is absent, this time with the chaplain, when Swiss Cheese absconds with the cash box, and finally she is in town buying stocks when Katrin does her noble and self-destructive act.

In *The Good Woman of Setzuan* Brecht most distinctly develops the contrast between the old modern heroes. Here there is an actual schizoid, Shen Te, the benevolent lady at one time, and Shui Ta, the shrewd cousin at others. When business wisdom predominates, the character prospers. Otherwise there is a degeneration into an old-fashioned do-gooder.

In addition to being interesting as an emphatic statement of the Galy Gay - Bloody Five relationship, *The Good Woman of Setzuan* is significant for the important conclusions to which it leads. Brecht's new heroism is not necessarily immoral any more than it is moral. These value terms are decidedly outdated. Shui Ta may be ruthless, but he is just, according to the letter of the law. His outstanding characteristic is the lack of the sentimentality that motivates Shen Te.

That the path of evil is not necessarily the one leading to success should be evident from the brutal death of the tyrannical Governor Abashwilli in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. He was a far from admirable character and was given his just reward. Consider also Bloody Five, a boaster of murderous deeds, and Eilif, the merciless robber of peasants. All these traditionally immoral men perish.

The good, however, also can suffer. Grushna's problems would have been much alleviated if she had held in mind the story teller's

“Terrible is the seductive power of goodness.” St. Joan would not have died so young if she had known when to terminate her gospel message.

To become a Brechtian hero one must forget about good and evil, and direct one's efforts to overcoming what we have come to accept as the distinctly human qualities of pity, love, pride and hate. The man who keeps alive is the one who learns to stop *feeling*. A certain combination of intelligence and visceral instinct is necessary as a replacement. Brecht's hero is the one who realizes that personal survival depends on knowing which parts of the human makeup are useful, and which ones are likely to become excess baggage. The swamp swallows up those men who insist on remaining too heavy with humaneness.

Ugo Betti's hero is in many ways the antithesis of Brecht's. In play after play Betti's characters make the traditionally grand gestures so much scorned by their Brechtian counterparts. Betti's people are plagued by the age-old problems of evil and guilt, the very concerns that are so obviously ignored in the Brechtian amoral development. They find their salvation in compassion toward each other, certainly not in the shrewd alienation promulgated by Brecht's characters.

Betti's hero suffers from an often times vague and purposely ill-defined malaise. Danielle in *The Fugitive* has, according to a line in Act I, been born “under an unlucky star.”¹ He is generally dissatisfied with life, and unsuccessfully seeks an explanation from the Doctor. He is unable to act on a logical basis. He knows, for example, that Nina is unfairly troublesome, yet he is driven by various forces to maintain his relationship with her.

Giorgio, the penitent in *Struggle Till Dawn*, is likewise perplexed. He has injured his friend Tullio and wants to make amends. He acts out of this desire, yet his confusion while doing so is all too obvious.

The discomfort of Betti's heroes is most clearly brought out in the inquiry play *Landslide* where a microcosm of human existence is developed. No one is altogether guilty for the deaths in the accident. Each person has an excuse of sorts. Yet finally the reason they are all disturbed is that they are all guilty. At the same time, they are in one way all innocent. Can the workers who are forced to do double shifts be held responsible? And yet must they not do their jobs no matter how difficult in view of the dangerous consequences of carelessness? And does not Gaucker have to make a living to keep himself and his wife alive? But again what right does he have to be instrumental in bringing about such a great tragedy?

The guilt borne by the inhabitants of Betti's world is not only general, it is also inevitable and lasting. The causes of the landslide are present as much at the end of the trial as at its beginning. It is significant that Giorgio comes to make amends to his old friend Tullio but, as the scene develops, finds himself once more nearly going off with Delia. Moreover, Giorgio finally murders Tullio. Giorgio

¹Ugo Betti, *The Fugitive in Three Plays On Justice*, trans. G. H. McWilliam (San Francisco, 1964), p. 124.

may be sorry for his past misdeeds, but until he himself is poisoned he is incapable of not sinning once more.

