



# Forbidden Words and Female Anatomy Gender and Language Taboos in the *Oxford English Dictionary*

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## *Abstract*

This paper focuses on English taboo vocabulary concerning female anatomy as represented in lexicography. It examines the *Oxford English Dictionary* and its many biases and subjectivity concerning gender, among other things. The analysis considers the three editions of the dictionary, the diachronic evolution of taboo words, how these have been defined in the OED, and tabooing practices like euphemism or dysphemism. Results show how linguistic censorship promotes the creation of highly inventive new expressions and sheds light on the culture(s) that enforce the use of taboo words and the ideologies behind their inevitably selective representation in lexicography.

**Keywords:** Female Anatomy, Gender, Lexicography, *Oxford English Dictionary*, Taboo Language

## *Introduction*

Words have always been thought to possess special powers – to cure sickness, keep evils away, bring fortune to oneself or harm one's enemy (Tambiah 1968), so much so that “[w]hen people have to talk about those things, they are talked about in very roundabout ways” (Gao 2013, 2310). Thus, taboos are created from social constraints on an individual's behaviour:

Infractions of taboos can lead to illness or death, as well as to the lesser penalties of corporal punishment, incarceration, social ostracism or mere disapproval. Even an unintended contravention of taboo risks condemnation and censure; generally, people can and do avoid tabooed behaviour unless they intend to violate a taboo. (Allan and Burrige 2006, 1)

In terms of language, taboos often concern the very wording or pronunciation of specific lemmas, and political correctness or linguistic prescriptions are both considered as aspects of

tabooing behaviour. The consequent censoring of language promotes the creation of “highly inventive and often playful new expressions, or new meanings for old expressions” (2), which causes existing vocabulary to be abandoned. This process can happen through such linguistic strategies as the construction of a changed form of the tabooed expression or of figurative language sparked from perceptions about the denotata (e.g., faeces, menstrual blood, death, genitals, etc.), word addition/loss, semantic shifts, and sound change (Adler 1978). However, the most common way to avoid using tabooed vocabulary is by replacing it with either euphemisms (“sweet talking”) or dysphemisms (“speaking offensively”; Adams 1985; Burchfield 1985). This article proposes an analysis of the tabooing strategies that concern the specific case of terms referring to female anatomy and their definition(s) in the three editions of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED): “[t]he genital organs of humans are always subject to some sort of taboo; those of women are usually more strongly tabooed than those of men, partly for social and economic reasons, but ultimately because they are the source of new human life” (Allan and Burridge 2006, 7). The aim is to ascertain the various linguistic and extralinguistic ideologies that have played a key part in drafting the definitions of such “unmentionable” headwords as *vagina* or *menstruation* through a diachronic perspective, and to analyse cases of euphemism or dysphemism that have been reported in the dictionary. There is no agreement on what taboos are, since people of different countries display different thought-styles about such touchy subjects as sexual intercourse or money, and this is even more evident when investigating the evolution of the same concept through the decades. The cultural and historical contexts cannot be ignored when conducting this type of study (Iamartino 2014, 173).

When researching the OED (and especially its first edition, compiled and published between the Victorian and Edwardian eras), scholars have already pointed out how, despite the lexicographers’ proclaims of inclusiveness and descriptiveness,<sup>1</sup> the final version of the dictionary was not devoid of judgements, opinions, and recommendations on language which nowadays appear as clearly prescriptive (Brewer 2010, 25). Quite obviously, forms of censorship or linguistic prescription also had to do with coarse and obscene words.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the linguist A.S.C. Ross believed that the OED had not been inclusive enough, and in 1934 he clearly indicated that there had been an unacceptable policy of omission of what he referred to as “mumfordish” (i.e. taboo) words:

[...] it certainly seems regrettable that the perpetuation of a Victorian prudishness (inacceptable in philology beyond all other subjects) should have been allowed to lead to the omission of some of the common words in the English language (e.g. *cunt*\* ‘female sex-organs’; ‘the curse’\* ‘menstrual period’; to *fuck*\* ‘to have intercourse with’; *roger*\* = *fuck*). (1934, 129)

Though we might wonder at such a non-objective treatment of language, we should remember that censorship is undoubtedly an institutionalised practice, usually imposed by the governing classes, and certainly influenced by the tenets of politics, religion, and culture; when speaking about the dictionary-making process, the very composition of the wordlist and its lexicographical handling are always influenced by sociolinguistic factors that may have to

<sup>1</sup> When delivering the lecture that officially started the project in 1857, Archbishop Trench had stated the by-now famous axiom “the lexicographer ‘is a historian [of the language], not a critic’”, while the Philological Society’s Dictionary Committee had announced that their job would be to simply list and describe words disinterestedly (Brewer 2010, 24).

<sup>2</sup> In modern dictionaries, the definitions of words which are considered as taboo or derogatory are normally accompanied by warning labels that indicate their potentially offensive usage (Chen 2019, 363).

do with ideology and tabooing behaviours (Benson 2001). After all, dictionaries are seen as conveying the views and prejudices of the well-educated upper classes (Landau 1985, 303), and thus lexicographers are mere spokespeople for institutionalised power (Iamartino 2014, 172): they “cannot escape from cultural stereotypes and social constraints when defining certain concepts, for they are victims of their own prejudiced society, subjects to its taboos, prohibitions, and models, both conscious and unconscious” (Mackintosh 2006, 58), and the society that provides the dictionary’s background “ensures that certain positions must, willy-nilly, be taken” (Green 1996, 23). Therefore, lexicographers have always been caught in the “dilemma between inclusiveness and ‘decency’ ” (Hughes 2006, ix), and determining the meaning of a word can be considered as a social phenomenon and the product of an ideological process (Fairclough 1989; 1992): the success of this process depends on “an act of faith on the part of their [dictionaries] users, and that act of faith is dependent on those users believing their dictionaries both authoritative and beyond subjectivity” (Moon 1989, 59).

