

Adventuring in Dictionaries:  
New Studies in the History of Lexicography

Edited by

John Considine

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**P U B L I S H I N G**

Adventuring in Dictionaries:  
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Edited by John Considine

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

# WORDS BY WOMEN, WORDS ON WOMEN IN SAMUEL JOHNSON'S *DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE*

GIOVANNI IAMARTINO

### 1. Methodological and cultural framework

Towards the end of Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, Captain Harville says to Anne Elliot:

But let me observe that all histories are against you—all stories, prose and verse. If I had such a memory as Benwick, I could bring you fifty quotations in a moment on my side of the argument, and I do not think I ever opened a book in my life which had not something to say upon woman's inconstancy. Songs and proverbs, all talk of woman's fickleness. But, perhaps, you will say, these were all written by men.

To which Anne replies:

Perhaps I shall. Yes, yes, if you please, no reference to examples in books. Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove any thing (1818/1985, 237).

In the early nineteenth century—*Persuasion* was published in 1818—Jane Austen was still voicing her protest against gender stereotypes and inequity, which was not only material but also cultural and linguistic. Among the different kinds of books whose authority is denied here, dictionaries might be said to be very much in the foreground as they were usually compiled by men, were largely traditional in form and content, and basically educational in character.

As a matter of fact, since the beginnings of dictionary-making in early modern Europe and until quite recently, dictionaries have always been full of entries, words, definitions, examples, and comments that display the contemporary attitude—at best patronizing, at worst derogatory—of the cultural and social elite, of course a male one, towards women.

One single example will suffice. Renaissance scholarship has long been ready to acknowledge the active, important role played by John Florio in disseminating the new ideals of the Italian Renaissance in England. In his *A worlde of wordes, or, most copious, and exact dictionarie in Italian and English* of 1598, he simply defined the expression *Menar moglie* as “to marrie or bring home a wife.” In the revised enlarged edition of his dictionary, published in 1611 as *Queen Anna's new world of words*, the same entry had a sting in its tail:

*Menar moglie*: to marrie, to bring home a wife, to take a ceaseless trouble in hand.

Despite the noble, female dedicatee of his 1611 dictionary, and although “Florio worked throughout his career to associate himself with the interests of women, and to link those interests with the status and practice of the European vernaculars” (Fleming 1993, 188), the Italian lexicographer could not refrain from perpetuating the gender stereotype of the shrewish, nagging wife—not so much from personal experience, perhaps, but only (or, at least, especially) in order to establish links between himself as a dictionary-maker, on the one side, and his male readership and the lexicographic tradition on the other.

Hundreds of similar examples from early modern dictionaries—published in Britain and elsewhere in Europe—could substantiate my claim here, and helped me to set my present research in a wider perspective and found it on more general assumptions.

Firstly, the issue of gender (and, more specifically, men's consideration for and judgement on women) is not unlike other touchy subjects in a given culture and historical period: sex, age, race, religious faith, political and social ideals, etc. Gender, of course, is not a synonym for sex: it implies that dissimilarities between the sexes, though based on biological differences, are socially, culturally, and politically constructed.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The sex versus gender dichotomy is often discussed in feminist writings, most interestingly in those books dealing with the relationship between language and gender, e.g. Lakoff 2004 and Talbot 1998, 7–13 and *passim*. A historical perspective on gender issues in early modern Britain and their impact on society and

Secondly, any given culture and historical period will consider some of the above issues as taboos, while other issues pose no problem at all: e.g., apart from his politically incorrect definition of *to marry*, John Florio is credited with having first introduced in European lexicography both the Italian word *cazzo*—defined in his dictionary of 1598 as “a mans priuie member” with the additional note that, like *cazzica*, it might also be an interjection like “what?” or “gods me”—and the most popular of the English four-letter words, which is listed as one of the translation equivalents of the Italian entry-word *fottere*.<sup>2</sup> Evidently, insulting women and talking about sex did not carry any social stigma in early seventeenth-century England—unlike, for example, Victorian England.<sup>3</sup>

Thirdly, any language in a given culture and historical period cannot but mirror its speech community’s ideology—its values and dominant attitudes, its stereotypes and taboos; languages are distorting mirrors, though, since they give voice to their speakers’ thoughts and feelings but can also disguise and stifle them.

Fourthly and finally, just as (or insofar as) every language reflects its speakers’ worldview, the lexicographer working on that language will reflect language usage. Things are not that simple, of course, as the history of lexicography will clearly tell us: I am referring (a) to the descriptive versus the prescriptive approach to dictionary-making; (b) to the fact that in most cases dictionaries were (and perhaps still are) produced by and for the cultural and social establishment; (c) to the influence exerted by tradition—preceding dictionaries, in particular—on the art and craft of lexicography, and finally (d) to the lexicographer’s individual (more recently, lexicographers’ collective) intention of becoming part of the cultural and ideological mainstream or steering away from it.

These and similar reflections and tenets laid the foundations of my ongoing research on dictionaries as cultural objects and on lexicographers—Samuel Johnson, in the present essay—as the interpreters of their own culture.

language can be found, among others, in Fletcher 1995, Sommerville 1995, and Shoemaker 1998.

<sup>2</sup> As a matter of fact, the first English lexicographer who dared to include the entry-word *fuck* in his wordlist was Nathan Bailey in his *Dictionarium Britannicum* of 1730: he did not dare too much, though, as he defined this dangerous word as “a term used of a goat”.

<sup>3</sup> One might argue that Florio would never have shown a similar, cavalier attitude to religion or monarchy in his dictionaries, two topics that an unconventional lexicographer nowadays, unlike Florio, might deal with without risking ... being hanged, drawn, and quartered.

## 2. Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language*

The historians of dictionary-making in Britain have long made clear that the development of English monolingual lexicography reached a turning point at the beginning of the eighteenth century: the earlier tradition of the so-called hard-words dictionaries gave way to the slow introduction into monolingual English dictionaries of the bulk of the language; correspondingly, while most seventeenth-century dictionaries had been compiled for specific categories of users, later works were meant to do service to all types of users (see e.g. Starnes & Noyes 1946 *passim*). Women had figured prominently among the perspective readers of early English dictionaries since the title-page of Robert Cawdrey's *A Table Alphabeticall* of 1604 mentioned "Ladies, Gentlewomen, or any other unskilfull persons" as its prime target (see Brown 2001); but as soon as English dictionaries tended to become "general" and "universal" in the early and mid-eighteenth century—as John Kersey's, Nathan Bailey's and Samuel Johnson's were—women were no longer mentioned as target audience, nor was their linguistic usage deemed particularly worthy of attention and registration.<sup>4</sup>

As a matter of fact, Johnson neither anticipated nor followed Lord Chesterfield's advice in the last issue of *The World* for November 1754 and the first for December of that year. No reference is being made here to the well-known gratuitous puff that infuriated Johnson, but to what followed it, i.e. Chesterfield's discussion of "the genteeler part of our language, which owes both it's rise and progress to my fair country-women, whose natural turn is more to the copiousness, than to the correctness of diction" (Chesterfield 1754a, 603). Language, argued the Lord, "is indisputably the more immediate province of the fair sex" (1754b, 606), and he went on to comment on "many very expressive words coined in that fair mint"—the verb *to fuzzi*, the peculiar, polite usage of the adjective *vast* and the adverb *vastly*, and the noun *flirtation*:

I assisted at the birth of that most insignificant word, FLIRTATION, which dropped from the most beautiful mouth in the world, and which has since received the sanction of our most accurate Laureat in one of his comedies.

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<sup>4</sup> Fleming (1993, 203) mentions the fact that in his preface to *A new English dictionary* of 1702 the compiler J.K. (i.e. John Kersey) includes "the more ingenious Practitioners of the Female Sex" among the prospective users of his dictionary: unlike earlier lexicography, however, his dictionary was meant to help women spell correctly, rather than to understand hard words.

Some inattentive and undiscerning people have, I know, taken it to be a term synonymous with coquetry; but I lay hold of this opportunity to undeceive them, and eventually to inform Mr. Johnson, that FLIRTATION is short of coquetry, and intimates only the first hints of approximation, which subsequent coquetry may reduce to those preliminary articles, that commonly end in a definitive treaty” (Chesterfield 1754b, 607).

Finally, Chesterfield advised Johnson “to publish, by way of appendix to his great work, a genteel neological dictionary, containing those polite, though perhaps not strictly grammatical words and phrases, commonly used, and sometimes understood, by the BEAU MONDE” (610).