Man's determined fate is perhaps most explicitly brought out in *The Burnt Flower-Bed*. There everything clearly must happen. Giovanni has to be murdered just as does Nicola. Tomaso, himself an executor, realizes that he will likely be destroyed. Near the play's end, he remarks, "And everything obeys. And children fall and die. But that's the fate of everything else too. There is nothing else. And why should man be the only exception? No. We roll docilely down the same slope. There was a push, at the beginning."²

Tomaso speaks as if man can do absolutely nothing, but yet the play concludes on a clearly hopeful note. Rosa does the traditional, grand heroic act, allowing herself to be shot to save the community. Giovanni is given the strength to join once more with his fellows. He too now assumes a responsibility. He announces as he goes out the door, "We will go up there and say what has to be said, and they will listen to us."³

The Bettian character has a potentially traditional heroic role to play. To be successful in this position he must first of all come to an understanding about evil. He must accept its existence and his role in perpetrating it.

In those Betti plays where the hero functions, what is seen is a reversal of the Brecht process. The Bettian hero is the man who learns to feel for his brothers. Parsc exclaims in *Landslide* that men need, "from the hands of the judges . . . something else [than the mere sentence], something higher, compassion, compassion."⁴ Argia in *The Queen And The Rebels* and the Inspector in *The Fugitive* also see the need for feeling. Giorgio has an imperfect understanding of this need, and so finally has to find refuge in his death brought on by his wife. Argia, on the other hand, sees herself as capable of being the queen. She takes on the symbolic nobility of office and dies. Her death is not in vain. True, she does not accomplish any specific good, except perhaps the saving of the child, but she somehow ennobles man in general. Man can rise to virtuous levels.

If one tries to find characters such as Rosa and Argia in the Brechtian theatre, he is forced to see that Brecht's counterparts for the Betti heroes are some of the very people he depicts as failures. Katrin, the daughter, is like Rosa and not Mother Courage. The same can be observed of St. Joan. If the process is reversed in an attempt to find the equivalent of Brecht's Galy Gay, one comes to such negators as the doctor in *The Fugitive* and to a lesser extent Raim from *The Queen And The Rebels*. Although Galy Gay is likeable and the two Betti characters are not, all three individuals reveal a complete lack of personal commitment.

²Betti, *The Burnt Flower-Bed in Three Plays*, trans. Henry Reed (N. Y., 1956), p. 178.

³Betti, *The Burnt Flower-Bed*, p. 186.

⁴Betti, *Landslide in Three Plays On Justice*, p. 58.

The two authors thus share a common concern with the response man can make to the modern environment. Also, the same character types appear in both Brecht and Betti. There is merely a reversal of roles. Each writer, quite naturally, devotes most of his efforts to the development of his particular hero. This observation is basic and unsurprising but it is very important. There are not very many Brechtian characters in Betti, and the development of the Bettian old-fashioned hero is very often superficially done in Brecht. There is, however, in Betti's *Crime On Goat Island*, a very good description of both his hero and Brecht's. Angelo, a very Brechtian individual, wants nothing more than to live a sensual trouble free existence. Agata, playing a Bettian hero, is a deeply tortured, guilt-ridden woman, who finds herself doomed to a harsh life in a nearly deserted house. Angelo is not overburdened by feelings of responsibility. He urges Agata to live like the goats. He suggests that she should dehumanize herself. She is unwilling to do so, and to save her humanity, with all its areas of responsibility and troubles, she symbolically leaves Angelo to die in the well.

It seems clear that the two writers need not be seen as competing, but rather as complementing authors, depicting various segments of the present human situation. Brecht has the panoramic outlook. He creates the modern Everyman, the one who shrewdly moves and profits from the times. Betti's hero, on the other hand, now and then does something to thwart the seemingly inevitable. If history both makes and is made by men, then there is a place for both Brecht's and Betti's heroes in the modern theatre.

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Noah Webster as a Lexicographer

By

William T. Graves

Any analysis of Webster as a lexicographer must rely heavily for its completeness on a consideration of the complexities and complications that were part of, and resulted from, Webster's own personality and the times and circumstances of which he was so integrally a part. The dictionaries compiled by Webster reflected a delicate balance of literary, political, and social concerns. This paper will trace the development of Webster's works of lexicographical interest, considering his aims and achievements.