The categories that proved to be “problematic” for the compilers of the first edition of the OED included race and class (for example, slang words were omitted; see Mugglestone 2000), but, even more importantly for the scope of this paper, gender represented a true issue which could not escape from the ideologies of the time: for instance, Fournier and Russell (1992) have shown how gender stereotypes were perpetrated in labels and quotations; Baigent, Brewer and Larminie (2005) have demonstrated how female sources were underrepresented; Russell (2018) has focused on how women actively participating in the lexicographical project were not acknowledged for it; and Guzzetti (forthcoming) has investigated the treatment of words referring to “undesirable” women (such as fallen women and suffragettes) of the Victorian and Edwardian eras.<sup>3</sup>

So far, no attention has been devoted to words relating to female anatomy, but this subject is certainly worthy of further consideration, as women’s bodies have always presented “a threat to culture and society [...] believed by many to be the root of patriarchal oppression of women”, which has resulted in “attempts to control women’s bodies and to curtail women’s freedom” (Chrisler 2011, 203). As stated by Ussher, a woman’s body “is deemed dangerous and defiled, the myth of the monstrous feminine made flesh [...] associated with the power and danger perceived to be inherent in woman’s fecund flesh, her seeping, leaking, bleeding womb standing as site of pollution and source of dread” (2006, 1). In terms of lexicography, as we will see, tabooing and prescriptive behaviours concerning this topic have mainly to do with ideologically-coloured definitions and illustrative examples: “[w]hen anatomical, physiological, and pathological terms are included in the dictionary, social values can affect the way in which such items are defined. Their definitions can be prudish, evasive, overly general, or so scientific as to be nearly incomprehensible to most users” (Mackintosh 2006, 55).

The following analysis thus proposes to shed light on the diachronic evolution of the definitions of women’s anatomical terminology and, consequently, to comment on how its representation in lexicography represents wider changes in society, culture, and ideology across time.

<sup>3</sup>The investigation of gender issues in lexicography has not been confined to the OED alone: indeed, scholars have commented on how mainstream dictionaries tend to be sexist in their definitions or use of illustrative quotations (see, for example, Gershuny 1974; Whitcut 1984; Hennessy 1994; Cowie 1995; Hoey 1996; Moon 2014), though these studies have usually stopped at the linguistic manifestation of ideology, rather than further investigating the relationship between dictionaries and society (Chen 2019, 363).

### 1. *Materials and Methodology*

The analysis took into consideration the three editions of the OED. The first edition (OED1) was a major philological work gradually compiled and published between 1864 and 1928, and it was shortly followed by a *Supplement* in 1933, which mainly added new words which had entered the English language since the publication of the last volume and presented a wider coverage of colloquial and slang words (see Brewer 2010; 2018). The second edition (OED2) was published in 1989 and it simply consisted in the merging of the first volumes and the *Supplement* of 1933, though there was no consistent revision of most entries, so that these acquired a specific Victorian outlook that was already outdated and anachronistic. The third edition (OED3) is still a work-in-progress: this time, the dictionary is being entirely revised, and the process mainly aims at “extirpating the prescriptivism that could sometimes be found in entries in the original dictionary, along with the out-of-date cultural biases” (Brewer 2018, 138).<sup>4</sup>

Apart from the main editions of the dictionary, valuable tools for the investigation were the *Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary* (HT), a new instrument that allows the researcher to study a word’s semantic domain and synonyms across time, and the materials about OED1 stored at the Archive of the Oxford University Press: these consist in proof slips of entries (with notes and corrections by the editors and lexicographers), letters concerning specific headwords and quotations,<sup>5</sup> and, probably most interestingly, the so-called “Superfluous slips”, which include copies of specific words and meanings that were ultimately discarded (mainly, as we will see, for ideological reasons) and not used for the dictionary.

The approach adopted is that of critical lexicography, which considers the fact that dictionary-making does not take place in a social vacuum: “ideology and power [...] are aspects of a dictionary that a lexicographer and a discerning dictionary user have to encounter in any serious lexicographical enterprise” (Kachru 1995, lxiii-lxvi); for instance, Samuel Johnson himself declared in his *Plan of a Dictionary of the English Language* (1747) that “barbarous or impure words and expressions, may be branded with some note of infamy, as they are carefully to be eradicated wherever they are found” (29), thus implicitly manifesting his prescriptive (linguistic) ideology. By using a critical view of lexicography, it is possible to emphasise the fact that prestigious social groups establish ideological conventions and that a constant scepticism and questioning of the normative assumptions are therefore always necessary (Chen 2019, 365). The very act of fixing meaning in a dictionary is considered as a matter of power which concerns, among other things, the prioritising of the language of print and literature: “in other words, it is power that decides which words are to be included in a dictionary, how those words should be defined and which meaning of a word is central. Power restricts the plenitude of potential meanings of a word” (373). In order to help uncover such issues of power and ideology, it is essential to remember that discourse is not produced without context, and it cannot be understood without taking this into consideration; moreover, it is always related to the past and connected to other discourse produced earlier (376).

Critical lexicography thus considers language, dictionary-making, and culture not as watertight compartments:

<sup>4</sup> For a comprehensive study of the history of the OED, see, for example, Willinsky 1994.

<sup>5</sup> Work on the first edition of the dictionary was greatly supported by external readers from all parts of Britain, who were encouraged by the editors to send examples of the words to be defined in context.

language usage and norms, the traditional form and content of dictionaries, the values and ideals of any given society and historical period largely interact. In their overlapping roles – as speakers of the language, lexicographers, and members of the society they live in – the compilers of dictionaries can favour a descriptive approach or alternatively a prescriptive one, though most probably their attitude to language use will be mixed; they will be influenced by tradition, i.e. preceding dictionaries; and their compilations will express the views and prejudices of the social groups to which they belong (possibly, of their social betters) and will usually be produced for the cultural and social establishment. (Iamartino 2014, 174)

Moreover, this methodology sees dictionaries as texts following the seven criteria of textuality (i.e., cohesion, coherence, acceptability, informativity, intentionality, situationality, and intertextuality) and focusing their attention on both the inner structure and the external forces that have a role in their production; as communication, that is to say, a process of dissemination and sharing of information which is realised by a series of choices of field, mode, and tenor; as intertext, thus supporting the idea of “lexicographising”, to be precise, the activity of writing lexicographical texts; and, last but not least, as discourse, since instead of reproducing reality, they select differences that matter and either emphasise or hide features of language and society (Chen 2019, 366-71).

In order to analyse the gender taboos concerning the representation of female anatomy in the OED, the study has focused on ten headwords: *breast*, *clitoris*, *hymen*, *menstruation*, *nipple*, *ovary*, *uterus*, *vagina*, *vulva*, and *womb*; the first step in the investigation consisted in checking the various definitions of these words in the three editions, thus noticing some preliminary differences and/or similarities across time. Secondly, each headword was examined in the HT, too, and this operation was fundamental in uncovering synonyms used across the centuries, which were later categorised as euphemisms or dysphemisms. The presence of forms of ideology and censorship (and, therefore, taboos) was ascertained by considering the following elements: word omission, which is deemed the strictest act of preventing (linguistic) control, since it corresponds to a refusal to admit its existence and perpetuates the social stigma attached to an object, action, or concept evoked by that word; hedging, which may take the form of a phrase or of words expressing doubts; usage labels, which can be an example of prescriptivism, as dictionaries also have a pedagogical function; and illustrative quotations, as restrictions in the sources from which these were taken, especially in the case of OED1,<sup>6</sup> inevitably affect the reliability and comprehensiveness of the dictionary’s judgements (Iamartino 2014; Pinnavaia 2014; Brewer 2018).