Nothing came of this, of course, and of the four words mentioned by Chesterfield, Johnson only comments on *flirtation* as a woman-related word (see section 3 below).<sup>5</sup> This was partly because Johnson would never have taken the Lord’s unsolicited advice, but especially because he based his dictionary on the best writers of the previous centuries, on the tenets formulated in his “Short scheme” and *Plan of a dictionary*, and on his own *Sprachgefühl*: as he made clear in his “Preface” to the *Dictionary*, he was aware of the “fugitive cant” (sig. C1v) of the working classes as well as the tendency to euphemism and linguistic innovation by the polite ones, both usages being for the most part beyond the scope of his dictionary. As a consequence, the way women’s language and women themselves are dealt with in Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary* can safely be assumed to be basically representative of the contemporary attitude to women and to their role in English society and in the speech community.

The historical context in which Johnson compiled his *Dictionary* was a changing one, as far as social and personal consideration of women is concerned: some doubted whether women could be said to be rational and thought that their minds were as different from men’s as their bodies were, while others insisted that women were intellectually equal to men and should receive a similar education. Other issues addressed the weak legal and economic position of women or called into question the double standard of morality and sexual behaviour.<sup>6</sup>

In this context, Johnson’s personality, temperament, and opinions come in as further elements to be considered. Anecdotes and quotations

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<sup>5</sup> On Chesterfield and women’s language see Fleming 1993, 178–181.

<sup>6</sup> For a general introduction to the period see R. Porter 1990; on the relationship between the sexes and men’s view of women see LeGates 1976, Nussbaum 1984, V. Jones 1990, Fletcher 1995, Gowing 1996, Shoemaker 1998, and Barker and Chalus 2005; the double standard is specifically dealt with in Thomas 1959, Spacks 1974, L. Stone 1977 (501–507), Sommerville 1995 (141–173), and Hitchcock and Cohen 1999.

gleaned from Boswell's *Life* may be said to have projected an image of Samuel Johnson as a rude misogynist who neither valued women nor appreciated their abilities at all. A well-known, though possibly spurious, episode in Boswell's *Life* for 1763 is a case in point:

Next day, Sunday, July 31, I told him I had been that morning at a meeting of the people called Quakers, where I had heard a woman preach. JOHNSON. "Sir, a woman's preaching is like a dog's walking on his hinder legs. It is not done well; but you are surprized to find it done at all." (Boswell 1791/1934–1964, 1:463)

Johnsonian scholarship has long made it clear, however, that Johnson's *persona* in Boswell's *Life* is not the same as Johnson the author. Therefore, Kathleen Nulton Kemmerer, who recently wrote a book that deals specifically with Johnson's opinions about marriage and women, is probably right in reclaiming a different "image of Johnson that is in keeping with the new emphasis on women in the eighteenth century" (Kemmerer 1998, 9). Not only has Kemmerer found that many eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century women intellectuals considered him a champion of women, but her critical survey of Johnson's *Irene*, *The Rambler*, and *Rasselas* has revealed him as a passionate advocate of women's education and their active participation in intellectual life, and a challenger of gender stereotypes and widely held prejudices against women.

Despite the critical relevance of Kemmerer's book and of previous literature on Johnson and gender,<sup>7</sup> there seems to be no specific study on the treatment of women in the *Dictionary*. Kemmerer herself states that "The intent of the *Dictionary* precludes any such discussion"—she means discussion of Johnson's sexual politics, as she defines the subject of her book—"although it gives interesting insight into Johnson's opinions and his use of words" (Kemmerer 1998, 21).

It is exactly such insight, opinions, and usage that, in order to address the issue of gender in Johnson's *Dictionary*, are investigated in this essay. By using Anne McDermott's CD-ROM edition of the *Dictionary* (Johnson 1755/1996), and *woman*, *women*, *wife*, *lady*, and *female* as main search words in both definitions and quotations, some 450 entries were selected in order to study (a) those words that Johnson described as typically used

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<sup>7</sup> See, among others, Basker 1990, Cafarelli 1992, and the 1992 special issue of *South Central Review* devoted to "Johnson and Gender", which includes Greene 1992. The topic of Johnson as patron of women and advocate of their education is especially dealt with in Grundy 1987 and Wellington 1977 as well as in the eulogistic Craig 1895.

by women, (b) the words used to refer to women in the English language, and (c) the way Johnson commented on them. This essay is therefore meant to contribute to a deeper knowledge of the *Dictionary* itself and, on a methodological level, to a sociolinguistic analysis of the interplay between language data, lexicographic technique, and ideology in an epoch-making dictionary.

### 3. Women's words

The first, most interesting and least represented category includes only four words, one of the meanings or usages of each of which is said by Johnson to be typically feminine:

EARTHLY. *adj.* [from *earth*.]

1. Not heavenly; vile; mean; sordid. ...
2. Belonging only to our present state; not spiritual. ...
3. Corporeal; not mental. ...
4. Any thing in the world; a female hyperbole.  
     Oh! if to dance all night, and dress all day,  
     Charm'd the small-pox, or chas'd old age away,  
     Who would not scorn what housewife's cares produce?  
     Or who would learn one *earthly* thing of use? *Pope*.

FLIRTATION. *n.s.* [from *flirt*.] A quick sprightly motion. A cant word among women.

    A muslin flounce, made very full, would give a very agreeable  
*flirtation* air. *Pope*.

FRIGHTFUL. *adj.* [from *fright*.]

1. Terrible; dreadful; full of terrour. ...
2. A cant word among women for any thing displeasing.

FRIGHTFULLY. *adv.* [from *frightful*.]

1. Dreadfully; horribly. ...
2. Disagreeably; not beautifully. A woman's word.  
     Then to her glass; and Betty, pray,  
     Don't I look *frightfully* to-day? *Swift*.

What is first to be remarked on is the paucity of women's words in Johnson's *Dictionary*. This is not at all surprising, though, if one remembers that Johnson's

is to be regarded as a dictionary of the written, not the spoken language, and of the written language as it is to be found in the pages of polite

authors, though as far as possible purged of the barbarisms that from time to time even the politest have admitted (Barrell 1983, 155).

Secondly, exaggeration, or rhetorical amplification, seems to be the only typical feature of women's usage that Johnson can pinpoint exactly. Thirdly, it should be noted that Johnson employs the word *cant* to label women's peculiar usage of *flirtation* and *frightful*: this agrees with the second or fourth senses—or both—of his own definition of the entry-word *cant* in the *Dictionary*, respectively "A particular form of speaking peculiar to some certain class or body of men" and "Barbarous jargon." Fourthly, although Johnson labels the word *flirtation* as a women's word, its meaning in the *Dictionary* is different from what Lord Chesterfield had identified as having recently developed in polite society (see section 2 above). Fifthly and finally, it should also be noted that the feminine sense of the word *frightful* is not exemplified by any quotation, so that its inclusion in the *Dictionary* must have been the result of the lexicographer's *Sprachgefühl*. Although no mention of this peculiar usage is made in the dictionaries compiled by Bailey (1727 and 1730), Dyche and Pardon (3rd ed. 1740), Martin (1749), and Bailey and Scott (1755), the investigation of a small sample of literature published in the decade preceding the publication of the *Dictionary* shows that Johnson was right.<sup>8</sup>

#### 4. Words on women I: daily life, body and clothing, jobs

In order to discuss the large number of words on women in Johnson's *Dictionary* a well-organized taxonomy is required. Therefore, the relevant entries will be grouped thematically and the different groups arranged on a continuum from the lowest to the highest level of assumptions, values, and behavioural models involved.

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<sup>8</sup> By using the ECCO collection of eighteenth-century texts many pertinent examples were easily found, the following among them: (1) Samuel Richardson, *Pamela* (1746) 136: "See, Sister, said she, here's a charming Creature! Would she not tempt the best Lord in the Land to run away with her? O frightful! thought I; here's an Avowal of the Matter at once: I am now gone, that's certain." (2) Anon., *The history of Charlotte Summers, the fortunate parish girl* (1750) 60: "Lord have Mercy upon us, Sir Thomas, says Margery, don't be in such a frightful Hurry; I'll tell you as fast as I can." (3) Mary Collier, *Letters from Felicita to Charlotte*, 3rd ed. (1755) 237: "I looked at her person:—I was struck at the disorder of her dress—frightful disorder! could I see it without redoubled confusion? I reflected on the indignities she had suffered—brutal indignities!"

