

GENDER AND GENITALIA IN SLANG: A STUDY OF BRITISH ENGLISH, 1200-1900

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ABSTRACT

This paper develops a research plan to compare the development of slang referring to the female genitalia to that referring to the male genitalia in British English between the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries. In doing so, it seeks to elucidate the development of a cultural taboo surrounding sex and sexual organs, as well as how that development played out differently for male and female bodies in England. After compiling a compendium of almost 700 vaginal slang terms and over 1,700 textual examples of those terms (available [here](#)), the paper argues that *cunt* became a “dirty word” in the centuries following the medieval ages as a growing conception of privacy among the upper class combined with elitism to create a taboo around the sexual vocabulary associated with the lower classes. However, further research and data collection is needed to determine whether that growing stigma was targeted particularly at female bodies.

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INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The English vocabulary is ill-equipped to deal with sex. There is the infantile language of euphemisms, of the birds and the bees, where figurative allusions purposefully obscure meaning. Then there is the parlance of clinical descriptions, made up of stilted jargon that sits awkwardly in its own impersonal accuracy. And then there is the third type of terminology, a vocabulary less sanitized by extra syllables or natural metaphors but just as - if not more - effective in its bluntness. Here, in the area of the English language deemed obscene, cunt fucks dick. Dick fucks cunt.

C.S. Lewis writes about this conundrum in his 1960 book *Studies in Words*. “As soon as you deal with it [sex] explicitly,” he explains, “you are forced to choose between the language of the nursery, the gutter and the anatomy class.”¹ Indeed, the greatest irony of the whole ordeal might just be that the language that is the most direct and the most easily understood is also the language that one cannot, under any circumstances, use. By stigmatizing words for being too good at their job, the existence of bawdy expletives almost seems to defy the very purpose of language itself. After all, isn’t the only crime the term *cunt* has committed that each one of us knows all too well what it means?

This paper will explore this question of why and how humans label certain terms or subject matter “obscene” by comparing the development of slang related to the female genitalia to that of the male genitalia in England during the period of 1200 to 1900. This project will not be studying all profanities, such as those in the religious and scatological vein.² It will not be examining all gendered profanity either, excluding words like *bitch*, *whore*, and *bastard*, but

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Studies in Words* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960).

² While *asshole* may also be considered a sexual obscenity, it is not anatomically unique to any one sex and therefore is not of particular relevance to this study. Credit must be given to my father for pointing out this *Asshole* Conundrum.

instead narrowly focus on those related to parallel anatomical parts. Due to the nature of the subject matter, I will be using terms that may make some readers uncomfortable in the coming pages. Despite this potential discomfort, it would be both ironic and counterproductive to censor obscene language in a project studying obscene language - especially when the development of censorship is a key, if not *the* key, component of the history of profanity - so for the purposes of frank and open academic discussion, please prepare for the *fucks*.

I KNOW IT WHEN I SEE IT: DEFINING OBSCENITY AND OTHER TERMINOLOGY

Unfortunately, settling on a precise definition of profanity is notoriously difficult. Even the Supreme Court has commented on the issue, with Justice Potter Stewart writing in his concurring opinion on a 1964 pornography case: “I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it.”³ Chief among the many issues with defining the term is that what we have considered to be “obscene” varies widely based on time and place. To many modern readers living in a more secular society, for example, *for God’s sake* may seem like a rather harmless curse, but during the Middle Ages, to invoke the Lord’s name was to bind oneself to an unbreakable oath.⁴ And while Americans might think the term *bloody* is used almost exclusively to describe that which is literally bleeding, many of their British counterparts would vehemently disagree and use it generously as a synonym for *fucking*.

But if profanity can’t be characterized by its content, perhaps it can be identified by people’s reaction to that content. Maybe it is how we perceive the word rather than its actual

³ Jacobellis v. Ohio, 378 U.S. 184 (1964), <https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/ll/usrep/usrep378/usrep378184/usrep378184.pdf>.

⁴ Geoffrey Hughes, “Paynims and Charlatans: Swearing in Middle English,” in *Swearing: A Social History of Foul Language, Oaths and Profanity in English*, (London: Penguin Group, 1998).

meaning that earns *shit* its proper place in the pantheon of the profane. We do all seem to understand that profanity is supposed to shock, to offend, to insult - except so much of what shocks, what offends, what insults depends so heavily upon contextual variables that even this formation for a definition seems unsound. Telling a sailor that they are an *asshole* will probably provoke a drastically different response than telling the same thing to the English monarch, after all, even without accounting for other circumstantial factors such as tone, gesture, and any power imbalances between the speaker and the listener.

So then maybe there is no stable set of words that can be counted as “profanity” in every instance. Maybe the definition is fluid, and what falls under the obscenity umbrella changes based on the context. But even that explanation seems inadequate, for while the sailor may not be very offended by the term, they would still probably group the word *asshole* under the profanity header, despite being unable to clearly articulate why.

To avoid this conundrum, and to more accurately describe the developments of sociolinguistic phenomena, this paper will concern itself less with finding the exact moment when a word went from being mundane to obscene and more with viewing profanity as a spectrum. It would be misleading to describe the entirety of English-speaking society as having woken up one day and deciding to relegate *piss* to a separate section of the dictionary. A more accurate characterization would say that the word simply moved further down the spectrum over the centuries and became considered more obscene. Words can even move in the opposite direction, with terms such as *hell* and *damn* becoming more socially acceptable as time goes on.