By taking all these elements into account, it was thus possible to provide a general picture of gender taboos and female anatomical terminology in the OED across time; due to space constraints, the following sections will report only the results of the analysis of words representing female genitalia, as *vagina*, *hymen*, *clitoris*, and *menstruation*, which represent very interesting examples of gender and linguistic taboos in the dictionary.

## 2. Defining and Tabooing Vagina

Table 1 reports the definitions of *vagina* in the three editions of the dictionary,<sup>7</sup> along with any valuable information found among the Superfluous files and a distinction between euphemisms and dysphemisms which have been found in the HT. This latter categorisation

<sup>6</sup> For example, choice of quotations was restricted to printed material only, thus unavoidably disregarding the fundamental importance of spoken language (Brewer 2018, 32).

<sup>7</sup> In all the examples considered here, the second and third editions have been grouped together because the definitions in OED3 have either not been updated yet, or because the revision has been minimal.

was conducted by focusing on labels such as “coarse slang” or “derogatory”, which clearly mark the noun as having a possibly offensive meaning, and on illustrative quotations, which allow insights into the actual usage of the words in context.

	OED1	Superfluous slips	OED2-3	Euphemisms	Dysphemisms
<i>vagina</i>	<i>Anat. And Med.</i> The membranous canal leading from the vulva to the uterus in women and female mammals; the external passage to the womb.	X	In humans and other mammals: the part of the female reproductive tract that leads from the vulva to the uterus, consisting of a tube with an inner lining of squamous epithelium, a middle layer of muscle, and an outer layer of connective tissue.	<i>Tail, case, bumble-broth, keyhole, niche, bumbo.</i>	<i>Quaint, mouse-trap, twat, cockpit, Whitechapel portion, fuck-hole, manhole, stank, pum-pum, punani, cunt, pussy.</i>

Table 1 – Definitions, euphemisms, and dysphemisms of *vagina* in the OED

As can be seen, the latest definition in OED3 (revised in 2019) provides more scientific and precise anatomical detail than the first entry, which dates back to 1916. While the 2019 record can certainly be deemed to be more specific and technical, with the use of such medical terminology as *squamous epithelium*, we can see that there is no ideological and gender bias in both editions of the dictionary, and this is particularly meaningful in the case of OED1, which, as we have already said, presented several issues concerning this matter. This idea is further supported by the fact that the Superfluous files did not contain any additional information which was later discarded and excluded from the dictionary because of “decent reticence” (Mugglestone 2007, 1).

Euphemisms and dysphemisms provide much more interesting insights into the linguistic and extralinguistic tabooing practices concerning the use of this word and its lexicographical treatment, with offensive terms clearly being more numerous than so-called “weasel words”. Among the euphemisms, we find slang expressions, such as *keyhole*, defined simply as “slang”. The female external genitals, the vulva; the vagina. Usually as a “double entendre” and taken from Farmer and Henley’s seven-volume *Slang and its Analogues* (1896);<sup>8</sup> obsolete words such as *bumble-broth*, which was defined as “a mess; a muddle” and could be allusively used to refer to the vagina as well, though the only citation reported in the HT dates to 1602 (“*Sir Ada*. Wod I were as sure to lye with her, as to loue heR [...] *Tuc*. If I might ha my wil, thou shouldst not put thy spoone into that bumble-broth”, from Thomas Dekker’s *Satiro-Mastix*) and thus confirms the archaic nature of this noun; and, lastly, borrowings from other varieties of English, such as *bumbo*, defined as “Of uncertain origin. Probably a borrowing from an African language. The vagina” and retrieved from Cassidy and Le Page’s *Dictionary of Jamaican English* (1907).

<sup>8</sup> This is a historical dictionary of slang which was intended as a complementary volume to OED that would include terms that were not allowed in the latter (Coleman 2008).

Examples labelled as “coarse slang” obviously make up most of the dysphemisms of *vagina*. The expression *Whitechapel portion* is labelled as “obsolete slang”, and the definition given by OED explains its origin: “A meagre dowry or inheritance; (hence) the vagina, regarded as the only dowry a poor woman can offer”.<sup>9</sup> We can also find other borrowings from Caribbean English, such as *pum-pum* and *punani*: interestingly, both words are defined in the same way in the HT (“*coarse slang*. The female external genitals, the vagina. Hence: women considered sexually”), but the entry for *punani* includes an explicatory note stating that this slang term was “[p]opularized originally in the lyrics of Jamaican dancehall reggae in the mid 1980s, and from there the lyrics of U.S. rap and hip-hop music. In the United Kingdom in the late 1990s, further popularized by ‘Ali G’, a television persona of comedian Sacha Baron Cohen”. Both headwords were new entries in OED3 in 2007, and their use in contemporary English is testified by the inclusion of very recent illustrative quotations, such as “He got some face like a donkey’s pum-pum” (from Zadie Smith’s 2001 novel *White Teeth*), and “He.. likes to be shown respect by his homeboys and doesn’t take no crap from no Henley-on-Thames punani called Charlotte”, from an article which appeared on *The Independent* of 6 November 2007. The presence of several borrowings from Caribbean English and their inclusion in British language and culture through the influence of music and television is a further suggestion of the global relevance of gender taboos concerning female private parts.

Sexist and offensive connotations are even more evident in words like *mousetrap*, *cockpit*, *fuckhole*, and *manhole*, which are clearly meant to represent women’s genitals mainly as an object of (men’s) sexual pleasure. In particular, we can notice the association between animals and female genitalia, with *mousetrap* being defined allusively also as “The female external genitals, the vulva; the vagina”, and *cockpit* being described as “*coarse slang*. The vagina”. For obvious reasons concerning, again, Victorian “decency” and “respectability”, these meanings were added in OED3 only in 2003 and 2019 respectively, and there was no reference at all to them in OED1. The HT shows that both terms have been recorded in the English language since at least the sixteenth century, but they are still used in contemporary English especially in contexts that refer to erotic contents or sexist and derogatory language. For example, the latest citation for *mousetrap* is taken from Henry Miller’s novel *Opus Pistorium* (1983), which includes a series of short stories focused on licentious episodes (“Her mousetrap stretches when she puts one of her fingers in”), while the one for *cockpit* is retrieved from a Twitter post of 13 April 2014 by user @yesimslick (“She fly my cock inside her cockpit woop!”).