### 4.1. Daily life

First of all, then, although the lexicon of a language is never fully neutral, only a cursory glance can be cast at those entries where women are mentioned in the definitions as a matter of fact. Such entries are numerous and refer to many different aspects of women's daily life, as a few representative examples will make clear:

KNITTINGNEEDLE. *n.s.* ... A wire which women use in knitting. ...

MILLINER. *n.s.* ... One who sells ribands and dresses for women. ...

PERSON. *n.s.* ...

1. Individual or particular man or woman.

*A person is a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places.* *Locke.*

2. Man or woman considered as opposed to things, or distinct from them.

*A zeal for persons is far more easy to be perverted, than a zeal for things.* *Sprat's Sermons.* ...

3. Human Being; considered with respect to mere corporal existence. ...

4. Man or woman considered as present, acting or suffering. ...

5. A general loose term for a human being; one; a man. ...

6. One's self; not a representative. ...

7. Exteriour appearance. ...

8. Man or woman represented in a fictitious dialogue. ...

THIMBLE. *n.s.* ... A metal cover by which women secure their fingers from the needle when they sew. ...

### 4.2. Women's bodies

Only a dozen entries describe the female body or physical condition: the definitions are certainly meant to be neutral and scientific in tone (and those for *brunett* and *to dishevel* certainly are), but one cannot help noticing that most of them deal with either childbirth and related problems (*breast 2, breeder 3, caudle, childbed, to deliver 6, lentigo, menstruous*) or with fits as typical female illness (*fit 5, hystericks, mother 5*), thus implicitly marking the sexual difference between man and woman and alluding to the latter as "the weaker vessel":<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>See e.g. Fletcher 1995 (60–82), Hitchcock 1997 (42–57), and Harvey 2005.

BREAST. *n.s.* ...

2. The dugs or teats of women which contain the milk.

The substance of the breasts is composed of a great number of glands, of an oval figure, which lie in a great quantity of fat. Their excretory ducts, as they approach the nipple, join and unite together, till at last they form seven, eight, or more, small pipes, called *tubuli lactiferi*, which have several cross canals, by which they communicate with one another, that if any of them be stopped, the milk, which was brought to it, might not stagnate, but pass through by the other pipes, which all terminate in the extremity of the nipple. They have arteries and veins from the subclavian and intercostal. They have nerves from the vertebral pairs, and from the sixth pair of the brain. Their use is to separate the milk for the nourishment of the foetus. The tubes, which compose the glands of the *breast* in maids, like a sphincter muscle, contract so closely, that no part of the blood can enter them; but when the womb grows big with a foetus, and compresses the descending trunk of the great artery, the blood flows in a greater quantity, and with a greater force, through the arteries of the *breasts*, and forces a passage into their glands, which, being at first narrow, admits only of a thin water; but growing wider by degrees, as the womb grows bigger, the glands receive a thick serum, and, after birth, they run with a thick milk; because that blood, which before did flow to the foetus, and, for three or four days afterwards, by the uterus, beginning then to stop, does more dilate the mamillary glands.

*Quincy.*

They pluck the fatherless from the *breast*.

*Job*, xxiv. 9.

CAUDLE. *n.s.* ... A mixture of wine and other ingredients, given to women in childbed, and sick persons. ...

FIT. *n.s.* ...

5. It is used, without an epithet of discrimination, for the hysterical disorders of women, and the convulsions of children; and by the vulgar for the epilepsy.

Mrs. Bull was so much enraged, that she fell downright into a *fit*.  
*Arbuthnot's History of John Bull.*

MOTHER. *n.s.* ...

5. Hysterical passion; so called, as being imagined peculiar to women.

This stopping of the stomach might be the *mother*; forasmuch as many were troubled with *mother fits*, although few returned to have died of them. *Graunt's Bills.*

### 4.3. Articles of clothing

Only a brief mention can be made of the 33 entry-words defining as many female articles of clothing: *bodice*, *bonelace*, *breastknot*, *busk*, *capuchin*, *caul*, *chioppine*, *clog* 3, *colbertine*, *commode*, *furbelow*, *hairlace*, *hoop* 3, *jump* 3, *kercheif*, *lace* 3, *mantelet* 1, *mob*, *necklace*, *patten*, *pin* 1, *plaid*, *ridinghood*, *shoetye*, *smock*, *staylace*, *stays*, *stomacher*, *tighter*, *topknot*, *tucker*, *vail* 2, *whittle* 1.

Although quite a few nouns in this list document the extravagances of contemporary female fashions in clothing,<sup>10</sup> especially as far as the upper layers of English society were concerned, most of Johnson's definitions here are simply descriptive, as a couple of examples will show:

BREASTKNOT. *n.s.* ... A knot or bunch of ribbands worn by women on the breast.

HOOP. *n.s.* ...

3. The whalebone with which women extend their petticoats; a farthingale.

A petticoat without a *hoop*. *Swift*.

At coming in you saw her stoop;

The entry brush'd against her *hoop*. *Swift*.

All that *hoops* are good for is to clean dirty shoes, and to keep fellows at distance. *Clarissa*.

Very rarely does the lexicographer specify that a particular article of clothing and the word for it are no longer fashionable or no longer used, as in the case of *plaid* and *whittle*. Just as rarely a comparison between the first and the fourth revised editions of the *Dictionary* will show that Johnson was able to correct and rewrite an entry (*furbelow*) or add a new one (*smicket*) belonging to this semantic area.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Female fashion in clothing or, rather, female follies were often castigated in popular satire: a representative example is John Dunton's *Bumography: or, A Touch at the Ladies' Tails* of 1707. I mention Dunton because a dozen years before, in 1694, he had published (and very probably edited or co-edited) *The Ladies Dictionary*, an alphabetical manual of instruction for women on many different topics, fashion and clothing included (see Linda Mitchell's chapter in this volume, and Dunton 1694/2010). On women's clothes see Cunnington 1957 and Waugh 1968; on the relationship between fashion and economy see Kowaleski-Wallace 1997 and Berg and Clifford 1999.

<sup>11</sup> See section 5.5.3 below for the transferred usage of the word *smock*, sense 1 of which is "The undergarment of a woman; a shift".

#### 4.4. Jobs

Quite a large number of entry-words in the *Dictionary* refer to women's jobs, occupations, or living conditions.<sup>12</sup> These words have to be divided into two groups, for both semantic and formal reasons.

In the first group women are simply defined by their occupations, and their occupational names may be further subdivided according to what women produce (*dairymaid, milkmaid, spinster 1, workwoman*), sell (*applewoman, butterwoman, herbwoman, milkwoman, oysterwench / oysterwoman*) or do (*alewife, basket-woman, bondmaid, bondswoman, chambermaid, char-woman, cinder-wench, drynurse, duenna, governante, housekeeper 4, housemaid, maiden 2, maidservant, market-maid, midwife, nun, nurse, queen, tirewoman, waiting woman, wife 2, woman 2*).

Three remarks are in order here: first, it is worth noticing the occupational meaning of otherwise more general terms, as *maiden* may mean "A woman servant" (sense 2), *wife* may be "used for a woman of low employment" (sense 2), and *woman* may mean "A female attendant on a person of rank" (sense 2); secondly, although in most cases the above words refer to low employments, Johnson's definitions are neutral, simply reflecting the contemporary organization of the job market; thirdly, only one word in this group—*oysterwoman*—carries a social stigma with it, as it had long acquired a derogatory meaning in English, as Johnson's gloss and quotations testify:

OYSTERWENCH. } *n.s.* ... A woman whose business is to sell oysters.  
 OYSTERWOMAN. } Proverbially, A low woman.  
 Off goes his bonnet to an *oysterwench*. *Shakesp.*  
 The *oysterwomen* lock'd their fish up,  
 And trudg'd away to cry no bishop. *Hudibras.*

The second group of occupational terms is made up of a long list of 65 derived words formed with the *-ess* suffix to denote a wide range of female roles: *abbess, actress, adulteress, ambassadress, archduchess, auditress, baroness, benefactress, canoness, cateress, chantress, citess, cloistress, coheiress, commandress, conductress, countess, deaconess, detractress, divineress, dutchess, embassadress, emperess, empress, enchantress, fautress, fornicatress, foundress, giantess, goddess, governess, heiress, hermitess, heroess, hostess, huntress, inheritress, inventress, laundress, marchioness, mayoress, mistress, murderess, patronness,*

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<sup>12</sup> Women's role in the British labour market is dealt with, among others, in Hill 1989, H. Barker 2005, Froide 2005, and Shoemaker 1998, 145–208.