Similar problems occur when trying to define “slang.” Its working - and imperfect - definition as used in this paper will be informal language that tends to behave like other fads by falling in and out of fashion as the times change. While this definition is less than ideal, its faults

can be sufficiently remedied by our common understanding of what constitutes slang. As Justice Stewart might have said, we may not ever be able to land on a coherent definition for the term, but we all do at least know it when we see it.

As this study concerns itself primarily with the language of gender and genitalia, it seems necessary to recognize the insufficiencies inherent to a heterosexual binary man/woman paradigm. Of course, transfeminine people are impacted by phallic imagery in slang, just as transmasculine people are impacted by terms related to the vagina. But transfeminine people also have a unique relationship with slang meant to denigrate women, just as transmasculine people are affected by obscenity related to male body parts. Exploring the relationship that trans, intersex, and gender non-conforming English speakers share with gendered obscenity is its own valuable project, but it is not the project of this paper. For the sake of conciseness, this study will use descriptors that can not fully nor accurately capture the complexity of the gender spectrum. It is therefore important to note that what I dub “masculine” obscenities like *dick* and *prick* do still affect non-masculine people, with the same applying to so-called “feminine” words. Likewise, examining the connections between queer identity and homophobia in profanity is more than worthy of investigation, but because this paper draws upon writing from a time and place where being openly gay was rare, this paper will focus primarily on analyzing what sexual slang can tell us about the relationship between cis-men and cis-women in a heterosexual context.

REDUCTIVE YET PRODUCTIVE: SEXUAL OBSCENITY

There has already been much academic work produced on the topic of how profanity shapes society's values. Anthropologist Mary Douglas's 1966 study *Purity and Danger*, for example, examines the importance of various taboos - including those pertaining to sexual

behaviors - as both a method of dictating as well as maintaining control over social norms.⁵ In this book, she argues that “[t]he study of taboo impinges inevitably upon the philosophy of belief. The taboo-maintained rules will be as repressive as the leading members of the society want them to be... [W]hen the controllers of opinion want a different way of life, the taboos will lose credibility and their selected view of the universe will be revised.”⁶ According to Douglas, what society considers profane is subject to change based on the agenda of those in charge. She argues that elites deem things “dirty” not in order to escape from the inescapable but rather to re-shape our own desires. We can not express ideas about things we have no words for; in that way, she observes that communication becomes not only a method *through* which concepts are shared but also determines *which* concepts are shared. “There can be thoughts which have never been put into words,” Douglas writes. “Once words have been framed, the thought is changed and limited by the very words selected. So the speech has created something, a thought which might not have been the same.”⁷ To Douglas, limitations on our language become limitations on our thought. When we don't have a way to describe a concept in words, we can't properly consider that concept in our own heads either. The words we have for sex and their connotations thereby have the potential to either expand or limit our conceptions of sex.

Douglas's book, however, does not examine English-speaking societies and is therefore of a limited relevance to a study of English obscenity. Edward Sagarin, on the other hand, more directly tackles the issue of profanity in his book *The Anatomy of Dirty Words*.⁸ Here, Sagarin argues that the relationship between social norms and language is mutually reinforcing. According to him, language both reflects and shapes worldviews: when we tell kids not to say

⁵ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966).

⁶ Ibid, xiii.

⁷ Ibid, 79.

⁸ Edward Sagarin, *The Anatomy of Dirty Words* (New York: Paperback Library, 1962).

fuck, they learn not to think *fuck* either. A taboo against terms referring to sexual behaviors therefore is not only the product of puritanical views towards sex. It is also what produces sex repulsion in the first place by teaching people to view sex as a dirty act as socially unacceptable as the words referring to it are. Sagarin is particularly concerned with the trend of sexual obscenity being used to denote various vices. He worries that association of the word *dick* with *being a dick* bleeds over into an aversion to the sexual organ itself, too. This leads him to call into question the work of sex-positive advocates who encourage the proliferation of profanity. In Sagarin's eyes, telling people to yell *fuck* won't do much to promote healthier attitudes towards sex when everybody still associates *fuck* and its derivatives - *motherfucker*, *fuckhead*, etc - with negative imagery.

Lisa Z. Sigel, meanwhile, traces the usage of sexual profanity in Victorian pornography and how that relates to nineteenth century Britain's preoccupation with pollution politics.⁹ She argues that during a period of about sixty years, the baroque language and flowery descriptions of England's sexual writings were replaced with a growing reliance on profanity. The "most interesting moving picture of nature" described in *Fanny Hill* had become a *cunt* by the latter half of the nineteenth century.¹⁰ According to Sigel, this shift in language represents a shift in the way Victorians perceived sexuality. Rather than a polysemous component within the complex natural and manmade systems we live in, sex was dissociated from all other social interactions. Intercourse was simplified down to a sum of its parts, and those parts were accordingly demarcated by their profane labels. Sex organs were thereby stigmatized and separated from the rest of the body.

⁹ What she means by "pollution politics" is explored later in this paper, but the term refers to Victorians' preoccupation with deeming certain social classes, language, and behaviors as "dirty" things that can pollute their pure minds.