Even more allusive in this sense are the terms *fuckhole* and *manhole*, which are both labelled in the dictionary as “coarse slang”, and which define the vagina only according to the use men make of it. Indeed, *fuckhole* (a compound noun which immediately reminds us of the association with sexual pleasure) was recorded for the first time in 2008 as “The vagina (or occasionally the anus) as an object of sexual penetration”, and it is retrieved again from Farmer and Henley’s *Slang and its Analogues*. Its latest citation is taken from another erotic work of fiction, Nicholson Baker’s *The Fermata* (1994), which is about a man called Arno Strine who can stop time and embark on a series of sexual encounters (“‘Fill my fucking fanny!’ Sylvie shouted, looking in Marian’s eyes and then down at her toy-filled fuckholes”). On the other hand, *manhole* makes a less strong allusion to sexuality, but still identifies the vagina (and, by extended meaning, women) as fulfilling men’s desires. This headword has

<sup>9</sup> The reference to Whitechapel places the origin of this expression directly in London, as this is a neighbourhood of the capital which belongs to the East End, associated (particularly in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) with poverty and social decay.

been updated in 2000 with the additional definition “A vagina; (also, by extension and frequently derogatory) a woman”, recorded as a pun of the original sense “A hole or opening in a floor, pavement, boiler, etc., through which a person may pass to gain access to a structure or mechanism for inspection, maintenance, etc”. A quotation that rightly illustrates the sexism behind this word is taken from Peter Tatchell’s *The Battle for Bermondsey* of 1983: “When I lived in Bermondsey, until my family were bombed out..., we had a saying, Bermondsey was a place where men were men and women counted as ‘manholes’ and members of the ‘Middlesex Regiment’ would not be tolerated”.

Finally, special consideration must be given to the dysphemism *cunt*, which generated animated discussions concerning its inclusion or exclusion from OED1. Indeed, due to Victorian prudery, it was considered one of the famous most obscene four-letter-words in the English language, and its vulgar nature preoccupied the editors of the first edition: while the chief editor James Murray was openly against including it in the dictionary, some other valued contributors, such as the surgeon James Dixon, had different opinions on the matter. In a letter to Murray, Dixon pointed out that “it would be cowardly to shirk” the enclosure of this word and that “the thing itself is not obscene. It was the gate by which we all entered the world”.<sup>10</sup> Despite the heated debate, *cunt* was eventually excluded from OED1: though the Victorian prudish treatment of vulgar and obscene terms (especially those related to sexuality) certainly played a key role in the ultimate decision, there were also legal reasons that justified it. Indeed, censorship on “inappropriate” content in works of fiction and non-fiction had been validated with the Obscene Publications Act of 1857, which commanded the prosecution of those guilty, among other things, of “lewdness [...] and other dissolute, immoral, or disorderly practices” (Hochschild 2005, 126).

As an example of taboo word being subjected to further linguistic and cultural taboos, *cunt* was finally included in OED only in 1972 (after the ban of the Obscene Publications Act), along with a lengthy introductory note that comments on the history of the term and its treatment in lexicography:

In spite of its widespread use over a long period and in many sections of society, there remains a strong taboo concerning use of this word. Although it does not seem to have been considered inherently obscene or objectionable in the medieval period, as suggested by its use in names and in medical treatises of the time, it is now generally considered an exceptionally strong swear word, and a potentially offensive term in all uses and contexts. As such, its public use has often been prohibited or restricted, notably in news and broadcast media. Until relatively recently it appeared only rarely in print, and there are a number of euphemistic substitutions for it (compare *C-word n.*, *berk n.*, *cunny n.*, and formerly also *quaint n.*); until the late 20th cent., written uses are typically in private sources or texts which were privately printed, especially on the mainland of Europe. It is also frequently written with asterisks, dashes, etc., to represent suppressed letters, so as to avoid the charge of obscenity.

Thus, despite the strong taboo still attached to it, the headword is now fully recorded in OED3 as “coarse slang in later use. The female genitals; the vulva or vagina”, and its illustrative citations document its usage in the history of the English language, which dates back at least to the thirteenth century. Examples which demonstrate how *cunt* has long been widely used in spite of the reticence to validate its existence in reference works include verses retrieved from John Wilmot Earl of Rochester’s *Poems* of 1680 (“Her Hand, her Foot, her very look’s a Cunt”);

<sup>10</sup> This quotation is taken from the so-called “Murray Papers”, a collection of letters concerning the process of dictionary-making and the first edition of the OED (Mugglestone 2007, 4).



an extract from an 1890 memoir by one “Walter” with the title *My Secret Life* (“I sicken with desire, pine for unseen, unknown cunts”); a citation from Henry Miller’s 1934 novel *Tropic of Cancer* (“O Tania, where now is that warm cunt of yours?”); and a sentence from Samuel Beckett’s *Malone Dies* of 1956 (“His young wife had abandoned all hope of bringing him to heel, by means of her cunt, that trump card of young wives”).

It is therefore possible to state that the noun *vagina*, though not presenting any mark of gender ideology or taboo in the definitions of the various editions of OED, can still be considered a taboo word (Blackledge 2003), as the euphemisms and dysphemisms created to avoid the direct mention of this private part of women’s body prove. As shown, the use of dysphemisms and offensive language directed at women is much more prolific, and it is interesting to notice from the citations reported above how these taboo terms were coined and are still used mainly by men with intrinsic sexist (and even misogynist) aims, while none of them were originated by women to talk about their own anatomy.

### 3. Women’s Bodies and Sexuality: Hymen and Clitoris

The strongest taboos on (female) anatomy probably concern those related to sexuality, and in the past dictionaries often altogether avoided including references to sex in a bid not to offend the sensitivities of the time: for example, they could mirror the moral values of the Victorian age, “when educated people often avoided using even such a word as leg, in particular when referring to the legs of young women. The word used instead was limb, which was considered less offensive” (Persson 2005, 431).

This theme is best exemplified by the words *hymen* and *clitoris* and their rendering in the different editions of OED, along with the synonyms found in the HT, which are shown in Table 2 (for *hymen*) and Table 3 (for *clitoris*).