*peeress, portress, priestess, princess, prophetess, proprietress, protectress, schoolmistress, seamstress, semstress, shepherdess, solicitress, songstress, sorceress, suitress, traitress, tutoress, tyranness, victress, viscountess, votaress.*

At first sight, one is tempted to consider many of these forms simply as dictionary words, perhaps invented by Johnson for the sake of analogy: as a matter of fact, for only nine out of 65—*archduchess, baroness, benefactress, coheiress, conductress, deaconess, hermitess, mayoress* and *viscountess*—Johnson does not provide any textual evidence to corroborate their present or past usage.<sup>13</sup> And in one case only the usage of these *-ess* words does not seem to be widespread: *citess*, “A city woman” is said to be “A word peculiar to *Dryden*.”

What is interesting to notice in the long list above is that the *-ess* suffix may convey various subtle nuances of meaning in relation to the different word bases it is attached to.

(1) When the ranks of the nobility or important offices are referred to in the bases, the *-ess* suffix suggests that the female forms are—socially as well as linguistically—dependent on and secondary to the corresponding male ones, as in *countess* “The lady of an earl or count”, *marchioness* “The wife of a marquis”, *peeress* “The lady of a peer; a woman ennobled”, or *mayoress* “The wife of the mayor” etc.

(2) Sometimes, however, an important social status is conveyed with no reference to male power, as in *commandress* “A woman vested with supreme authority”, *conductress* “A woman that directs; directress”, or *tyranness* “A she tyrant.” *Princess* and *emperess* sit uneasily between this and the preceding category, as Johnson’s different senses make clear: a *princess* can be “1. A sovereign lady; a woman having sovereign command ... 2. A sovereign lady of rank, next to that of a queen ... 3. The daughter of a king” or “4. The wife of a prince: as, the princess of Wales”, whereas an *emperess* is either “1. A woman invested with imperial power” or “2. The queen of an emperour” (note that the variant form *empress* has obviously the same meanings—“1. The queen of an emperour” and “2. A

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<sup>13</sup> Anyway, the online *OED* lists them all, and their first attestations largely precede the publication of Johnson’s *Dictionary*. This is perhaps the place to remark that in the revised edition of the *Dictionary* the word *heroess* is described as “Not in use”, i.e. totally replaced by *heroine* that, duly listed in both editions, is defined as “A female hero. Anciently, according to English analogy, *heroess*.” And probably for the sake of analogy and because it is attested in such a masterpiece as *The Faerie Queene*, Johnson includes *avengeress* in the revised edition only to define it as “A female avenger. Not in use.”

female invested with imperial dignity; a female sovereign"—but they are listed in reversed order!).<sup>14</sup>

(3) In religious language *-ess* forms may also denote important positions for women, as in *abbess* "The superiour or governess of a nunnery or monastery of women", or *canoness*, *deaconess* etc.

(4) Female jobs are also referred to in a straightforward, unbiased way, e.g. *actress* 2 "A woman that plays on the stage", *chantress* "A woman singer", *cateress* "A woman employed to cater, or provide victuals", *laundress* "A woman whose employment is to wash cloaths", *portress*, *schoolmistress*, *shepherdess* etc.

(5) *-ess* forms may define women as they temporarily take on a specific role or duty: e.g., *embassadress* is "A woman sent on a publick message" and *foundress* is either "1. A woman that founds, builds, establishes, or begins any thing" or "2. A woman that establishes any charitable revenue."

(6) In quite a few words the *-ess* suffix denotes a condition a woman is in, which may be either positive (*benefactress*, *coheiress*, *heiress*, *inheritress*, *proprietress*, *victress*) or negative (*adulteress*, *fornicatress*, *murderess*, *traitress*).

(7) Rarely, instead, *-ess* forms help define the main feature of a woman's character, as in *detractress* "A censorious woman."

Most *-ess* words may easily fit in one of the above categories. A few of them, however, do not, as they have taken on different meanings with the passing of time: an *enchantress* is "1. A sorceress; a woman versed in magical arts" and by metaphor has also acquired a new, more positive meaning as "2. A woman whose beauty or excellencies give irresistible influence"; *governess* has both the general meaning "1. A female invested with authority" and the more specialized meanings "2. A tutoress; a woman that has the care of young ladies" and "3. A tutoress; an

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<sup>14</sup> Men's uneasiness about women's power is well documented in the *Dictionary* by the entry-word *gynecocrasy* (sc. *gynecocrasy*), which is defined as "Petticoat government; female power." Although the online *OED* provides a few attestations from the early seventeenth to the late nineteenth century, Johnson must have taken this word from either Martin 1749—where *gynaecocracy* is defined as "feminine rule, or petticoat government"—or one of the few preceding dictionaries (Dyche and Pardon 1740, Bailey 1730, *Glossographia* 1707, or Cocker 1704) that included it in their wordlist. This learned word was first introduced into English monolingual lexicography in 1659 by Thomas Blount ("*gynecocracy* or *gynocratie*, feminine Rule or Authority, the Government of a woman"), who may have taken it from Cotgrave 1611, where French *gynecocratie* is likewise glossed "Feminine rule, or authoritie, the gouernment of a woman."

instructress; a directress.” But the widest range of general versus specialized denotations and positive versus negative connotations in *-ess* words is certainly exemplified by the word *mistress*:

MISTRESS. *n.s....*

1. A woman who governs: correlative to subject or to servant. ...
2. A woman who possesses faculties uninjured. ...
3. A woman skilled in any thing. ...
4. A woman teacher. ...
5. A woman beloved and courted. ...
6. A term of contemptuous address. ...
7. A whore; a concubine.

What is to be noted here is that the different senses show a cline from general and positive to specific and negative and that, unlike the preceding senses, the last one has no quotations to illustrate it: one might surmise that Johnson had felt compelled to list this meaning as well but had refused to give it any literary credit.

As far as the usage of these *-ess* words is concerned, the only word worth commenting on is *ambadress*, whose second meaning is the only example of a pragmatically-marked usage:

AMBASSADDRESS. *n.s. ...*

1. The lady of an ambassador.
2. In ludicrous language, a woman sent on a message.  
Well, my *ambadress* —————  
Come you to menace war, and loud defiance?  
Or does the peaceful olive grace your brow? *Rowe's Penit.*<sup>15</sup>

It is as if this *-ess* word had been socially acceptable only insofar as it showed a woman in the bright light of her successful husband; a different usage might only expose a woman to ridicule and criticism for attaching too much importance to the paltry issues of a woman's life.

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<sup>15</sup> Note that *embassadress*, that is not so much a variant form of *ambadress* as the female equivalent of *ambassador* (“One sent on a publick message”), is simply used to mean “A woman sent on a publick message.” Note also that the online *OED*, s.v. *ambadress*, provides quotations with both spelling variants but does not mention any distinction in their usage.

## 5. Words on women II: relations between the sexes

One may easily hypothesise that, when searching Johnson's *Dictionary* for words and entries that more directly reflect the contemporary relations between men and women, the results will show an even stronger bias and prejudice towards women than the vocabulary analysed so far. Although it will be shown that Johnson's attitude is, generally speaking, not condemnatory, and he is certainly not prejudiced against women, as a matter of fact most relevant words here paint a grim picture of womankind in eighteenth-century Britain.

The interplay among Johnson's stance, English lexicographic tradition, and the biased widely held views on women can be seen at work in his entries defining men's aversion to women: the word *misogyny* is defined in a simple and uncommitted way as "Hatred of women" and no illustrative quotation follows; *womanhater* is likewise simply explained as "One that has an aversion from the female sex", but this is followed by a quotation from Swift—the 1728 poem "The journal of a modern lady, in a letter to a person of quality"—that, Swift's irony apart, might be read as a positive statement on the lexicographer's part:

How could it come into your mind,  
To pitch on me of all mankind,  
Against the sex to write a satyr;  
And brand me for a *womanhater*.    *Swift*.

Anyway, whatever Johnson's and his readership's attitude to women, the entry-words referring to the relations between the sexes can be divided into five different groups: words dealing with marriage; words describing "female nature"; words denoting and connoting women's physical appearance and behaviour; words dealing with love and sexual relations; and, finally, pragmatically motivated meanings and changes of meaning in words referring to women.