Allen Read in his article "Projected English Dictionaries, 1755-1828," observed that as early as 1789 Webster was very seriously interested in compiling an "American" dictionary. Webster's non-literary sentiments intruded immediately. He concluded his comments on the proposal with the observation: "Whether this project, so deeply interesting to this country, will ever be effected; or whether it will be defeated by indolence and prejudice, remains for my countrymen to determine."¹

It was not until 1828, almost forty years after these lines were written, that the first edition of *An American Dictionary of the English Language* was published. Although Webster did not work continuously on the dictionary, much of his time during the forty-year period was spent on allied projects and a good deal of them can be referred to as preparation for the grand undertaking.²

The bibliographies of his writings reveal extensive activity in varied fields. Many of the works are of a strictly political nature. Webster fought in the Revolution and subsequently became a staunch, although a still very independently minded Federalist. There are, however, a sizeable number of letters, addresses, and books concerned with educational matters. Some of these have a direct bearing on Webster as a lexicographer. Other, at least, serve the important purpose of indicating the basic assumptions and ideas with which Webster approached his work.

From the beginning of his career as a scholar, Webster felt the need for a definite American oriented scholarly program. At times, his interest seems almost provincial. In a letter dated January, 1783, addressed to John Canfield, a member of the Connecticut legislature and the father of one of Webster's pupils, Webster exclaimed that,

¹Noah Webster, *Dissertations On The English Language* (Boston, 1789), p. 407. Quoted by Allen Walker Read, "Projected English Dictionaries, 1755-1828," *The Journal Of English And Germanic Philology*, XXXVI (1937), pp. 188-205.

²F. Sturges Allen, *Noah Webster's Place Among English Lexicographers* (Springfield, 1909), passim.

"An attention to literature must be the principal bulwark against the encroachment of civil and ecclesiastical tyrants . . . America must be as independent in literature as she is in politics, as famous for art as for arms . . ."³

Words of this sort have led Ervin Shoemaker in his biography, *Noah Webster*, to observe of Webster that, "The growing consciousness of Americanism was more rampant in him than in any other of his contemporaries."⁴ It is important, however, to bear in mind the role Webster saw for himself. He concluded his exclamatory comments in the letter to Canfield with the hope and prediction: ". . . it is not impossible but a person of my youth may have some influence in exciting a spirit of literary industry."⁵

It seems possible thus, that at least part of the spirit of patriotism that motivated Webster was related to a feeling of youthful desire to profit from the opportunities afforded by a new and expanding nation. Nevertheless, there were very real and pressing needs for a learning directed towards America. With regard to the spoken and written tongue, Webster expressed his awareness as follows: ". . . although the body of the language is the same as in England, and it is desirable to perpetuate that sameness, yet some differences must exist."⁶ Here and elsewhere he pointed out some obvious problems. He perceived that there were many general refinements that might be added to the language. But he was more concerned with the immediate American situation. The English dictionaries were not paying heed to American place names. As a former schoolmaster, Webster perceived the need for a pronunciation and spelling guide. Moreover the English books, in disdainful fashion, did not record "americanisms," words and phrases of United States origin and usage.

The difficulties Webster encountered in rectifying these errors were directly related to a prevailing subservience to the British in the field of letters. In August, 1809, he wrote to his good friend, Thomas Dawes of Boston, in reply to general charges that he, Noah Webster, was adding "Americanisms and vulgarisms"⁷ to the language. He called the accusation, "one of the most extraordinary charges which my opponents have ventured to suggest."⁸ He did not, however, deny these imputations. Rather, in a characteristic fashion, he resigned himself to the fact that prejudices were so strong that his best hope of success lay not in engaging in general arguments, where appeals to authority and old notions could be made against him, but in considering the particular problem. He continued in the letter to say:

I have indeed introduced into our vocabulary a few words, not used perhaps in Great Britain or not in a like sense, such as 'customable' . . . 'doomage' . . . 'four-fold' . . . and a few others,

³Webster, *Letters*, ed. Harry Warfel (N. Y., 1953), p. 4.

⁴Ervin C. Shoemaker, *Noah Webster* (N. Y., 1936), p. 247.

⁵Webster, *Letters*, p. 4.

⁶Webster, *An American Dictionary Of The English Language*, Vol. 1 (N. Y., 1828), "Preface," p. i.

⁷Webster, *Letters*, p. 329.