¹⁰ Lisa Z. Sigel, "Name Your Pleasure: The Transformation of Sexual Language in Nineteenth-Century British Pornography," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9, no. 4 (2000): 400-6, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3704910>.

Sigel also observes that many pornographic works from this time depict older characters welcoming younger initiates to the world of the erotic by teaching them the profane names for their various sexual organs. These characters' descent into dirty language serves as a lexical mirror to their spiritual descent from virginity into their newfound - and corrupting - sexual knowledge. The usage of obscene phrases was particularly tied to characters' physical ejaculation: in these stories, people can not help but spew out dirty words when they climax. Sigel argues that not only does this reflect the Victorian view that sexual desires are involuntary, but that this association between profanity and orgasm also indicates the perverse, almost voyeuristic pleasure the elite took in using the language of the working class. "Simply put," she writes, "in these texts, eroticism in some fundamental way became equivalent with dirtiness. The eroticized body had been stripped of its potential as a repository of complex and contradictory metaphors and instead had become a site of pollution beliefs. Through the process of ordering, organizing, and articulating dirtiness, the meaning of sexuality changed." Sigel's analysis provides almost a case study for Douglas's thesis about the way elites use taboos in order to shape the public's view of sex. Both scholars argue that, rather than simply forbidding the mere mention of sex, the taboo around curse words only makes their usage more potent. In economics, value is determined by supply and demand: when supply - the number of times a person is allowed to use a word - decreases, the value - the power of that term - increases. There is nothing inherently striking about the term *bitch* - perhaps the word has a nice ring to it, but it is still our social context which lends *bitch* the vast majority its potency. This allows the upper echelons of society to weaponize the power of curse words to change how we view the world, or in this case, sex.

In particular, Sigel's analysis exemplifies how elites have been able to dub certain words as obscene so that when they use those terms, the newfound potency that comes hand-in-hand with that label of obscenity only makes their message all the more powerful. Victorian elites separated themselves from the working class by creating distinctions in their language - "their" words are dirty, "ours" are not - and then used those corrupted terms to corrupt sex. The creation of a taboo around swearing then becomes a question not of banning certain language but of carefully regulating its use. As philosopher Michel Foucault points out, "[i]f power was never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but say no, do you really believe that we should manage to obey it? ... [Power] produces discourse; it must be considered a productive network which runs through the entire social body much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression."¹¹ There can be no such thing as "dirty" words, after all, if "clean" words don't exist to make the aforementioned seem "dirty" in comparison. In this way, making certain speech acts unacceptable requires making others acceptable. The words of the working class - slang - become "dirty" while the words of the rich become "clean." This theory of power thereby shifts the framework through which scholars should view obscenity: while labeling a term as profane is still an exercise in suppression, it is also - in a counterintuitive and perhaps more important way - an act of creation.

SUBJECT VERB OBJECT: GENDER AND SEXUAL SLANG

But not all cusses were created equal. It would be inaccurate to suggest that all sexual terms share the same level of taboo, especially when comparing gendered terms like *dick*, which even doubles as a popular nickname for Richard, to their feminine counterparts like *cunt*.

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. (New York City: Pantheon Books, 1980), 119.

Some feminist scholars have posited theories as to why these differences exist. “Man fucks woman,” wrote Catharine MacKinnon in 1982. “[S]ubject verb object.” To her, the language of sexuality is inextricably intertwined with that of male dominance. “Sexual objectification,” she observes, “is the primary process of the subjection of women. It unites act with word, construction with expression, perception with enforcement, myth with reality.”¹² MacKinnon’s analysis, although not directly focusing on profanity, is similar to that of both Douglas and Sagarin in that all three scholars point to how inequities in language and the material world are locked in a mutually reinforcing cycle. Studying gendered differences in sexual obscenity can therefore help us understand how we ourselves view gender in relation to sexuality. MacKinnon’s emphasis on sexual objectification specifically speaks to the importance of examining the way profanity reduces men and women to their sexual organs. We do not, after all, call rude men *arms*, nor do we call mean women *feet*. Why is it then that a person can be a *dick* but not a *nose*, a *cunt* but not a *ear*? And what do the differences in the way we use *dick* and *cunt* say about the different ways we view the men and women attached to them?

For a feminist perspective on these questions, many scholars cite Inga Muscio’s 2002 book *Cunt: A Declaration of Independence*.¹³ Although its title would misleadingly suggest this book’s relevance to a study of obscenity related to genitalia, Muscio focuses less on the way English-speaking societies treat the word *cunt* and more on the way English-speaking societies treat the actual organ itself. Rather than trace the etymological development of sexual obscenity, her analysis seems more preoccupied with how astrological folk medicine can resist the commercialization of feminine hygiene.

¹² Catharine A. MacKinnon, “Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory,” *Signs* 7, no. 3 (1982): 515–44, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173853>.

¹³ Inga Muscio, *Cunt: A Declaration of Independence* (New York City: Seal Press, 2002).