### 5.1. Words dealing with marriage

In *Rambler* 115, Samuel Johnson seems to agree with Hymenaeus when the latter says that marriage is "able to afford the highest happiness decreed to our present state."<sup>16</sup> However, when considering the 69 entry-

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<sup>16</sup> Quoted from Kemmerer 1998, 32; the whole chapter 1 of Kemmerer's book (23–37) deals with Johnson on women and marriage. For a general introduction to marriage in early modern England see L. Stone 1977 and 1992, Sommerville 1995

words from the *Dictionary* that deal with marriage—*advancement* 5, *affinity* 1, *age* 7, *alimony*, *bastard*, *bigamy*, *bride*, *to cohabit* 2, *coheirress*, *consort*, *contract* 2, *covert*, *coverture* 2, *couple*, *divorce*, *divorcement*, *divorcer*, *dotal*, *dowager*, *dowery*, *dowry*, *espousals*, *feme covert*, *feme sole*, *fortune* 6, *fortunehunter*, *fosterchild*, *honey-moon*, *housewife*, *housewifely* adj., *housewifely* adv., *housewifery*, *huswife*, *to huswife*, *huswifery*, *jointure*, *maiden* 1, *marriage*, *to marry*, *matrimony*, *monogamy*, *mother*, *to mother*, *motherhood*, *motherless*, *motherly*, *nubile*, *pinmoney*, *relict*, *to settle* 10, *settlement* 3, *spinster* 2, *spouse*, *spoused*, *spouseless*, *treason*, *unconjugal*, *unmarried*, *to wed*, *wedding*, *widow*, *to widow*, *widower*, *widowhood*, *widowhunter*, *widowmaker*, *wife*, *to wive*, *wively*—the overall picture that emerges from them is certainly not a rosy and a romantic one.

What is first to be noted is the strikingly high number of entries dealing with legal terms. This is not surprising, for two different reasons. The first is “Johnson’s lifelong fascination with the law” (Scanlan 2006, 88; see also J. Stone 2005). The second is the chaotic nature of marriage settlements in early eighteenth-century Britain: in fact, “it was not until 1753”—that is to say, a couple of years before the *Dictionary* was published—that Lord Hardwicke’s Marriage Act was passed, which at last brought coherence and logic to the laws governing marriage” (L. Stone 1977, 35).<sup>17</sup> Given the basically economic (rather than affective) nature of contemporary marriage (see Erickson 1993), very many words provide evidence of the strong link between marriage and property (*advancement* 5, *alimony*, *coheirress*, *dotal*, *dowager*, *dowery*, *dowry*, *jointure*, *pinmoney*, *to settle* 10, *settlement* 3, etc) or refer to marriage arrangements and contracts (*age* 7, *contract* 2, *espousals*, *matrimony*, etc) and the role of the law in married life (*covert*, *coverture* 2, *feme covert*, *feme sole*, *spouse*, etc) or beyond it (*bastard*, *bigamy*, *divorce*, *divorcement*, *divorcer*). Notice that *bigamy* is defined as “The crime of having two wives at once”, i.e. an illegal condition of which only men can be guilty. Correspondingly, *monogamy* is the “Marriage of one wife.”

Among the everyday words in the list above, some are not only evocative of unbalanced relations between men and women, but allude to

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(114 ff.), and Evans 2005. Love, as distinct from marriage or not, is dealt with in Hagstrum 1980.

<sup>17</sup> Notice that Lawrence Stone’s more recent book on marriage in England between the Restoration and the Marriage Act is aptly and revealingly entitled *Uncertain unions* (1992). Hogarth’s paintings and engravings are an artistic testimony to the problems that ensue from marriages made for purely financial reasons: the *Marriage à la mode* series is from the 1740s.

the dangerous situation even an economically independent woman may get involved in (*fortune* 6, *fortunehunter*, *widowhunter*).

## 5.2. Words describing “female nature”

Words describing traditional feminine roles and supposed female nature, though not very numerous, are particularly interesting in order to understand gender-based stereotypes at work in eighteenth-century Britain. What is to be emphasised here is not so much Johnson's choice of these entry-words but his definitions and illustrative quotations.

*Female* and related words are a case in point: the adjective *female*, “Not masculine; belonging to a she”, is defined by contrast first, rather than in itself; and Johnson's definition of the noun *female* as “A she; one of the sex which brings young” underlines the reproductive nature of women, whereas his quotations for this entry—most authoritative as they are taken from the Bible and Shakespeare's works—remind his readers that women are radically different from and intellectually subject to men:

God created man in his own image, male and *female* created he them.

*Gen. i. 27.*

Man, more divine,

Lord of the wide world, and wide wat'ry seas,

Indu'd with intellectual sense and soul,

Are masters to their *females*, and their lords. *Shakespeare.*

In a similar way, the noun *feminine* is defined as “A she; one of the sex that brings young; a female”, while the corresponding adjectival entry introduces a new element in the picture, as the first two “acceptable” senses of the word – “1. Of the sex that brings young; female ... 2. Soft; tender; delicate”—are followed by one that can only be stigmatized by patriarchal ideology:

3. Effeminate; emasculated.

Ninias was no man of war at all, but altogether *feminine* and subjected to ease and delicacy. *Raleigh's Hist. of the World.*

No bias, instead, is found in the definition of *feminality* as “Female nature”, nor in those words that help convey, and perpetuate, the traditional notion of femininity: *maidenhood* “1. Virginity; virgin purity; freedom from contamination”; *maidenly* “Like a maid; gentle, modest, timorous, decent”; *muliebrity* “Womanhood; the contrary to virility; the manners and character of woman”; *virgin* adj. “Befitting a virgin; suitable

to a virgin; maidenly”; *virginal* adj. “Maiden; maidenly; pertaining to a virgin”; *to woman* “To make pliant like a woman”; *womanhood* / *womanhead* “The character and collective qualities of a woman. Obsolete”; *womanish* “Suitable to a woman”; *womankind* “The female sex; the race of women”; *womanly* adj. “1. Becoming a woman; suiting a woman; feminine; not masculine ... 2. Not childish; not girlish”; *womanly* adv. “In the manner of a woman; effeminately.”

When women do not conform to the ideal and the examples set before them by society, condemnatory words are ready at hand. It is perhaps ironic that the best known word for a rebellious woman, *shrew*, was originally used with reference to men as well. Johnson is ready to acknowledge this in his etymological note, but both his definition with its long string of adjectives and his illustrative quotations clearly express strong popular feelings:

*SHREW. n.s.* ... A peevish, malignant, clamorous, spiteful, vexatious, turbulent woman. [it appears in *Robert of Gloucester*, that this word signified anciently any one perverse or obstinate of either sex.]

There dede of hem vor hunger a thousand and mo,

And yat nolde the *screwen* to none pes go. *Robert of Gloucester.*

Be merry, my wife has all;

For women are *shrews* both short and tall.

*Shak. H. IV.*

By this reckoning he is more *shrew* than she.

*Shakespeare.*

A man had got a *shrew* to his wife, and there could be no quiet in the house for her.

*L'Estrange.*

Her sallow cheeks her envious mind did shew,

And ev'ry feature spoke aloud the *shrew*.

*Dryden.*

Every one of them, who is a *shrew* in domestick life, is now become a scold in politicks.

*Addis. Freeholder.*

Other examples of mildly derogatory words and definitions include *prude* “A woman over nice and scrupulous, and with false affectation”, *to squall* “To scream out as a child or woman frightened” and *to trape* “To run idly and sluttishly about. It is used only of women.” More interesting, however, are those words and definitions that indirectly allude to women’s stereotypical characteristics by censuring men that seem to make those same characteristics their own. A man, in fact, should be blamed for going beyond the boundaries set by society for his sex, as the entry *cotquean* shows:

*COTQUEAN. n.s.* ... A man who busies himself with women’s affairs.

Look to the bak’d meats, good Angelica;

Spare not for cost. —

— Go, go, you *cotquean*, go;

Get you to bed.

*Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet.*

A stateswoman is as ridiculous a creature as a *cotquean*: each of the sexes should keep within its particular bounds.

*Addison's Freeholder*, N<sup>o</sup>. 38.