	OED1	Superfluous slips	OED2-3	Euphemisms	Dysphemisms
<i>hymen</i>	(Not yet fully updated). <i>Anatomy</i> . The virginal membrane, a fold of mucous membrane stretched across and partially closing the external orifice of the vagina.	X	unchanged	<i>Maidenhead, cherry.</i>	X

Table 2 – Definitions, euphemisms, and dysphemisms of *hymen* in the OED

The interplay of extralinguistic, cultural, and moral values is evident in this case, as the entry for *hymen* (first introduced in the dictionary in 1899) defines it, first and foremost, as “the virginal membrane”, thus reflecting the Christian beliefs and prudish ideologies which were typical of Victorian Britain. In this way, this part of women’s anatomy is distinguished for its religious and moral connotations (which saw the integrity of this membrane as a symbol of a woman’s “purity” before marriage) even before being described for its medical and anatomical characteristics, thus referring to a specific gender taboo. The fact that there are no additional details in the Superfluous files for this word is indicative of a certain reticence to treat some specific topics, which are either defined quite loosely, imbued with ideology, or altogether neglected. Moreover, the note in OED3 that states that this definition is “not yet fully updat-

ed” might suggest the power that certain ideologies still have after more than a century, since the reference to women’s virginal qualities seem to be sticking in time.

As a taboo word linked not just with sexuality, but, implicitly, also to religion, *hymen* does not present any form of dysphemism, thus suggesting that, in the history of the English language, the word (and the concept it refers to) has never been seen as vulgar: on the contrary, it has always been associated with women’s respectability, which might nowadays be read as a patriarchal view and limitation to their sexuality. In the HT, we do find only two euphemisms that refer to people’s preference to avoid the taboo word *hymen* by using other mitigating expressions. The noun *maidenhead* still refers to women’s religious morality, since it is defined as “The state or condition of being a virgin, virginity (esp. of a young woman, occasionally of a man). Also: the hymen (occasionally: †the vagina), esp. considered as the mark of a woman’s chastity”. The abundance of quotations in this entry confirms that this word has been used in this way at least since the fourteenth century, though the latest example dates to 1967 (“A lady may have had prolonged sexual relations.. without injuring the maidenhead”, from the short story by Graham Green “Dr. Crombie”), so we cannot entirely be sure that it is still in use today.

On the other hand, in the HT *cherry* is simply defined as “the hymen”, therefore the moral allusion seems to be lost, and the illustrative quotation labels the noun as typical of American English: “Associated with the growing heterosexual awareness of high-school students are such words as *cherry*, which in appropriate contexts takes on the familiar slang meaning ‘hymen’, while a *cherry-buster*, logically, is ‘a professional deflowerer’ ” (taken from volume 39 of the scientific journal *American Speech* of 1964). Again, since this example concerns a specific diatopic variety and a specific culture and society which have greatly changed throughout the last decades, we might wonder whether *cherry* is still widely used in contemporary English, especially because the sentence refers to *heterosexual* awareness only and is not inclusive of other forms of sexuality.

Table 3 shows the results of the analysis for *clitoris*:

	OED1	Superfluous slips	OED2-3	Euphemisms	Dysphemisms
<i>clitoris</i>	Part of the female generative organs in the mammalia.  <del>A small elongated body situated within the labia of the female generative organs. It is erectile, and corresponds to the penis in the male.</del>	1771, J. S., <i>Le Dran’s Obs. In Surg.</i> (ed. 4), Dictionary “A part of the Pudendum Muliebre, the seat of Titillation”.	The female genital organ located in the anterior part of the vulva, which contains numerous nerve endings and plays a major role in sexual arousal and pleasure in women. [...]	<i>Button</i>	<i>The little man in the boat, clit, clitty.</i>

Table 3 – Definitions, euphemisms, and dysphemisms of *clitoris* in the OED

While *hymen* referred to women’s chastity before marriage and thus suggested a vision of sexuality as mainly a fulfilment of wives’ duties, *clitoris* concerns women’s sexual pleasure, which has always been a taboo throughout the centuries and is still unacknowledged, or even forbidden, in many contemporary societies (it is enough to think of the brutal practice of infibulation which is still undertaken in many countries of north-eastern Africa).

The entry in OED1 provides interesting insights into the cultural taboos concerning this word. First of all, in the 1899 definition, *clitoris* is dismissed as part of generative organs in *mammalia*, thus the use of the collective noun that includes all mammals, while certainly being scientifically correct, may underline the hidden gender bias that influenced the lexicographers' choice in Victorian times, who preferred to avoid referring to women's sexual pleasure. Even the citations only refer to vertebrate animals and never specifically to women, such as in the case of Thomas Henry Huxley's *Manual of the Anatomy of Vertebrate Animals* (1871), whose quotations states "In some few mammals [...] the clitoris is traversed by a urethral canal". This idea is further reinforced by the analysis of the proof slip of the same word, which, as can be seen from Table 3, contains a whole passage which was crossed out and not included in the ultimate version of the dictionary. More specifically, the phrase that was crossed out compares women's clitoris to men's penis, defining it as "erectile" and thus having the same functions during sexual intercourses and being responsible for women's pleasure, too. Therefore, this can be read as a clear taboo concerning women's sexuality, which is not surprising considering Victorian ideologies of respectability and chastity in women: the word *clitoris* was not excluded in OED1 (as it happened for *cunt*), but any reference to the possibility for women to enjoy their own sexuality was ultimately ruled out from the dictionary, thus implicitly denying the very idea of it.

Further proof is to be found among the Superfluous slips, which contain an illustrative quotation which was not included in the final version of the dictionary, but which makes the only specific reference to women's sexuality. This example is taken from Henry-François *Le Dran's Observations in Surgery* of 1771, which defines the clitoris as "the seat of women's titillation", while at the same time also calling it part of the *pudendum muliebre*, i.e. the vulva: the use of Latinate expressions was not just as part of medical terminology, but, in cases like this one, it was also a linguistic strategy that avoided the direct utterances that were so often the subject of (gender) taboos.

The reference to women's sexuality was finally recovered only in 1989 (OED2), and a further revision was made in 2019 (OED3), where *clitoris* is defined as a specific part of women's anatomy which has a key role in their sexual "arousal and pleasure". The taboo concerning female sexual pleasure thus seems to have been ultimately excluded from the dictionary, which now provides a more neutral and inclusive definition. Among the citations, we may find both highly technical scientific works, such as *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Female* (1953) by Alfred Charles Kinsey ("As sources of erotic arousal, the labia minora seem to be fully as important as the clitoris"), and women's magazines that popularise scientific knowledge while at the same time helping women become more aware of their own bodies, such as the UK edition of *Cosmopolitan* ("Every inch of the labia, vulva and clitoris is filled with a gazillion tingly nerve endings"). Thus, while in OED1 both definition and illustrative quotations deliberately unacknowledged the function of the clitoris in women's sexuality because it was considered a strong taboo, OED2-3 discard the gender bias in favour of a more inclusive treatment of the word.