When one moves beyond Muscio's work, however, there does seem to be a consensus among many profanity scholars about the misogynistic undercurrents of genitalia-related obscenity. Jonathan Green, for example, argues that because women's speech has historically been considered delicate and elegant, slang developed as a "man-made language," being predominantly generated and spoken by men. The words men used became viewed as crude - "dirty" - while the words women used became viewed as elevated - "clean." In this masculine lexical environment, Green observes that women are oftentimes reduced to either sex objects or the vagina itself. For example, he cites the emergence of the term *piece* in the fourteenth century - along with its cousins *piece of stuff* from the seventeenth century, *piece of ass*, *piece of tail*, and *piece of stray* all from the twentieth century - to illustrate how slang views women as sex objects by defining them in terms of their anatomy or their sexual function.¹⁴ In the world of slang, people with vaginas are not defined so much by their personhood as by their vagina. They are divided into *pieces*; they are no longer full human beings.

One may argue, however, that the same can be said of masculine slang. Men, after all, can be *pricks*, *dicks*, or any other number of words that reduce them to their sexual organs. What makes vaginal terms any different? In answer to this, Green points out that the number of words referring to the vagina takes up a significantly larger portion of the slang vocabulary than does almost any other category, including the penis.¹⁵ His own compendium - which he himself admits is probably incomplete - lists almost nine hundred. In fact, Green even goes so far as to conclude that "[i]f such a mass of terms appears to prove yet again feminism's contention that men see

¹⁴ Jonathon Green, *Slang Through the Ages* (Chicago: NTC Publishing Group, 1997), 8-9.

¹⁵ Green does make one notable exception to this trend when it comes to slang words for drinking, with one recent study counting over 2,000 such terms.

women primarily as sex objects, then so be it. If slang is indeed the most ‘man-made’ of languages then it is never more so than when dealing with the female genitalia.”¹⁶

Such sentiments are mirrored by scholar John McWhorter. He views *cunt* to be a “charmless little grunt of a word” that reflects centuries of English-speaking society objectifying and abusing women. McWhorter even suggests that it may be “a sign of progress” that the c-word is now considered to be one of the most socially unacceptable terms in the English language, second only to certain racial epithets.¹⁷ His argument contrasts sharply with that of Sagarin, who worries that the taboo surrounding sexual organs and other bawdy profanity does more harm than good. If Sagarin’s reasoning was extended to the question of gender in language, one may conclude that labeling female genitalia as obscene does not stigmatize the term’s sexist connotations so much as it stigmatizes women’s bodies. To him, the only solution is to change the negative connotations of the word rather than banning its usage.

The view of profanity forwarded by Melissa Mohr, on the other hand, might challenge both McWhorter and Sagarin’s interpretations, although she does agree with Sagarin in so far as shunning the word *cunt* would not make the patriarchy disappear. “Eradicating the words with which we express hatred will not get rid of the emotion itself, producing some conflict-free, if not socialist, utopia,” she writes. “A world without swearing would not be a world without aggression, hate, or conflict.”¹⁸ Where she disagrees with Sagarin, however, is in whether or not English benefits from labeling certain words as obscene. While Sagarin argues that dubbing sexual terms as profane only propagates puritanical views towards perfectly natural desires, Mohr points out that the alternative to anger through cursing is expressing it through violence.

¹⁶ Ibid, 31-32.

¹⁷ John McWhorter, *Nine Nasty Words: English in the Gutter: Then, Now, and Forever* (New York: Avery, 2021), 160-62.

¹⁸ Melissa Mohr, *Holy Shit: A Brief History of Swearing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 255.

She also cites recent research suggesting that the very act of swearing, precisely because of its taboo, is a cathartic way to release tension with quantifiable health benefits. One study, for instance, found that people who let out a curse were able to keep their hand submerged in cold water for forty seconds longer than those who used a neutral term.¹⁹

Geoffrey Hughes might also disagree with McWhorter's method of analysis. He points out that while it may seem obvious that *cunt* is indeed one of the more hurtful insults available to English speakers, much of slang's meaning is dependent upon the specific context of its usage. A multitude of factors, such the speaker's identity, tone, relationship to the insulted, and/or surroundings, can all potentially change the amount of harm calling somebody a *cunt* is meant to inflict.²⁰ One recently published article in the Guardian, for example, even records the usage of the c-word as a term of endearment.²¹ All of this would seem to make comparing the varying potencies of gendered terms, as McWhorter claims to do, very difficult.

Hughes therefore takes a slightly different approach in examining slang's misogynistic roots. For evidence of slang associating women with the monstrous, he points to the feminization of androgynous insults. Throughout the English language's history, ambisexual snubs have tended to gain feminine connotations while there is little evidence of a parallel trend whereby genderless taunts have become associated with men. For example, men were first characterized as *witches* in the year 890, much earlier than a woman ever was, despite the term's current feminine connotations. In 1250, meanwhile, *shrew*, a word now reserved almost exclusively for women, was defined as referring to an "evil-disposed or malignant man."²² Another concerning - and potentially more significant - trend Hughes examines is the deterioration in connotation of

¹⁹ Ibid, 252.

²⁰ Hughes, "Sexuality in Swearing," in *Swearing*.

²¹ Rachel Braier, "In Praise of the C-Word," *The Guardian*, July 11, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/mind-your-language/2016/jul/11/in-praise-of-the-c-word>.