You have given us a lively picture of husbands hen-peck'd; but you have never touched upon one of the quite different character, and who goes by the name of *cotquean*. *Add. Spect.*

A man may also reverse the established social order by loving his wife too much, which is described as an illness and a loss of understanding in *uxorious* "Submissively fond of a wife; infected with connubial dotage", *uxoriously* "With fond submission to a wife", and *uxoriousness* "Connubial dotage; fond submission to a wife." The entry to *womanise* stresses this point further in both its definition, "To emasculate; to effeminate; to soften. Proper, but not used", and quotation, "This effeminate love of a woman doth *womanize* a man. *Sid.*"

More radically, the danger from man's failure to conform to the traditional standards of male behaviour and way of thinking is highlighted in quite a few entries (on the ideology behind these words and their lexicographical treatment see Barker-Benfield 1992, 104–153 and Fletcher 1995, 83–98 and 322–346):

(1) The noun *effeminacy* means both "1. Admission of the qualities of a woman; softness; unmanly delicacy; mean submission" and "2. Lasciviousness; loose pleasure." Correspondingly, the adjective *effeminate* means "1. Having the qualities of a woman; womanish; soft to an unmanly degree; voluptuous; tender; luxurious." The verb *to effeminate* v.a. is even stronger, in its definition "To make womanish; to weaken; to emasculate; to unman" as much as in its illustrative quotation, "When one is sure it will not corrupt or *effeminate* childrens minds, and make them fond of trifles, I think all things should be contrived to their satisfaction. *Locke.*"

(2) In both the verb *to emasculate* and the adjective *emasculat*ion the primary, medical meaning is followed by the secondary, transferred one, i.e. "To effeminate; to weaken; to vitiate by unmanly softness" and "Effeminacy; womanish qualities; unmanly softness" respectively.

(3) Finally, the most clear-cut distinction between the sexes—drawn by the language, the society and the lexicographer alike—can be found in the definition of *virile* as "Belonging to man; not puerile; not feminine."

### 5.3. Words on women's physical appearance and behaviour

The ideological model of male dominance versus female subservience founded on gender-based distinctions also determined language usage as far as words describing women's physical appearance and their behaviour were concerned. Before providing some examples from the *Dictionary*, two facts are to be emphasized: firstly, the very connection between appearance and behaviour in the denotative and connotative meanings of quite a few words is indicative of a gender-based, male notion of femininity; and secondly, the words that describe the negative outward and behavioural features of women largely outnumber the positive ones.

*Lady* seems to be the only name or title available in eighteenth-century English to portray women in a fully positive social and/or personal light, as it may mean either "A woman of high rank" (with the note "the title of lady properly belongs to the wives of knights, of all degrees above them, and to the daughters of earls, and all of higher ranks") or "An illustrious or eminent woman" or "A word of complaisance used of women." Even *gentlewoman*, in fact, denotes "A woman of birth above the vulgar; a woman well descended" or "A woman who waits about the person of one of high rank" but may also be used ambiguously as "A word of civility or irony." *Dame*, *damsel* and *matron* have all widened their meanings by diluting the social value attached to them: *dame* denotes "A lady; the title of honour to women" and "is still used in poetry for women of rank", but it has come to mean "Mistress of a low family" and "Woman in general" as well; a *damsel* is "A young gentlewoman; a young woman of distinction: now only used in verse" and "An attendant of the better rank" but also "A wench; a country lass"; a *matron* is "An elderly lady" and, more humbly, "An old woman." The most drastic semantic change for the worse registered by Johnson in this category of words is undergone by *miss*:

MISS. *n.s.* ...

1. The term of honour to a young girl.

Where there are little masters and *misses* in a house, they are great impediments to the diversions of the servants. *Sw.*

2. A strumpet; a concubine; a whore; a prostitute.

All women would be of one piece,  
The virtuous matron and the *miss*.

*Hudibras*, p. iii.

This gentle cock, for solace of his life,  
Six *misses* had besides his lawful wife.

*Dryden.*

It goes without saying that beauty and youth were appreciated and praised, by both the society and the lexicographer: a *fair* is defined as "A

beauty; elliptically a fair woman” and the accompanying quotation hints at the fascination beauty may hold for men, since “Gentlemen who do not design to marry, yet pay their devoirs to one particular fair. *Spectator*, No. 288”; in its third sense, a *toast* is “A celebrated woman whose health is often drunk”; *belle* is “A young lady” and *bellibone* “A woman excelling both in beauty and goodness. A word now out of use”; a *girl* is simply defined as “A young woman, or female child”, whereas a *coquette* is “A gay, airy girl; a girl who endeavours to attract notice”, a *minx* is “A young, pert, wanton girl”, *flirt* may also mean “3. A pert young hussey” and *tombay* is “A mean fellow; sometimes a wild coarse girl.”

These latter entries may have reminded dictionary users that acceptable social and personal behaviour is as important as an engaging personal appearance: *courtesy* does not only mean “Elegance of manners; civility; complaisance” and “An act of civility or respect” but also “The reverence made by women”, and “to courtesy” is defined as “To perform an act of reverence” and “To make a reverence in the manner of ladies.”<sup>18</sup> In a sense, this word epitomises how women were expected to behave in eighteenth-century society: be submissive and compliant, and defer to men and men’s wishes. This is of course what the conduct books had long been preaching to women, as far as good behaviour, manners, and morality were concerned.<sup>19</sup>

Naturally enough, then, the language was rich in words that could be used to define those women that did not conform to the idealized construction of femininity. The entry *shrew* has already been quoted in section 5.2 above, but similar entries can be found for *scold* “A clamorous, rude, mean, low, foul-mouthed woman”, *termagant* “A scold; a brawling turbulent woman” (with the note “it appears in Shakespeare to have been anciently used of men”), or *romp* “1. A rude, awkward, boisterous, untaught girl.”

Although the larger number of lexical items that describe women as old, unattractive or untidy do not certainly express the same harsh criticism as that levelled at women for their misbehaviour or defiant attitude, still social stigma is palpable in many words, as Johnson’s definitions make clear.

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<sup>18</sup> In the revised 1773 edition of the *Dictionary* the first sense is modified as “To perform an act of reverence: it is now only used of women”, thus registering a change in social behaviour.

<sup>19</sup> Among the very many books dealing with this topic, only two will be mentioned: Hull’s classic study (1982) covers the early modern period to 1640, whereas the collection of essays in Armstrong and Tennenhouse 1987 brings the analysis further on into the eighteenth century and later.

First of all, old age in women is often held in contempt: *beldam* is “1. An old woman; generally a term of contempt, marking the last degree of old age, with all its faults and miseries”; *crone* means “1. An old ewe” but metaphorically also “2. In contempt, an old woman”; *nurse*, too, may also be used to refer to “4. An old woman in contempt”, and *trot* is “2. An old woman. In contempt. I know not whence derived.” Only *grandam* is simply and factually “2. An old withered woman” and the learned word *anility* neutrally defines “The state of being an old woman; the old age of women.”

Secondly, a few words blame women for their lack of taste or cleanliness: a *dowdy* is “An aukward, ill-dressed, inelegant woman; a *slattern* is “A woman negligent, not elegant or nice”; *trapes* denotes “An idle slatternly woman” (cf. the verb *to trape*, discussed in section 5.2 above); a *trollop* is “A slatternly, loose woman”; and *slut* means “1. A dirty woman” but is also used as “2. A word of slight contempt to a woman.”

Thirdly, a few words describe women’s unattractiveness; unlike lack of youth and cleanliness, lack of beauty does not seem to be stigmatized, as the matter-of-fact tone of Johnson’s definitions seems to imply: a woman may be *ordinary* in the fourth sense of this word, i.e. “Ugly, not handsome: as she is an *ordinary* woman”; a *grimalkin* is a “Grey little woman; the name of an old cat”, a *pundle* is “A short and fat woman. Ainsworth”, a *ronion* is “A fat bulky woman” and a *trubtail* is “A short squat woman. Ainsworth.”<sup>20</sup>

## 5.4 Words dealing with love and sexual relations

Words dealing with love and sexual relations make up the largest group in the corpus of gender-related entries in Johnson’s *Dictionary*, totalling some eighty terms, most of them nouns. Various subgroups may be identified.

### 5.4.1 Courtship

Words denoting legal and “respectable” forms of sexual relations before marriage stress the man’s role: courtship is the man’s job as the

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<sup>20</sup> Another word that might have been included in this group is *fren*, defined by Johnson as “A worthless woman. An old word wholly forgotten” and followed by a quotation from Spenser. This meaning, however, was corrected by Johnson in his revised edition where the same word is defined as “A stranger. An old word wholly forgotten here; but retained in Scotland. Beattie”.

verb *to court* "1. To woo; to solicit a woman to marriage" and the noun *courtship* itself "2. The solicitation of a woman to marriage" testify; he has to be *gallant* "4. Inclined to courtship"<sup>21</sup> and a *wooer* "One who courts a woman", and perhaps ready for a *serenade* "Musick or songs with which ladies are entertained by their lovers in the night."