Euphemisms and dysphemisms do not abound in the case of *clitoris*, but they are still worth investigating. The euphemism *button* can obviously be considered a term of endearment that recalls the shape of the organ, and it is simply defined as "the clitoris". Quite interestingly, the illustrative examples include citations that go back to the nineteenth and early twentieth century, which further proves that the use of these words to refer to women's sexuality anticipated their official record in the dictionary. For instance, the sentence taken from the anonymous *Confessions of Lady Beatrice* of 1930 states "Edward's fingertips found my button", thus testifying to the euphemistic nature of this word.

Among the dysphemisms, we find words that at first do not seem to have a derogatory aim: *clitty*, *clit*, and the expression *the little man in the boat* might appear “nice” weasel words, but their distinct sexist connotation is to be found in the citations in each entry, or in dictionary labels. In particular, *clitty* is tagged as “coarse slang”, which, as we have already seen for the dysphemisms of *vagina*, is indicative of the negative meaning of the word in question. Indeed, the examples include the anonymous 1873 erotic fiction *Romance of Lust* (“I sucked her clitty”), and a novel by Irish writer Edna O’Brien called *Down by the River* of 1998 (“Ever have your clitty kissed, it’s gorgeous I says to her and blew a load of smoke in her face”). The word *clit* is also labelled as “slang”, particularly frequent in the USA, but its definition also contains an extended meaning which concerns women as a whole: “Also: a contemptible woman (*derogatory*)”. Thus, apart from indicating the clitoris itself, *clit* becomes a synecdoche that refers to the whole of womanhood in insulting and belittling tones: the first sense is exemplified by a quotation taken from a *Loaded* issue of July 2002<sup>11</sup> (“‘What is tribadism?’ Is it when women rub their clits together?”), while the second sense can be found in Jim Cartwright’s *Rise and Fall of Little Voice* of 1992 (“Deaf old clit [...] Make us a cuppa, love. Look after me. Give us that paper”).

Lastly, the idiomatic expression *little man in the boat* is again labelled as “coarse slang” and taken once more from nineteenth-century Farmer and Henley’s *Slang and its Analogues*. The citations suggest that it is a common phrase used by prostitutes, as in the case of the example taken from the monthly periodical *Encounter* of May 1959 (“[Prostitute speaking] The man in the boat’s my mascot. As a matter of fact it’s every woman’s mascot”), which might also be considered the only instance of such a term being used by women themselves. Another quotation from W. J. Caunitz’s novel *One Police Plaza* (1984) provides an explanation for the expression: “Please observe the glans clitoris resembles a man standing in a boat. Hence.. the nickname, the man in the boat”.

Women’s sexuality can certainly be considered a strong taboo subject which has for a long time been totally neglected from such an authoritative official record of the English language as the OED, though, as we have seen, the process of revision in OED3 is certainly tackling these touchy subjects and veering towards a more inclusive and less gender-biased treatment of these words. Just as in the case of *vagina*, then, it is interesting to notice how both euphemisms and dysphemisms were once again mainly created and used by men, apart from the case of *little man in the boat*, thus suggesting that taboos concerning this topic and anxieties about the use of words like *hymen* and *clitoris* are probably less frequent among women.

#### 4. Taboos about Menstruation

The idea of menstruation as symbolically polluting and as involving shame and/or censure is steeped in patriarchal ideologies which are inherent in Jewish and Christian traditions, as well as in Islam (Gottlieb 2020, 145). In this section, we will see how “[t]his desire to ‘talk around’ menstruation, the perception of menstruation as a ‘sensitive’ topic, and the abundance of euphemistic slang expressions, demonstrate that women’s periods are still, to some extent, in a direct sense ‘unmentionable’ ” (Newton 2016, 136).

Generally speaking, the direct reference to clear biological descriptors such as *menstruation* or *menstrual period* still tends to be avoided:<sup>12</sup> these words acquire what the philosopher John

<sup>11</sup> *Loaded* was a men’s lifestyle magazine that ceased publication in 2015 and that depicted the “lad culture” of the 1990s, with its intrinsically sexualised view of women.

<sup>12</sup> As Chrisler reports, in 2009 American comedian Joan Rivers was censored for using the rather common

Austin defined as the “anti-illocutionary force”, that is to say, the opposite of the illocutionary force and the speaker’s intentions conveyed by words that *are* spoken rather than avoided. Table 4 reports the results of the investigation of the term *menstruation* in the various editions of the OED and its related materials:

	OED1	Superfluous slips	OED2-3	Euphemisms	Dysphemisms
<i>menstruation</i>	The act or process of discharging the catamenia.  <i>To menstruate:</i> To pollute with menstrual blood.	X	The periodic shedding of the uterine lining in women and certain other female primates, manifesting itself as a flow of blood from the vagina at approximately 28-day intervals from menarche until the menopause, except during pregnancy and lactation. Also: an instance of this, a menstrual period.	<i>Purgation, superfluities of the mother, terms, the custom of women, visit, lunation, periodicity, friend.</i>	<i>The curse.</i>

Table 4 – Definitions, euphemisms, and dysphemisms of *menstruation* in the OED

As can be seen, the dictionary reflects the culture of shame and the “sweet talking” used to protect (generally) men’s ears when it comes to menstruations: this is shown both in the definition of OED1 and in the many euphemisms invented to avoid the direct mention of the word.

The first entry for *menstruation* dates back to 1906 and it comprises a single very simple sentence that refers to the discharge of the *catamenia*, a Latin term that indicates the blood from the uterus of non-pregnant women which is released monthly from puberty to menopause. Interestingly, the proof slip for this headword also contains a verb form, *to menstruate*, that is clearly ideologically marked, as the use of the verb *to pollute* reminds us of the association between menstruation, disease, and contamination. The only illustrative quotation for this meaning is taken from a 1687 poem by John Cleveland (“On O. P. Sick”) that recites as follows: “The reeking steam of thy fresh villanies would spot the stars, and menstruate the skies”, thus confirming the inherent negative connotation of the verb in question and the concept it refers to.

