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dictator, *n.*

Pronunciation: Brit. /dɪk'tetə/, U.S. /'dɪk,tetɪdər/

Forms: OE **tictator**, ME **dictature**, ME–16 **dictatour**, ME–16 **dictatoure**, ME– **dictator**, 15 **dyctatour**, 15 **dyctatoure**.

Frequency (in current use):

Origin: A borrowing from Latin. **Etymon:** Latin *dictātor*.

Etymology: < classical Latin *dictātor* magistrate having plenary powers, appointed at Rome in times of emergency, Italian municipal officer, in post-classical Latin also person who dictates to a writer (late 4th cent.), author, writer (6th cent.) < *dictāt-*, past participial stem of *dictāre* DICTATE *v.* + *-or* *-OR* suffix. Compare Middle French, French *dictateur* (1213 in Old French as *dictator*), Catalan *dictador* (1507), Spanish *dictador* (13th cent., earliest in sense 'poet'), Portuguese *ditador* (15th cent.), Italian *dittatore* (a1292), also Dutch *dictator* (1614), German *Diktator* (late 15th cent.).

The unusual Old English form *tictator* with initial *t-* is attested only in the translation of Orosius *Hist.* (compare quot. eOE at sense 1a), where it is spelt thus consistently; it has frequently been assumed to be one of several phonetic spellings in this text arising from dictation in the scriptorium by a non-native (perhaps Celtic) speaker (see further J. Bately *Old Eng. Orosius* (1980) pp. cix–cxvi), although this has recently been disputed (see P. Kitson in *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia* 30 (1996) 3–35).

The form *dictature* in quot. a1450 at sense 1a could instead show an earlier example of DICTATURE *n.*

1.

a. Ancient Hist. In Rome and some neighbouring states: a chief magistrate with absolute power, appointed for a limited period or for the duration of an emergency.

eOE tr. Orosius *Hist.* (BL Add.) (1980) II. iii. 41 Æfter þæm wæs þæt Sabinisce gewinn, & him Romane þæt swiðe ondrædende wæron, & him gesetton hiran ladteow þonne hiera consul wære, þone ðe hie tictatores heton, & hie mid þæm tictatore micelne sige hæfdon.

►a1387 J. TREVISA tr. R. Higden *Polychron.* (St. John's Cambr.) (1869) II. 273 After consuls, tribunes plebis and dictatores rulede the comounte.

a1450 (►1408) tr. Vegetius *De Re Militari* (Douce) f. 7^v (MED) Þis office of Dictature was noȝt ellis as ysider seiþ..þey were clepid maistres of þe puple for þat þay saide was seide, and þerfore were þei clepid Dictatores, a dicendo uel a dictando.

1485 *Malory's Morte Darthur* (Caxton) v. i. sig. huii^v The Emperour Lucyus, whiche was called at that tyme, Dictatour or procurour of the publyke wele of Rome.

1485 *Cronicles of Englonde* (St. Albans) III. sig. eij The[y] chose an other man the wich shuld haue more auctorite then they [sc. Lucius and Brutus], & thei cleped hym dictator.

1592 R. GREENE *Quip for Vpstart Courtier* sig. C3^v Was he not called to be Dictator from the Plough?

a1616 SHAKESPEARE *Coriolanus* (1623) II. ii. 89 Our then Dictator..saw him fight.

1624 R. BURTON *Anat. Melancholy* (ed. 2) I. II. III. iv. 85 As in old Rome, when the Dictator was

- created, all inferior magistracies ceased.
- 1735 VISCT. BOLINGBROKE *Diss. upon Parties* (ed. 2) 164 A Dictator was a Tyrant for six Months.
- 1788 GIBBON *Decline & Fall* IV. xlv. 309 The execution of the Alban dictator, who was dismembered by eight horses.
- 1839 *Penny Cycl.* XIII. 438/2 During Cæsar's absence, Lepidus proposed the law by which Cæsar was created Dictator.
- 1874 J. MORLEY *On Compromise* 9 Our people..have long ago superseded the barbarous device of dictator and Cæsar by the great art of self-government.
- 1913 *Classical Jrn.* 9 47 Cases of abdication under pressure were not uncommon. M. Claudius Glicia, dictator in 249 B.C., suffered this fate.
- 1952 H. HILL *Roman Middle Class* 183 It was inevitable that he [sc. Pompey] should be given dictatorial powers, though the Senate disguised them by appointing him not dictator but sole consul.
- 2003 M. FREEMAN *Freedom or Security* i. 6 The Roman dictator, appointed for six months, is an example of a limit on duration by design.

b. gen. An absolute ruler of a state, esp. one whose rule displaces that of a democratic government. (In quot. 1671 used of the Devil.)

Equivalents of *dictator* in other languages were sometimes used during the 19th cent. and later in the formal titles of heads of state, and the English word has been used to render these; more generally, however, the word suggests oppressive or totalitarian rule, and hence is rarely used in a neutral sense.