#### 5.4.2 Chastity and unchastity

The entry *chastity* in its first sense is defined as "1. Purity of the body" and this is explained by the following illustrative quotation, among others:

Chastity is either abstinence or continence: abstinence is that of virgins or widows; continence of married persons: chaste marriages are honourable and pleasing to God.  
*Taylor's Rule of Living Holy.*

Although this quotation seems to imply that chastity is expected from both man and wife, the sexual senses of the word *chaste* can be said to refer to women only, as the example and the quotation provided show:

CHASTE. *adj.* ...

1. Pure from all commerce of sexes; as a *chaste* virgin. ...

4. True to the marriage bed.

Love your children, be discreet, *chaste*, keepsers at home. *Titus*, ii.5.

This interpretation can be confirmed by the fact that the sex-related meaning of the word *lightness* is only referred to women: "3. Unchastity; want of conduct in women."

As a matter of fact, however, all the words denoting marital infidelity<sup>22</sup> in the *Dictionary* put the blame more or less equally on either sex: an *adulteress* is "A woman that commits adultery" and a *cuckold* is "One that

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<sup>21</sup> In the 1773 edition the definition of this adjective is changed into "Courtly with respect to ladies". As a noun, *gallant* means either "1. A gay, sprightly, airy, splendid man" or "2. A whoremaster, who caresses women to debauch them" or "3. A wooer; one who courts a woman for marriage", thus displaying the same coexistence of different, or even contradictory meanings that is found in such words as *mistress* and *miss* (see sections 4.4. and 5.3 above). On courtship and marriage in eighteenth-century England see Shoemaker 1998, 87 ff., Hitchcock 1997, 24–41, and L. Stone 1977.

<sup>22</sup> The contemporary term for intercourse outside of marriage was "criminal conversation", which is unfortunately not included in Johnson's wordlist. On this topic see Wagner 1988, 133–161. Different aspects of eighteenth-century sexuality are discussed in Boucé 1982 and L. Stone 1977.

is married to an adulteress; one whose wife is false to his bed”, but the corresponding verb *to cuckold* has two different senses, the first stressing the man’s role (“1. To corrupt a man’s wife; to bring upon a man the reproach of having an adulterous wife; to rob a man of his wife’s fidelity), and the second the woman’s (“2. To wrong a husband by unchastity). A man can either be a *cuckoldmaker* “One that makes a practice of corrupting wives” or a *wittol* “A man who knows the falsehood of his wife and seems contented; a tame cuckold.”

### 5.4.3 Licentiousness

Licentious behaviour, instead, is lexically and lexicographically referred to men in particular: a man may be guilty of *concubinage* “The act of living with a woman not married”, *fornication* “1. Concubinage or commerce with an unmarried woman”, or *whoring* “fornication”; he may then be defined as a *fornicator* “One that has commerce with unmarried women” or a *wencher* “A fornicator”; and his actions may be described by the verbs *to fornicate* “to commit lewdness”, *to cover* “7. To copulate with a female”,<sup>23</sup> and *to whore* in its transitive (“To corrupt with regard to chastity”) and intransitive (“To converse unlawfully with the other sex”) use. In this context, the only word related to women is *fornicatress*, “A woman who without marriage cohabits with a man.”

### 5.4.4 Prostitution

As far as prostitution is concerned,<sup>24</sup> a prostitute may be denoted by numerous specific terms, the most common ones being *strumpet* “A whore; a prostitute”, *prostitute* “2. A publick strumpet”, and *whore*, which may mean either “1. A woman who converses unlawfully with men; a fornicatress; an adulteress; a strumpet” (apparently, no money being involved in her actions) or “2. A prostitute; a woman who receives men for money.” Although he defines *prostitution* as “2. The life of a publick strumpet”, Johnson does not seem to make a clear distinction between a kept mistress and a prostitute, as is shown by his definitions of *concubine* “A woman kept in fornication; a whore; a strumpet”, *miss* “2. A strumpet; a concubine; a whore; a prostitute”, *mistress* “A whore; a concubine”, and

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<sup>23</sup> Notice that Johnson modestly defines *to copulate* as “To come together as different sexes” and *copulation* as “The congress or embrace of the two sexes.”

<sup>24</sup> On prostitution in eighteenth-century Britain see V. Jones 1990, 57 ff., and Henderson 1999. Gowing 1996, 59 ff., carries out an interesting analysis of words for sexual slander and insult.

*whoremaster / whoremonger* "One who keeps whores, or converses with a fornicatress." *Courtezan*, *doxy*, *drab*, *hackney*, and *harlot* are used more or less synonymously, whereas *harridan* denotes more specifically "A decayed strumpet" and *trull* "A low whore; a vagrant strumpet." *Crack* is "8. A whore; in low language" whereas *Laced mutton* is "An old word for a whore." More terms for a prostitute derive from particular senses of other words (*baggage* 3, *quean*, *wench* 3, etc).

A prostitute's behaviour is described by the adjective *meretricious* "Whorish; such as is practised by prostitutes; alluring by false show", by the related adverb *meretriciously* "Whorishly; after the manner of whores", and by the noun *meretriciousness* "False allurements like those of strumpets"; *prostitute* as an adjective means "Vicious for hire; sold to infamy or wickedness; sold to whoredom."

Also the exploitation of prostitution is referred to in the *Dictionary*: a *seraglio* is "A house of women kept for debauchery" and a *stew* "2. A brothel; a house of prostitution" (with the note "This signification is by some imputed to this, that there were licensed brothels near the stews or fishponds in Southwark; but probably *stew*, like *bagnio*, took a bad signification from bad use"); a *bawd* is "A procurer, or procuress; one that introduces men and women to each other, for the promotion of debauchery." The pertinent verbs here are *to hack* "To hackney; to turn hackney or prostitute", *to prostitute* "1. To sell to wickedness; to expose to crimes for a reward. It is commonly used of women sold to whoredom by others or themselves", and *to strumpet* "To make a whore; to debauch."

#### 5.4.5 Rape and the pursuit of women

A few entries in the *Dictionary* describe sexual violence against women.<sup>25</sup> A *rape* is a "1. Violent defloration of chastity", a crime that is also defined in *violation* 2 and *violence* 6; *to ransack* "3. To violate; to deflower" is a synonym of *to ravish* "1. To constuprate by force"; a *ravisher* "1. He that embraces a woman by violence" may also be termed a *violator*.

Violence apart, men's attitudes to women may have different aims, or no aims at all, as the definitions of *intriguer* as "One who busies himself in private transactions; one who forms plots; one who pursues women" and *dangler* "A man that hangs about women only to waste time" testify; in the latter case, however, the social stigma attached to a kind of behaviour

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<sup>25</sup> Violence in sexual and marital relations is discussed in Fletcher 1995, 192–203, and in Gowing 1996, 180–231.

felt to be unworthy of men is evident in the illustrative quotation chosen by the lexicographer: “A *dangler* is of neither sex. *Ralph’s Miscel.*”

#### 5.4.6 Women’s revenge on men

In some way, women can take their revenge on men, either before or after marriage. This is shown by Johnson’s inclusion in his *Dictionary* of such words as *lasslorn* “Forsaken by his mistress” (labelled “Not used” in the 1773 edition), *jilt* “1. A woman who gives her lover hopes, and deceives him” (hence, unsurprisingly, “2. A name of contempt for a woman”), *to jilt* “To trick a man by flattering his love with hopes, and then leaving him for another”, *hen-pecked* “Governed by the wife”, and *curtain-lecture* “A reproof given by a wife to her husband in bed.”

#### 5.4.7 Words applicable to either sex

It can finally be added that some words on different aspects of love and sex may be referred to both men and women: a *leman* is “A sweetheart, a gallant; or a mistress”; *loyal* means “2. Faithful in love; true to a lady, or lover”, the quotations (and the related entry *Loyalty* “2. Fidelity to a lady, or lover”) making it clear that this quality may be shown by both sexes alike; a *sweetheart* may be “A lover or mistress”; *wanton*, too, may refer to both men and women as it means “1. A lascivious person; a strumpet; a whoremonger” (and the same is true of the related words *wanton* adj., *to wanton*, *wantonly*, *wantonness*).

### 5.5. Meaning and change of meaning in women-related words

Although a few passing comments on words displaying some sort of semantic change have already been made, it is finally worth noting all those women’s words whose principal and/or original meaning has been modified over time—either amplified or specialized—in order to denote and especially connote women.