⁸*Ibid.*

probably not twenty, noting them as local terms . . . Such local terms exist, and will exist, in spite of lexico-graphers or critics. Is this my fault? And if local terms exist why not explain them? Must they be left unexplained, because they are local? This very circumstance renders their insertion in a dictionary more necessary . . .⁹

The tone of the preceding passage is one of exasperation. Webster's common sense told him one thing and yet he was confronted by a New England populace that maintained a most amazing academic slavery to the status quo. By the time of the 1828 Dictionary, Webster had already given in on a good many points. His shrewdness led him to realize that if he was to be at all successful he would have to allow the undisturbed continuation of what to him appeared as absurdities. Perhaps years of harrassment by the "authorities" and their proponents forced his adjustment to this harsh reality.

In his earlier years, however, Webster had been firmly convinced that in the same way America had set an example in government, it could show the way in language studies. He even thought in terms of a "federal language."¹⁰ Americans would speak American. He was not clear exactly how far he would like to have altered the English language, but it is certain that he did not desire to make Americans and Englishmen mutually unintelligible, but rather to take advantage of the times so as to create a higher level of language for his countrymen, one that eventually might be taken up by the Mother Country.

In order to aid the development of the "national tongue," Webster authored a school book series he called *The Grammatical Institute*. This series, which was to lay only the most basic framework for the change, consisted of a speller, a grammar, and a reader. These volumes along with works of a similar nature gave Webster an opportunity to explain and place into effect some of the theories that were to be important in the final dictionary. The prefaces of these works are particularly illuminating. In a passage that suggested the approach of many modern scholars, Webster clearly limited the role of the grammarian: "It is the business of grammar, to inform the student, not how a language might have been originally constructed, but how it is constructed. Grammarians are apt to condemn particular phrases in a language, because they happen not to coincide strictly with certain principles. But we should reflect that languages are not framed by philosophers. . ."¹¹ Here Webster was trying to defend something he saw instinctively as correct. He was also still showing his patriotism. His concern with "particular phrases" at least partly was related to the American origin of the idioms.

At the same time that he recognized the natural mutability of language, Webster was concerned with rooting out what he considered to be artificial restrictions. The effect of these restrictions had been

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Webster, op. cit. p. 80.

¹¹Webster, *Grammar*, 6th ed. (Boston, 1800), "Preface," p. v.

to create a body of contradiction within the tongue. The problem here was how to allow the acceptance of the modern changes and not the anomalies. Ultimately, Webster was to solve this problem by going over the heads of the authorities and calling on the greater testimony of the natural state of the language. He seems to have precluded this approach in the preface quoted. Thus, during his work on the great dictionary he came up with the idea that is partly in the preface and partly not. He continued to accept the modern variations and developments he found in America. He also continued to reject the authoritative positions on language, but he did so now for a new reason. He suggested that the problem was that the scholars, contrary to promulgating the original state of the language, were actually obscuring it. His studies in etymology and comparative linguistics filled him with a self-confidence that may not have been justified, but which did result in a working approach of great pragmatic value. He had a rational guideline to keep what he always instinctively felt belonged in the language and to reject what he sensed was burdensome.

The preliminary books also reveal Webster's penchant for clever propaganda. The title page of his *A Philosophical And Practical Grammar Of The English Language*, a variation of his standard work, contained Lockes's admonition to those who refuse to learn by reasoning rather than by mere acceptance of what is taught: "'Authority keeps in ignorance and error more people than all other causes. No opinion is too absurd to be received on this ground.'"¹² Note that despite Webster's desire to innovate and reform, he wished to avoid the suggestion that he was the radical. He quoted a very established and respected man of English thought. With more than a little irony, he used a passage from Dr. Johnson himself for the inscription of the 1828 *American Dictionary*.

In addition to the grammar and related type books, Webster was responsible for several smaller dictionaries before he released his *American Dictionary*. *A Compendious Dictionary* was published in 1806. In a letter written in the summer of the previous year he explained to the printer, Matthew Carey, that in the preparation of the work he had studied Anglo-Saxon and consequently became aware of the numerous errors in ". . . more or less all the spelling books, grammars, and dictionaries . . ."¹³ then prevalent. The preface to the 1806 work paid due respect to Johnson, but finally pointed out ". . . the danger of taking his [Johnson's] opinions upon trust."¹⁴ The problem, according to Webster, was that Johnson and others did not bother with the sources of information and insight readily available to any one who read Anglo-Saxon.