- a1593 MARLOWE *Massacre at Paris* (c1600) sig. C5 Guise, weare our crowne..And as Dictator make or warre or peace.
- 1671 MILTON *Paradise Regain'd* l. 113 To him their great Dictator, whose attempt At first against mankind so well had thriv'd.
- 1794 R. SOUTHEY in S. T. Coleridge *Fall Robespierre* ii. 26 Fall'n guilty tyrant! murder'd by thy rage How many an innocent victim's blood has stain'd Fair freedom's altar! Sylla-like thy hand Mark'd down the virtues, that, thy foes removed, Perpetual Dictator thou might'st reign, And tyrannize o'er France, and call it freedom!
- 1824 *Times* 27 July 2/2 The decree appointing Bolivar Dictator of Peru.
- 1848 G. LIPPARD *Paul Ardenheim* II. 346 Under other circumstances he might have become a Poet, a General, or the Dictator of a Revolutionary age.
- 1863 *Birmingham Daily Post* 12 Mar. 8/4 By a resolution of the Central National Committee, General Langiewicz has been proclaimed Dictator of Poland.
- 1938 *Foreign Service* Feb. 9/3 Our democratic institutions are the subject of jeers by foreign dictators.
- 1978 G. A. CRAIG *Germany 1866-1945* xvi. 578 Hitler, on the afternoon of 23 March 1933, became dictator,..free from any real control by his cabinet colleagues.., and empowered to mould Germany's governmental and social system as he wished.
- 2007 *N.Y. Times Mag.* 26 Aug. 23/2 In the so-called New State of the dictator António Salazar, independent political parties and labor unions were outlawed.

2. A person exercising absolute authority of any kind or in any sphere; a person who authoritatively prescribes a course of action or dictates what is to be done.

- 1575 *Exam. Whytgiftes Censures* 7 Who made him a dictator to determine the sence of other mens wordes. Euery man is best interpreter of his owne wordes.
- 1605 BACON *Of Aduancem. Learning* I. sig. F3^v The ouermuch credite that hath beene giuen vnto Authors in Sciences, in making them Dictators .
- 1631 B. JONSON *Staple of Newes* III. iv. 58 in *Wks.* II Say, that you were the Emperour of pleasures, The great Dictator of fashions, for all Europe.
- 1700 J. TYRRELL *Gen. Hist. Eng.* II. 893 Arbitrators, who are sometimes called Assessors, sometimes Dictators of Amends.
- 1728 SWIFT *Intelligencer* (1729) ix. 86 The Dictators of Behaviour, Dress and Politeness.
- 1791 J. BYNG *Diary* 9 July in *Torrington Diaries* (1935) II. 380 In touring the right mode is to chuse a dictator, one who should be obeyed.
- 1836 E. EVERETT *Orations* 480 It raised him into a new moral power in the state; an inofficial dictator of principle.
- 1875 W. STUBBS *Constit. Hist.* III. xxi. 525 The medieval church of England stood before the self-willed dictator [sc. Henry VIII].
- 1892 F. LAWLEY *Pref. to Racing Life Ld. G. C. Bentinck* 7 I inquired who was now the Dictator of the Turf.
- 1912 *Times* 20 Sept. 7/4 Hodler, who, after becoming a kind of dictator of Swiss art, plunged into a lamentable period of picture making.
- 1966 W. T. BERRY & H. E. POOLE *Ann. Printing* 230/2 As the watch-dog of contemporary literary morals, Mudie soon became a ruthless dictator as to what the people should read.
- 2005 'NOIRE' *Candy Licker* i. 6 The minute they put their name on the dotted line their asses belonged to the House of Homicide, and Hurricane Jackson became their don, their daddy, and their dictator.

3. A person who dictates to a secretary, dictating machine, etc.

- 1617 J. MINSHEU *Ἡγεμὼν εἰς τὰς γλώσσας: Ductor in Linguas* A Dictator, or inditer.
- 1650 I. BROMWICH *Spoiles of Forrest of Deane* 2 A late scurrilous libel, the conception and issue whereof bespeaks the Fathers, both dictator and scribe to be men of a beggarly and needy invention.
- 1741 S. JOHNSON *Let.* 31 Mar. (1992) I. 27 Nor do I intend to be understood..to express any of my own sentiments, but merely to write after a dictator.
- 1833 C. H. TERROT tr. J. A. Ernesti *Princ. Biblical Interpr.* II. III. vi. 117 When a book was copied by dictation, the dictator sometimes pronounced the letters indistinctly.
- 1883 *Athenæum* 16 June 759/1 Reminiscences..dictated to a scribe and checked here and there by reference to documents in the dictator's possession.
- 1900 *Times* 11 May 15/5 [He] was identified by a young lady typewriter as the dictator of letters in the name of 'Russell Bros.' ordering goods.

- 1945 *Mod. Lang. Rev.* **40** 137 There is certainty of misreading, either by scribe or dictator, of an original copy, e.g. in the reading 'prince' for 'province'.
- 1995 *Contemp. Lit.* **36** 26 When I revise it's as if I were taking dictation, but who the dictator is I do not know.

COMPOUNDS

General *attrib.* and appositive.

- 1737 J. THOMSON *To Mem. Ld. Talbot* 12 Rome's awful Consuls, her Dictator-Swains, As on the Product of their Sabine Farms They far'd.
- 1825 J. WILSON *Noctes Ambrosianae* xix, in *Blackwood's Edinb. Mag.* Mar. 379 Certainly these are not dictator times.
- 1959 *Western Polit. Q.* **12** 1166 Why should we undertake the impossible task of trying to quarantine the Communist world by giving military aid to dictator countries?
- 2002 *List* (Glasgow & Edinb. Events Guide) 4 July 105/2 Those of us who spent much of the 1980s wishing that the entire Tory cabinet and its dictator leader would fall into a snake filled hole somewhere.

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