#### 5.5.1 Women as mythological beings

Classical mythology is the source of a few words, whose more recent sense is negatively applied to women: Johnson’s encyclopaedic definition of *Amazon* as “The Amazons were a race of women famous for valour, who inhabited Caucasus; they are so called from their cutting off their

breasts, to use their weapons better. A warlike woman; a virago<sup>26</sup> shows that the modern, transferred meaning of the word is included into the encyclopaedic definition, thus highlighting the close connection between the original and the more recent meaning. The same happens with *siren* "A goddess who enticed men by singing, and devoured them; any mischievous enticer" and *fury* sense 4 (this sense identified as "From *furia*, Latin"), "One of the deities of vengeance, and thence a stormy, turbulent, violent, raging woman." In the latter case, the adverb *thence* in the definition makes the connection between the original meaning and the transferred one explicit. *Nymph*, whose original meaning is positive "1. A goddess of the woods, meadows, or waters", has also a positive transferred meaning, which is however used as a poetical word only: "2. A lady. In poetry." The 1773 edition of the *Dictionary* adds the adjective *nymphish* "Relating to nymphs; ladylike" to its wordlist.

### 5.5.2 Women as animals

On a less learned note, animals may provide derogatory qualifications for some kinds of women. *Bitch* and *carrion* seem to be general terms of abuse, as the former is described as "2. A name of reproach for a woman" and the latter "2. A name of reproach for a worthless woman." *Vixen* is not defined with precision either, but the illustrative quotations make its transferred meaning quite clear:

VIXEN. *n.s.*

*Vixen* or *fixen* is the name of a she-fox; otherwise applied to a woman whose nature and condition is thereby compared to a she fox. *Verstegan*.

O! when she's angry, she's keen and shrewd;

She was a *vixen*, when she went to school;

And though she be but little, she is fierce.

*Shakesp.*

See a pack of spaniels, called lovers, in a hot pursuit of a two-legg'd *vixen*, who only flies the whole loud pack, to be singled out by one.

*Wycherly.*

*Crone* means both "1. An old ewe" and "2. In contempt, an old woman." Contempt can also be conveyed by referring to women as horses. A *tit* is "1. A small horse: generally in contempt" and, by extension, "2. A woman: in contempt." The range of negative connotations of *jade* is wider:

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<sup>26</sup> The word *virago* itself is included in the *Dictionary*, with the following senses: "1. A female warrior; a woman with the qualities of a man" and "2. It is commonly used in detestation for an impudent turbulent woman."

apart from denoting “1. A horse of no spirit; a hired horse; a worthless nag”, it has two semantically and pragmatically ambiguous, context-dependent extra-meanings: “2. A sorry woman. A word of contempt noting sometimes age, but generally vice” and “3. A young woman: in irony and slight contempt.” The sexual connotation implied in the use of this word is evident in the corresponding adjectival entry:

JADISH. *adj.*

1. Vitious; bad, as an horse. ...

2. Unchaste; incontinent.

’Tis to no boot to be jealous of a woman; for if the humour takes her to be *jadish*, not all the locks and spies in nature can keep her honest.

*L’Estrange.*

In order to complete this short list of women-related animal names, it must be added that *dragon* may mean “2. A fierce violent man or woman” and that *chicken* and *duck* may be used as fond epithets as the former is defined by Johnson as “2. A word of tenderness” and the latter “2. A word of endearment, or fondness.”

### 5.5.3 Women as objects

Women may also be seen as and identified with objects. A *distaff* is not only “1. The staff from which the flax is drawn in spinning” but also “2. It is used as an emblem of the female sex” (in the 1773 edition Johnson adds here, “So the French say, The crown of France never falls to the distaff”). In a similar, but more familiar way, the word *smock* can also be used:

SMOCK. n.s. ...

1. The under garment of a woman; a shift. ...

2. *Smock* is used in a ludicrous kind of composition for any thing relating to women.

At *smock* treason, matron, I believe you;

And if I were your husband; but when I

Trust to your cob-web bosoms any other,

Let me there die a fly, and feast you, spider.

*Ben. Johnson.*

Plague on his *smock*-loyalty!

I hate to see a brave bold fellow sotted,

Made sour and senseless, turn’d to whey by love. *Dryden.*

As the above exemplification has amply shown, the connotative use of words is very often meant to qualify women as contemptible, blame-

worthy, or ridiculous.<sup>27</sup> Johnson's completes his definition of *huswife* as "1. A bad manager, a sorry woman" with the following usage note: "It is common to use *housewife* in a good, and *huswife* or *hussy* in a bad sense."<sup>28</sup> However, spelling and pronunciation do not usually help to discriminate between the positive and negative usage of such words or among the different senses of a polysemous word. Much depends on the speaker's intention and the context: according to Johnson's explanations, in fact, the very same word may be uttered approvingly or disapprovingly, as for example in the case of *gentlewoman* that may be "A word of civility or irony"; likewise, only the context will make clear whether the word *mother* is used in its primary, obvious meaning or as "A familiar term of address to an old woman; or to a woman dedicated to religious austerities."

## 6. Concluding remarks

One final entry-word from Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* will introduce the concluding remarks on the present study. Johnson compiled the entry *sex* as follows:

SEX. *n.s.* ...

1. The property by which any animal is male or female.  
     These two great *sexes* animate the world. *Milton.*  
     Under his forming hands a creature grew,  
     Manlike, but different *sex.* *Milton.*
2. Womankind; by way of emphasis.  
     Unhappy *sex!* whose beauty is your snare;  
     Expos'd to trials; made too frail to bear. *Dryd.*

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<sup>27</sup> Many more examples might be added: for instance, contempt is implied in the use of the words *bunter* "A cant word for a woman who picks up rags about the street; and used, by way of contempt, for any low vulgar woman", *harlotry* "2. A name of contempt for a woman" or *stateswoman* "A woman who meddles with publick affairs. In contempt"; reproach is meant when *gipsy* "3. A name of slight reproach to a woman" is used; *gallimaufry* "3. It is used by Shakespeare ludicrously of a woman", *gill* "5. ... The appellation of a woman in ludicrous language" and *kicksy-wicksey* "A made word in ridicule and disdain of a wife" all connote ridicule.

<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, *housewife* is defined as "1. The mistress of a family ... 2. A female economist" and "3. One skilled in female business" in the *Dictionary*, while *hussy* is "A sorry or bad woman; a worthless wench. It is often used ludicrously in slight disapprobation."

Shame is hard to be overcome; but if the *sex* once get the better of it, it  
gives them afterwards no more trouble. *Garth.*

As far as the first sense is concerned, the illustrative quotations from Milton stress both the difference and the similarity between the sexes; the second sense suggests, by implication at least, that men—in eighteenth-century English and England—represented the standard, unmarked status of humanity, women the marked one; and the two quotations speak for themselves.

It is probably not very easy to pinpoint exactly what Samuel Johnson—as a lexicographer, as a member of his speech community, as a thinker, and as a man—had to do with all that. The members of the speech community, be they great writers or common people, used words not only to label reality but also to express shared views, values and assumptions—in short, an ideology; and contemporary ideology constructed women as essentially—i.e. both biologically and culturally—other than and inferior to men.

On the one hand, therefore, Johnson's *Dictionary* could but respond to his society's construction of gender, as the long lists of gender-related words and the comments on Johnson's lexicographic treatment of them have shown. On the other hand, however, the cultural and educational tenets he relied on while compiling the *Dictionary* did influence him as well: for instance, it is well known that standardization, rather than comprehensiveness, was Johnson's original goal as a lexicographer; it is also quite obvious that his quotations were meant to provide pleasure and instruction, more than—or at least as much as—to illustrate usage; and research has clarified the importance of education, morality, and Christian faith for him.

Therefore, he was able to deal with gender expectations and sexual prejudices in a balanced way: he was ready to condemn prostitution, for example, but the words he chose to include in the *Dictionary* are an eloquent testimony to men's co-responsibility for a practice he stigmatized.

As Kemmerer (1998, 61) reminds us, Johnson declares in *Rambler* 18 that he has “endeavoured to divest my heart of all partiality, and place myself as a kind of neutral being between the sexes.” He promoted his own image as an impartial judge, as an arbiter between men and women in the *querelle des femmes*. This did not mean denying gender differentiation, which was rooted in society and universally taken for granted, nor subverting the traditional social order. It meant instead trying to bring the sexes together while proposing the cultural, linguistic and lexicographic model of a naturally unified and stratified society. It can therefore be argued that Johnson's treatment of words by women and words on women

in his *Dictionary* endorses the idea that his masterpiece is both a mirror of his author's personality, opinions, and ideals and a cultural construct, the reflex of the linguistic and social world he happened to live in.

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