²² Hughes, "Sexuality in Swearing."

words referring to women or their body parts. He analyzes the way previously neutral terms associated with women like *mistress*, *hussy*, and *puss* have developed more pejorative connotations over the centuries, a pattern that lacks an equal and opposite amelioration of other feminine words to offset it. This deterioration, too, lacks a parallel with the feminine words' male-gendered counterparts, with Hughes concluding that "the preponderance of unfavourable terms continues unabated, and that this imbalance, deriving mainly from sexist assumptions, seems to be constant and unaffected by, or unresponsive to, social developments. The apparent permanence of this imbalance suggests that it is a mass psycholinguistic phenomenon."²³

A CHARMLESS LITTLE GRUNT OF A WORD: CASE STUDIES IN DETERIORATION

The work of some recent scholars may provide additional support to Hughes's hypothesis about the consistently declining status of women in the English vernacular by complimenting his general analysis of slang across the ages with some more specific examination of sexual profanity in particular contexts. Mara L. Keire, for example, compares the way profanity was used before, during, and after World War I to solicit sex in American nightclubs.²⁴ Examining government-recorded transcripts from the period led her to find that the moral policing of the early twentieth century increased the objectifying nature of slang, for as men were banned from speaking directly with strangers of the opposite sex, negotiations for prostitution had to take place through intermediaries. The customer - almost invariably a man - would therefore have to find somebody in the know - a waiter, a bartender, but also usually a man - who would then use

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Mara L. Keire, "Swearing Allegiance: Street Language, US War Propaganda, and the Declining Status of Women in Northeastern Nightlife, 1900-1920," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 25, no. 2 (2016): 246-66, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44862299>.

demeaning and obscene labels to indicate a woman's sexual willingness. Before the war, when men would negotiate directly with the women, those same terms had been used freely by both prostitutes and customers to refer to the other sex. During and after the war, however, when tighter moral regulations forced men to talk more to each other about the women, profane slang became increasingly objectifying and the deterioration process can be seen taking place in just a few short years.

Likewise, in Sigel's analysis of Victorian pornography's profanity usage, she observes that "the word 'cunt' ceases to have any relevance to a woman's body except as a place for a man's pleasure. 'Cunt' no longer connotes a place, but becomes any place that a man chooses to 'fuck.' The meaning of that organ has changed as the meaning of the word, itself, has changed."²⁵ Here, Sigel argues that the word *cunt* deteriorated from its more neutral meaning as a woman's body part to a rather derogatory term denoting a hole for a man's penis. To exemplify this point, she uses a passage from a pornographic work in which a man tells a woman that a *cunt* can be anywhere a man wants to have sex with, including breasts and armpits. The character explains that "it's all the same to a man," shifting the meaning of *cunt* from a body part that a woman owns to a body part that a man fucks.²⁶ Sigel notes that in making the term more general, the meaning of *cunt* was actually reduced. Its importance for the menstrual cycle and woman's pleasure were not thought to be its defining characteristics. Instead, the thing that makes something a *cunt* is how it can satisfy a man.

Piers Beirne also examines the development of the c-word, but through an ecofeminist lens.²⁷ Ecofeminism is an intersectional field of study that connects sexual violence to animal

²⁵ Sigel, "Name Your Pleasure," 407.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Piers Beirne, "Animals, Women and Terms of Abuse: Towards a Cultural Etymology of *Con(e)y*, *Cunny*, *Cunt* and *C*nt*," *Critical Criminology* 28, (2020): 327-49, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10612-019-09460-w#article-info>.

abuse, arguing that masculinity views women and animals in a similar manner and therefore also uses the same language to degrade, demean, and dominate both groups. Such an interpretation seems especially appealing when talking about the world of slang, where women are regularly referred to as *bitches*, *cows*, *bunnies*, *foxes*, and *pussies*. In his paper, Beirne argues that *cunt* only gained its negative connotations at the end of the twelfth century, “as soon as speciesism was discursively attached to the naming of women’s genitalia.”²⁸ This speciesism came with the arrival of a particular strain of rabbits to England: the *conies*. The name of this species rhymes with the word *bunnies* and therefore shares phonetic similarities with *cunt*, too. This leads Beirne to claim that “[a]s *ME* [Middle English] sexualized slang, *cony*, *con(e)y*, *cunny* and *cunt* had become all one and the same—all mixed together into a hellish cauldron of speciesist and sexist practices.”²⁹ According to him, once language associated *cunt* with animals, the term began to connote something that could be hunted, tamed, devoured. According to him, *cunt* became prey. For example, he points to a humorous sixteenth century pamphlet called *Disputation, Between a Hee Conny-Catcher, and a Shee Conny-Catcher* that ends with the protagonist being “conny-catcht” by either the rabbit, a woman, or potentially both, for it remains ambiguous whether or not there was ever a difference between the two.³⁰ As *cunt* began to be treated as the c-word, potentially distasteful names for plants and animals like *black maidenhair*, *bunny mouth*, *counteminte*, *countewort*, *cuntehoare*, and *prick madam* were replaced with Latinized terms like *xylaria polymorpha* and *ctaraxacum*. Brothels, meanwhile, were dubbed *cunny-houses* and *cunny-warrens*, places where prostitutes went “at it like rabbits.”³¹

²⁸ Ibid, 336.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid, 337.

³¹ Ibid, 341.