The definition was unchanged in OED2 and then revised in OED3 in 2001 and, as evident in Table 4, it has become much more articulated and richer in scientific and technical terms: the very act of reformulating the explanation may suggest a more inclusive and less

euphemism *period* during a TV show: “The message sent was that ‘it is okay to menstruate as long as you do not mention it and no one knows you are doing it’ ” (2011, 202).

biased view of this gendered taboo word. Quite clearly, all the citations are taken primarily from medical treatises and scientific works, such as the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* (“Unless the regularity of her menstruation for the last eighteen months may be attributed to a chalybeate medicine”; Sir John Pringle, 1754), *A Manual on Midwifery* (“When menstruation is about to cease, the period is called ‘the change or turn of life’”; Michael Ryan, 1828), and the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (“I have...urged that anovulatory menstruation, so common in monkeys, is not nearly so rare in women as was once believed”, 1934). The last two quotations are taken from the 1970 novel *Play It As It Lays* by Joan Didion (“Helene’s depressed. Helene has these very copious menstruations”) and from the July 1991 issue of *Utne Reader*, an American magazine that specialises in politics, the environment, and emerging cultures (“Navajo and Apache menstruation ceremonies are important religious rites”). Though the abundance of medical sources for the quotations certainly suggests that *menstruation* is still mainly considered as a technical word and as part of the scientific jargon, the presence of works of fiction and non-fiction may be seen as an indication of the (partial) breaking of the taboo concerning this term, as its use is extended in popular language as well.

As for euphemisms, the list reported in Table 4 and in the HT cannot be considered an exhaustive one, as the first systematic study on euphemistic expressions of *menstruation* conducted in 1964 by Natalie F. Joffe (which mainly focused on American English) found more colourful terms that have not been included in the OED, such as *leakage*, *flow*, *the red road*, and *Aunt Jane*, among others (see Newton 2016, 134-35). Moreover, the analysis shows that most of the euphemisms included in OED are now labelled as obsolete or rare. For example, *purgation* (“menstruation; an instance of this; menstrual discharge”) is attested only from the fourteenth to the nineteenth century, and its last illustrative quotation is taken from the *Journal of American Folklore* of 1889: “At the time of first purgation, a young maiden is buried to the arm-pits in hot sand; this will help to develop... breasts”; *superfluities of the mother* is simply defined as “menstrual discharges” under the heading for *superfluity* and we do not find any specific quotation that exemplifies it; *the custom of women*, defined as “menstruation”, reports citations from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century which are taken either from the *Bible* (“My lord, be not angry that I can not rise vp before thee: for the custome of women is vpon me”, *Genesis* 31, 35) or from anthropological works, such as Willem Bosman’s 1705 *New Description of the Coast of Guinea* (“When the Custom of Women is upon the Female Sex, they are...esteemed unclean”); and we can find only one example for *lunation*, defined as “a menstruation. Rare”, retrieved from *The Study of Medicine* (1822) by John Mason Good: “A tendency to keep up that periodical habit of depletion which will probably prove advantageous against the ensuing lunations”). Thus, the HT fails to include contemporary euphemisms for *menstruation* (an omission which, as we have already seen, might be considered a further form of tabooing and censoring behaviour), while the obsolete and rare ones recorded in past centuries offer even more insights into folkloristic views and practices concerning this topic, such as the immersion of young girls into hot sand to help the development of the breasts, or the association between menstrual discharges and uncleanliness.

Quite interestingly, only one word can be labelled as dysphemism: *the curse* is reported as an expression related to menstruation with quotations that span only from the 1930s to the 1960s, though this does not mean that its use is so recent. Indeed, “in Western/ized nations, the widespread concept of menstruation-as-curse likely derives from one specific religious tradition: the Jewish and Christian traditions’ sacred text, the Bible” (Gottlieb 2020, 146), with this view being validated in *Leviticus* (which mentions the pains of menstruation and lists a series of required and forbidden activities for menstruating women), but also by Pope

Gregory, who, in the sixteenth century, saw these prohibitions as a form of divine punishment for women's sinful nature, thus associating menstruation with a divine "curse" (*ibidem*). These taboos do not concern Jewishness and Christianity alone, since the *Qur'an*, Islam's sacred book, also mentions the "painful conditions" linked to menstruation, and in most modern Muslim communities many activities are still prohibited to menstruating women, such as fasting during Ramadan, entering a mosque, praying, having sex, and making the pilgrimage to Mecca (146-47). These are just mere examples that signal how sociologically taboo it remains for women in different settings to discuss this basic biological function and, consequently, the painful conditions associated with it. Indeed, though the pains linked to menstruation are certainly well-known and acknowledged by medicine, this does not mean that women feel at ease when talking about them, as the tabooing practice remains evident.

Though *the curse* originated from patriarchal religions and cultures, the illustrative quotations included in the entry (defined as "menstruation. *colloquial*") demonstrate how the term was later adopted by women themselves and used almost sympathetically to refer to the common experience of menstruation, thus playing down the derogatory and misogynistic effects of this dysphemism. For instance, quotations include Eileen Arnot Robertson's 1933 novel *Ordinary Families* ("Ill luck..had added a premature last straw to my load of misery: I had the curse"), a sentence from the March 1960 issue of British lifestyle magazine *Woman's Own* ("I always think it such a pity when girls..call it 'the curse' "), and Graham Greene's 1969 *Travels with my Aunt* ("I forgot the damn pill and I haven't had the curse for six weeks"). Whether used by women authors or female characters in a novel, *the curse* seems to have lost any religious or patriarchal connotation, thus becoming almost a sign of bonding and common identity, as the negative effects of menstruation now have to do more with pains and other problems related to it, rather than with pollution, uncleanliness, and dangers for the community.

We have seen how euphemisms and dysphemisms concerning the word *menstruation* all have historical roots and are linked to centuries-old traditions and gendered taboos that seem to be common in most religions and cultures. However, while the careful labelling of these words as "obsolete" or "rare" in the dictionary signals the anachronistic character of such expressions, this does not mean that taboos about menstruation have completely disappeared in contemporary cultures and languages (De Klerk 1992; Kissling 1996). Gottlieb (2020, 143-51) cites just a few examples of cultural stereotypes and shame linked to menstruation, such as the fact that, still in 2018, the medical journal *Lancet* reported that about 30% of UK girls who had experienced concerning menstrual symptoms like unusually heavy or irregular bleeding had not consulted a medical professional just because they felt too embarrassed to talk about it. Even more troublesome and thought-provoking is the persistent misogynistic biological reductionism which often justifies women's "deviant" behaviour as a consequence of the presumed adverse effects of menstruation: in 2015, after a heated televised presidential debate, then-candidate Donald Trump complained about journalist Megyn Kelly's continuous assertive questions by stating that "[Megyn Kelly] starts asking me all sorts of ridiculous questions... you could see there was blood coming out of her eyes, blood coming out of her wherever", that is to say, her vagina. Once again, menstrual blood became the simple explanation for women's supposed "out-of-character" behaviour, with the hormones playing nasty tricks on them: "[i]n implicitly yet legibly evoking such long-standing gender stereotypes, Donald Trump signalled that menstrual taboos remain alive and well in the contemporary world" (143).