There was a time when Webster believed that English could possibly reach a stage in its development at which it could be fixed. In 1783, he quoted in agreement with Henry Home's *History of Man*:

¹²Webster, *A Philosophical And Practical Grammar Of The English Language*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, 1822), title page.

¹³Noah Webster, *op. cit.*, p. 262.

¹⁴Webster, *A Compendious Dictionary Of The English Language* (N. Y. or New Haven, 1806), "Preface," p. v.

“In its progress towards perfection, a language is continually improving and, therefore, continually changing. But supposing a language to have attained its utmost perfection, I see nothing that should necessarily occasion any change. On the contrary, the classical books in that language become a standard for writing and speaking”¹⁵ Fifteen years later, in his general address to the heads of American schools, Webster changed at least his emphasis, and likely his whole concept as to what could be imposed upon language. He spoke in terms of a living language and inevitable changes.¹⁶

In the preface to the 1806 dictionary, Webster expressed the view on linguistic change, that was to remain within the final 1828 work. By the turn of the century, he was increasingly concerned with the problems in spelling resulting from his organic view of language. In words that were probably stronger than necessary, he claimed that, “The unavoidable consequences . . . of fixing the orthography of a living language, is to destroy the use of the alphabet. . . the present doctrine that no change must be made in writing words, is destroying the benefits of an alphabet, and reducing our language to the barbarism of Chinese characters instead of letters.”¹⁷

It was in the field of orthography, more than anywhere else that Webster encountered the most hostile criticisms upon the publication of the 1828 *American Dictionary*.¹⁸ There were various factors involved here. Despite the immense amount of time and effort Webster devoted to studying the history of words, relatively few people were either equipped or inclined to question his conclusions. The interest, to a large extent, was just not present.

With regard to the field of general word selection, it has been observed that Webster had trouble because of his inclusion of “Americanisms.” By 1828, however, people generally realized the necessity for a dictionary to contain at least the “legitimate” terms of recent or local use. Moreover, Webster followed a fairly conservative approach, and was as desirous as anyone to avoid giving standing to actual “vulgarisms.” Webster, it must be remembered, was the man who “purified” the standard King James Version of the Bible, removing such “unpleasant” terms as “womb,” “teat,” and “stones.”¹⁹

The problems of pronunciation loomed large for Webster in his earlier period when he was most eager to bring about radical changes. But generally for the 1828 dictionary, he was content with observing how a particular word was pronounced by the cultured and then recording some standard form with possible variations. He travelled

¹⁵Webster, *op. cit.*, p. 13

¹⁶Webster, *op. cit.*, p. 175

¹⁷Noah Webster, *A Compendious Dictionary . . .*, “Preface,” p. vi.

¹⁸Various attitudes toward Webster’s orthography may be found in: Israel W. Andrews, *Webster’s Dictionaries* (Springfield, Mass., 1856); Lyman Cobb, *A Critical Review Of The Orthography Of Dr. Webster’s Series Of Books* (N. Y., 1831); Edward S. Gould, *A Review Of Webster’s System Of Orthography* (Boston, 1856); William D. Swan, *The Critic Criticised And Worcester Vindicated* (Boston, 1860).

¹⁹Allen Walker Read, “Noah Webster as A Euphemist,” *Dialect Notes*, vol. 6 (July, 1934), pp. 385-391.

to England to hear the actual state of the language there. Eventually, in some of the later editions of his dictionary he even included the archly traditional "Walker's Key to the Classical Pronunciation of Greek Latin, and Scriptural Proper Names."²⁰

Webster's basic concern in improving the English language thus finally found its development in orthography. Although affairs were in a state of flux, with writers on both sides of the Atlantic using a variety of spelling forms, Dr. Johnson was at the time the authority whose past decisions earned the most respect. He had incorporated his beliefs into his *Dictionary*, a book which was still very influential, both in itself and in lesser works closely derived from it. In 1827, one year before Webster released his work, Joseph E. Worcester, later to be Webster's foe in the "War of the Dictionaries," issued his own dictionary, one whose orthography was almost completely based on Johnson's.

Webster respected Johnson primarily for the Doctor's non-lexicographical achievements, but he did recognize the immense debt that all compilers of English language dictionaries owed him. Webster felt, however, that Johnson's *Dictionary* had been praised all out of proportion to its merits, and that the continuing non-critical acceptance of it by many authorities was hampering rather than helping lexicography.