While Beirne does present a convincing correlation, at the very least, between the term *cunt* becoming seen as more obscene and it also being increasingly associated with the animal kingdom, his argument is not entirely foolproof. The term *cock*, after all, certainly ties the penis to the rooster, although it is difficult to think of as many examples of gendered insults with animal imagery that are typically directed towards men than it is to think of those directed towards women. Furthermore, *cunt*'s connection to *coney* does not seem to always be negative or imply the subjugation of women: in fact, from the sixteenth century onward, *coney* is recorded in many places as clearly a term of endearment rather than a term of abuse. For example, a Tudor poem describes a man calling a woman "his conny His swetyng and his honny."³² Similarly, another Tudor theatra, comedic interlude features a fond "[m]y darlynge, my Conye, my Bryde."³³ Regardless, considering the confluence of various social developments that were changing the way medieval English speakers viewed women's bodies, it seems highly unlikely that speciesism was the most important - let alone only - factor that contributed to the stigmatization of the word *cunt*.

GAPS IN THE LITERATURE

Most of the existing body of literature on gender, sex, and obscenity seems to fall into three categories. The first group contains general histories of profanity, including the work of Mohr and Hughes. These books tend to trace the ever-shifting ways obscene words have been treated and defined by English-speaking society from the birth of the language into the twentieth century. Both Mohr and Hughes argue that, in general, what English speakers consider to be too

³² John Skelton, *Elynour Rummyng: famous Ale-Wife of England*, rev. ed. (London: 1624), line 223, quoted in *Green's Dictionary of Slang*, s.v. "cony n.," <https://greensdictofslang.com/entry/wubl2wy>.

³³ Thomas Ingelend, *Disobedient Child* (New York: AMS Press, 1970; Hathi Trust), 40, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000004848>.

taboo to say has shifted over the centuries from the sacred - swearing by God and Jesus, damning people to hell, etc - to the sexual and scatological. This is a pattern that Mohr has dubbed the *Holy Shit* phenomenon, whereby the Holy has become increasingly more socially acceptable and the Shit has become increasingly less so.³⁴

The second category holds the general surveys of slang, which can be found in the work of scholars like Sagarin and Green. These studies tend not to focus on developments in the vernacular over time. Instead, they concern themselves with finding general trends in the types of words slang has generated throughout the centuries. Sagarin and Green both agree that slang tends to display sexist as well as anti-sex roots, and the general histories of profanity seem to agree that slang has changed over time. What is missing then is a history of the sexism in profanity - if slang has changed, how has its relationship with the subjugation of women changed, too? That is the gap that this project aims to fill by comparing the development of slang related to the female genitalia to that of the male genitalia in England between the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries. Studying the changes in such terminology can reveal developments both in attitudes towards sexual activity as well as the status of women in English-speaking society.

The third and final category of literature on the lewd zooms in to examine the evolution of gendered slang within specific cultural contexts, genres, and timeframes. Examples of this body of work include Sigel's analysis of the role of profanity in nineteenth century British pornography and Keire's study of the impact of the early twentieth century's moral crusading on the usage of obscenity in sexual solicitation within nightclubs in the American northeast. Research that focuses on the development of slang specifically related to sexual organs will complement this third category by providing valuable background information on the larger

³⁴ Mohr, *Holy Shit*.

trends that have dictated how the different ways the English vernacular treats male and female bodies have changed over time.

METHODS

In this next section, I will explain the issues my study has run into as well as the sources I have drawn upon.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

Language, and especially informal language like slang, evolves within specific regional and cultural contexts, with different groups producing their own unique vernaculars. Given temporal restraints, attempting to study the slang of the entire English-speaking world would require a substantial amount of papering over the complex and oftentimes conflicting ways different vernaculars in different parts of the world have developed. For example, the way South African slang treats genitalia may very well be different than the way Canadian slang treats the same subject matter, despite them both technically falling under the broad umbrella of English slang. Even without accounting for differences of culture, differences of foreign language influence alone has produced vastly different obscene vocabularies. While Canadian English developed alongside French influence, South African English has borrowed heavily from Afrikaans.³⁵ These differing regional influences have created differing regional slangs; for example, one would be much more likely to hear somebody be called a *moer* in Johannesburg than in Vancouver.

But even this view of slang seems overly simplistic, for almost no English-speaking culture is an island completely cut off from all other parts of the world. What of the South African immigrant who brings their profanity to Canada? Slang may develop regionally, but certainly not in a bubble. Especially since the English language spread primarily through the

³⁵ Hughes, *Swearing*.

creation of colonial empires, interactions within the English-speaking have produced an even more complicated web of English slang.

In order to mitigate this problem, I have narrowed the focus of my research to only study slang that developed in the geographic region of the United Kingdom. This is, of course, an imperfect solution, seeing as even within Britain, many different dialects thrive, from the Cockney rhyming slang to that of the Northern Irish. However, limiting my research in this manner does at least produce an area that, from the period of 1200 to 1800, had regular interactions and seems to be a reasonable, if arbitrary, brightline.

Many of the other major roadblocks that academics studying obscenity encounter stem from the problem I elaborated on in the beginning section— that is, our inability to settle on a precise definition of what even qualifies as “obscene” in the first place. The “I know it when I see it” approach seems sufficient in many cases, but it will produce varying results when that “I” changes. It is therefore important to recognize my own definitional biases as an author, for I, as an English speaker who grew up in southern California, may have a different idea of what constitutes slang than an English speaker who lives in Sydney or Dubai.