It is also true that the current Third Wave of feminism is engaging politically in the elimination of taboos about menstruation by protesting against menstrual product taxes, sick leave inequity, unaffordability and environmental unsustainability of menstrual supplies, and toxicity

in menstrual products, thus rendering even the simple acknowledgment of menstruation an attempt to eradicate such taboos and to normalise such a natural characteristic of women. The same process is surely happening in language, too, though the OED limits its more inclusive treatment of *menstruation* to a revised and ideologically unmarked definition, while the HT presents a rather restricted list of synonyms which account for historical words and concepts, but not contemporary ones.

### *Conclusion*

The analysis of the treatment of taboo words referring to female anatomy in the various editions of the OED has clearly shown that “social values influence dictionaries, but dictionaries can also influence social values” too (Mackintosh 2006, 59). Indeed, the relevance of this dictionary as an important pillar of national scholarship has always been unquestionable, and all the more so at the turn of the twentieth century, after many laborious years of editing and proofreading which lead to the creation of a reference work for the English language that claimed to be innovative, all-inclusive, and representative of Victorian and Edwardian British culture (Mugglestone 2000; Brewer 2010).

If it is true that “dictionaries produced at different times reflect the social and cultural values incorporated in the then current vocabulary” (Persson 2005, 432), then we can also safely state that different conceptions of taboo topics (and words) are represented in lexicographical works. The diachronic analysis of the definition of female anatomical terminology has shed light on the social and cultural values lying behind these taboo theme, which consequently implied the use of extralinguistic criteria to provide the ultimate definitions in the three editions of the dictionary. The results demonstrate a clear tendency towards a more inclusive and less (gender) biased treatment of such headwords in the OED, so that, by considering the dictionary also as an archive to be mined for historical and cultural information about its background (Baigent, Brewer and Larminie 2005, 29), we can discern a reflection of the values and ideologies typical of each era (from the late nineteenth century up to nowadays).

For example, if we take into account the definitions of OED1, we can undoubtedly recognise the influence of Victorianism in the process of dictionary-making: it is essential to remember that James Murray, born in 1837 (the year in which Queen Victoria ascended the throne), could not escape the feelings and social values of its own epoch and, as he himself wrote to the scholar Edward Arber, “You and I are of Victorian era, and History, if it remembers us, will so describe us” (cited in Mugglestone 2007, 1). While the 1917 entry for *Victorian* simply defined this adjective as “Of or belonging to, designating, or typical of the reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901)”, the updated (but not fully revised) OED3 version of 2022 has added a figurative meaning, “Resembling or typified by the attitudes supposedly characteristic of the Victorian era; prudish, strict; old-fashioned, out-dated”, which confirms that the term is still used to evoke a set of “hackneyed images of prudery – pantalooned piano legs, the censorious Mrs. Grundy as well as hypocritical worshippers of Respectability like Dickens’ Podsnaps and Pecksniffs” (Ottensen Garrigan 1992, 1).

Apart from coarse words like the ancient “four-letter” ones, Murray’s Victorianism had a deep influence in all matters concerning gender, and female anatomy specifically. Indeed, we have seen how gender ideologies were reflected in the dictionary’s definitions of such words as *clitoris* and *hymen*, where women’s sexuality was completely unacknowledged and neglected, while their supposed “purity” and respectability tended to be highlighted, and in such a term as *menstruation*, defined almost in folkloristic terms as “polluting”. The analysis of the same headwords in OED2 and OED3 has shown how the process of revision now tends to generally



discard such ideologies and taboos, or, at least, they are labelled as historical, anachronistic, rare or obsolete, in an attempt to build a non-sexist dictionary (Graham 1975). While this definitely suggests a move towards description, rather than proscription, which is now typical of modern-day lexicography,<sup>13</sup> we must be wary of considering this fact as corresponding to a change of attitude towards gender and female anatomical terminology. Indeed, though the discussion of the examples presented above has surely referred to some important steps being undertaken in the normalisation of such taboo words and topics as menstruation, we have also cited instances of misogyny and sexism which demonstrate that today's society has not got rid of certain stereotypes and cultural ideologies concerning women's bodies: therefore, the more inclusive approach in the dictionary does not seem to totally reflect real-life situations.

In terms of language, and apart from the definitions of the single headwords, we have seen how, first and foremost, female anatomical terminology presents a wealth of euphemisms and dysphemisms that are used to avoid mentioning the taboo word in question: the term *vagina*, in particular, generates the richest linguistic creativity, though derogatory and offensive synonyms (mainly used by men to refer to women) are much more abundant. The same tendency is to be found for the other words as well, and the illustrative quotations prove that dysphemisms are generally created by patriarchal ideology, and rarely adopted by women themselves: on the whole, though the definitions of the words are being revised with the aim of removing any gender bias and extralinguistic taboo, the much more frequent recurrence to dysphemisms still signals a form of sexism which is harder to extricate in society, no matter the many inclusive initiatives which regard language as well.

Finally, we have seen how, in the editions of the OED, the various linguistic strategies to signal the presence of a taboo word and to treat it are: labels (such as *rare* or *obsolete* when the term is either not very frequent or used only in the past); usage markers, such as (*coarse*) *slang* to highlight the inherent derogatory meaning of the word, or simply *colloquial* when the lemma is used only in informal registers; and illustrative quotations, which are mainly taken from fiction, but also from newspapers and social media (in OED3), and which prove to be fundamental in providing contextualisation for each definition and meaning (in many cases, where there were no labels to mark the taboo words, this was the only way to understand how these were used). As far as exclusion and omission are concerned, we can safely say that this prescriptive (and censoring) practice was used in OED1 alone: the analysis of the proof slips and of the Superfluous files has allowed us to ascertain specific cases of tabooing behaviour (such as for *clitoris* or *cunt*) which lead to the ultimate rejection of some words or of part of their meanings, especially when a reference to women's sexuality would have been necessary. Generally speaking, these practices seem to have been abandoned in OED3, whose definitions now tend to recover what was intentionally left out before.

This investigation offers only a first glimpse into language, cultural values, and taboos concerning female anatomy: further research might consider comparing the entry in the dictionary with a corpus of contemporary English, as this could provide more insights into any similarities and/or discrepancies with the actual usage of the same words in everyday language, while an evaluation of the representation of terms about *male* anatomy (both in the OED and in a corpus) might be useful in highlighting further gender biases and ideologies, both at a diachronic and synchronic level.

<sup>13</sup> As OUP dictionary publisher R.W. Chapman is reported to have said, "the real question is not whether a phrase is rude, but whether it is current" (cited in Benson 2001, 50; on the inclusion of "bad" words in a dictionary, see also Gates 1992).

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