Webster was convinced that the only sane approach to orthography was one that took into account two factors: first, the nature of the changes that occur in pronunciation and the subsequent need for spelling correspondences; and second, that the "real" spelling could be traced out of the radical words and primitive spellings.²¹ Johnson and others, as he understood things, were guilty of imposing illogical and artificial rules. A prime example was the spelling of a large group of words with a "c" followed by an unnecessary terminal "k". Thus Johnson wrote "publick."²² With the same lack of reason Johnson used the unnecessary "u" in many of the "or" words such as in "labour."²³ At the turn of the century in America, some authors were following Johnson in these cases, but others were not. Webster himself reflected the confusion. In his 1790 *Collection Of Essays And Fugitive Writings*, he used the modern American spellings of the words at point,²⁴ but writing six years later in *The Prompter*, he preserved the dated British forms.²⁵ His dictionaries of the later years generally held to our modern forms, but inconsistencies were still present, with some variations not finally settled until well after his death.

²⁰Webster, *An American Dictionary Of The English Language* (N. Y., 1844).

²¹Noah Webster, *A Dictionary Of The English Language Compiled For The Use Of Common Schools In The United States* (Hartford, 1817), "Preface," pp. iv-v.

²²Samuel Johnson, *Dictionary Of The English Language*, 2nd ed., Vol 2 (London, 1755-56).

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴Webster, *Collection Of Essays And Fugitive Writings* (Hartford, 1790), p. 222.

²⁵Noah Webster, *The Prompter* (Philadelphia, 1796), p. 32

On the whole, Webster's *American Dictionary* was more restrained and practical a work than Johnson's. In the matter of illustrations the difference was most evident. Johnson was intent on creating a definitely literary work, and so his *Dictionary* contained pages upon pages of unnecessary passages in which the word under definition had been used. Webster noted that often times Johnson's illustration did not even explain the word to which it was supposedly directed, and that, moreover, most words did not require illustrations in their definitions.²⁶

In the actual matter of definitions Webster was motivated by a desire to create a useful work. He had previously objected to the lack of discrimination and distinction in the definitions of Johnson and his followers.²⁷ Webster also tried to be more objective here. Johnson was at times extremely flippant. Two of his most famous definitions serve as examples. "Whig," he defined as "The name of a faction," and "Pension" as an allowance made to anyone without an equivalent. In England it is generally understood to mean pay given to a state hireling for times. However, Webster did allow his own prejudices, especially in the case of religion, to enter into his work. His definition of "Abdal" rivalled some of Johnson's for distortion and value judgments. "Abdal" according to Webster, may be defined as "The name of certain fanatics in Persia, who, in excess of zeal, sometimes run into the streets, and attempt to kill all they meet who are of a different religion; and if they are slain for their madness, they think it meritorious to die, and by the vulgar are deemed martyrs."²⁹ His political opposition to the extremes of the French Revolution was found in his characterization of "Jacobitism" as "unreasonable or violent opposition to legitimate government."³⁰

Three years after the *American Dictionary* was published, Webster made a comment which was directed to the particular concern of orthography, but on consideration really applied to the varied range of problems he encountered as a lexicographer. "The truth is," he began, "there are many errors or blunders in English . . . which must have originated in heedlessness, ignorance, or want of system among writers; and which I should exert my influence to correct were it not for the difficulty of overcoming long-established usages."³¹ Webster realized his sizable debt to the writers and lexicographers of the past ages. But he, unlike the literary authorities of his time, understood the need to think critically in the field of lexicography that he witnessed in political philosophy. Even if many of his plans remained unrealized, there is a lasting testimony to his insight and perseverance in the fact that his *American Dictionary* in its various revised and newly edited forms became the most influential work of its type in this country.

²⁶ Webster, *Letters*, p. 287.

²⁷ Samuel Johnson, *Dictionary of The English Language*, vol 2.

²⁸ Johnson, op. cit., Vol. 2 of The English Language.

²⁹ Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary . . .*, Vol. 1 (N. Y., 1828).

³⁰ Webster, op. cit., Vol. 2 (N. Y., 1828).

³¹ Webster, *Letters*, pp. 427-28.

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