Furthermore, if one can not define what exactly is “obscene,” how can one compare the varying degrees of profanities’ taboo-ness? Especially because so much of a profanity’s intended meaning is circumstantial, not having access to recordings of a speaker’s tone and gesture means that it is often difficult to ascertain whether or not a profanity was meant to be used in a joking, friendly manner or as an actual insult. This problem is only compounded by the fact that, throughout the centuries, writers and dictionary compilers have often omitted words like *cunt* and *dick* from their work precisely because they were thought to be too offensive. Indeed, perhaps one of the most effective ways to measure a word’s taboo-ness is not by examining its

usage but instead by examining its absence. I have therefore traced the inclusion of slang related to the genitalia in various dictionaries and other writings as well as the development of minced oaths - that is, the clever ways people have gotten around having to say the actual profanity by, for example, substituting *gosh* for *god* - in order to gage the tabooeness of various terms.

Unfortunately, the intentional censorship of profanity is not the only limiting factor on finding primary sources for this research. Many old texts have been lost to time, which leaves large gaps in the writings academics have access to, let alone writings that deal with or contain obscenities. Even the texts that do exist, however, are not very representative of daily slang usage, for even if the words weren't often written down, there is no guarantee that English speakers didn't often use *fuck* in regular conversation. Further complicating matters, up until the mid-seventeenth century, the majority of the English population was illiterate,³⁶ which means that there is a large lack of written documentation made by the primary creators and users of slang: the working class.

Due to the confluence of these factors, the primary sources I have examined are far from perfect, and certainly not comprehensive. However, my project is hardly unique in that regard, for such is the nature of any project that attempts to examine the history of the obscene.

PRIMARY SOURCES & MATERIALS

Thankfully, there are those who have endeavored to document and compile slang so as to ensure that the words are not lost to the ages. Perhaps most notably, lexicographer Jonathon Green published in 2010 a 6,200-page *Green's Dictionary of Slang*, drawing from a database of

³⁶ Tyrel C. Eskelson, "States, Institutions, and Literacy Rates in Early-Modern Western Europe," *Journal of Education and Learning* 10, no. 2 (2021): 109. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1290524.pdf>.

around 575,000 citations. Since then, he has moved the dictionary online to offer access to over 131,000 such terms, as well as their country of origin and earliest known usage.³⁷

According to its advanced search function, the GDoS contains 726 terms for the vagina originating in the United Kingdom that were used between 1200 and 1900, 558 for the penis, and 57 for the testicles. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) and Middle English Dictionary (MED), too, contain helpful information on certain terms, though these sources are not specialized in slang.

STUDY DESIGN / PROCEDURE

When searching through the *GDoS*, I used the website's advanced search function to filter results by period of use (1200 - 1900) and the country or region of its usage (United Kingdom). This year, I have used the key term "vagina" to compile a chronological list of all relevant slang terms, their meaning, and the primary source(s) in which they have been cited. This has provided me with a database (available [here](https://greensdictofslang.com/)) of 697 slang terms related to the female genitalia and 1,723 quotations in which the terms appear, including 166 alone which feature *cunt* or its derivatives. It is upon this reference source - as well as primary sources I have encountered on my own - that the following analysis is founded.

³⁷ *Green's Dictionary of Slang*, <https://greensdictofslang.com/>.

CUNT: A CASE STUDY

Cunt is arguably one of the most taboo obscenities in the English language. Its potency as a term of abuse for women is so great that John McWhorter even called it “a sign of progress, then, that this word is today the most taboo of the taboo words other than nigger.”³⁸ But how and why did this taboo develop? What was so special about this monosyllabic term that it now holds such a rarefied throne in the pantheon of the profane? In this next section, I will delve into the history of this specific term, between the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries in Britain. In particular, I will trace its evolution through three stages: when *cunt* was not so profane as to carry any negative connotation, when *cunt* became more profane than other synonyms for the same sex organ, and when *cunt* became so profane that the word could be detached entirely from its original meaning.

IN MIDDLE ENGLISH: *CUNT* DURING THE LATE MEDIEVAL AGES

The British Library defines Middle English as a murky era hovering somewhere between the more clearly established Old and Modern English periods, from around 1150 CE to 1450.³⁹ However unclear the period’s definition, scholarly consensus seems to be that for these three centuries, *cunt*’s connotation was relatively neutral. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*), the word’s first appearance in 1230 was quite public, with a London streetname called *Gropecuntlane*.⁴⁰ In fact, the term appears in numerous medieval place names, surnames, and plant names, leading researchers to conclude that *cunt* did not carry the same taboo then that it holds today. For example, Keith Briggs notes that the term appears in place names like

³⁸ McWhorter, *Nine Nasty Words*, 161.

³⁹ David Crystal, “Middle English,” *British Library*, January 31, 2018, <https://www.bl.uk/medieval-literature/articles/middle-english>.

⁴⁰ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “cunt, n.,” March 2023, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/45874>.

Cuntelowe (1221), *Hardecunt* (1216-72), *Cuntewellewang* (1317), and *Cuntland* (1384).⁴¹ Piers Beirne, meanwhile, records its usage in multiple surnames - such as *Johanne le Cunte* (1230), *Adam de Cunneslegh* (1246), and *Robert Clevecunt* (1302) - as well as plant names like *counteminte*, *countewort*, and *cuntehoare*.⁴² “Such public evidence,” Geoffrey Hughes concludes, “alongside the ubiquitous *Pissing Alley* and *Shitteborwelane*, a London street name of 1272, suggests that *cunt* must have been a publicly acceptable term.”⁴³

Literary works from this period also feature *cunt*. In “The Miller’s Tale,” for example, Chaucer describes a sexual encounter in which “prively he caughte hir by the queynte.”⁴⁴ Elsewhere in the *Canterbury Tales*, the Wife of Bath declares that “trewely, as myne housbondes told me, / I had the best quoniam might be.”⁴⁵ While Beirne argues that Chaucer “altogether” avoided explicit use of cunt and therefore “anticipated” its later taboo,⁴⁶ it seems more likely that Chaucer’s *queynt[e]*, *queint*, *quente*, and *quoniam* were simply the type of alternate spellings common in Middle English literature. As G. L. Brook notes, “[t]he difficulties in the way of the study of Middle English spelling are well-known. Very few manuscripts are known to be in the hand of the author; many of them are clearly copies of copies and each scribe added his share of dialectal variants and individual idiosyncrasies.”⁴⁷ Indeed, the two most widely cited and studied Chaucer manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales* - Hengwrt and Ellesmere - are noticeably different. The results of some statistical tests suggest that the two manuscripts were “copied by different scribes with different habits of registering certain accidentals, different habits of proofing

⁴¹ Keith Briggs, “OE and ME *Cunte* in Place-Names,” *Journal of the English Place-Name Society* 41 (2009): 26-39.

⁴² Beirne, “Animals,” 332, 340.

⁴³ Hughes, *Swearing*.

⁴⁴ Geoffrey Chaucer, “The Miller’s Tale,” in *Chaucer: The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Walter Skeat (Oxford: Clarendon Press).

⁴⁵ Ibid, “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue.”

⁴⁶ Beirne, “Animals,” 340.

⁴⁷ G. L. Brook, “A Piece of Evidence for the Study of Middle English Spelling,” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 73, no. 1/3 (1972): 25-28, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43345328>.

finished copy, and different habits of registering substantive readings.”⁴⁸ The lack of *cunt* with a “c” in *Canterbury Tales* might therefore be a reflection of scribes’ natural variations in spelling and transcription rather than intentional censorship. For example, the *Middle English Dictionary* (*MED*) only notes *quoniam* appearing once in the approximately three million quotations it has compiled,⁴⁹ suggesting that *quoniam* is a spelling unique to this specific instance within the *Canterbury Tales*. Another possibility is that alternate spellings of *cunt* with a “q” were popular in Chaucer’s period, a theory supported by *queynt*’s appearance in a fourteenth century text describing “[h]ir queynt abouen hir kne, Naked þe kniztes knewe.”⁵⁰ In fact, the *MED* lists *queinte* as an alternate form of *cunte* - along with *conte* and *counte* - in a list of spelling variations that implies *queynte* in “The Miller’s Tale” is not necessarily Chaucer’s attempt at cleaning up his language. Even if *queint* and its derivatives are only close synonyms to *cunt*, however, their appearances in Chaucer’s work betrays a comfort with blunt language referring to the female genitalia that might also apply to medieval attitudes towards *cunt* as well. *Cunt* could therefore have been less obscene during the fourteenth century than even Beirne suggests.

Perhaps the most telling indicator of *cunt*’s neutral connotation, however, is its appearance in various Middle English scholarly texts. For example, Lanfranc of Milan’s fifteenth century *Science of Cirurgie* describes how “[i]n wymmen þe necke of þe bladdre is schort, & is maad fast to the cunte.”⁵¹ The *MED*, meanwhile, notes the word’s appearance in two fifteenth

⁴⁸ Roy Vance Ramsey, “The Hengwrt and Ellesmere Manuscripts of the ‘Canterbury Tales’: Different Scribes,” *Studies in Bibliography* 35 (1982): 133, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40371755>.

⁴⁹ *Middle English Dictionary*, ed. Robert E. Lewis, et al. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1952-2001), s.v. “Cunte n.,” https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED9133/track?counter=1&search_id=24448512.

⁵⁰ *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. “Queint(e) n.,” https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED35505/track?counter=2&search_id=24449662.

⁵¹ Lanfranc of Milan, *Science of Cirurgie* (circa 1400), quoted in *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “cunt, n.,” March 2023, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/45874>.

century glossaries - *Medulla Grammaticae* and *Illustrated Nominale* - that use *cunt* in an academic sense.⁵² The fact that the term was used in scholarly settings indicates that it could function as a purely anatomical term during this period, the equivalent of today's *vagina*. Although certainly present in popular culture - as illustrated by its appearance in proverbs like "Ȝeve þi cunte to cunni[n]g, And crave affetir wedding"⁵³ - *cunt* was not confined to informal slang, nor is there any evidence of it being used as an insult. While all analysis of Middle English terminology is limited by widespread illiteracy, lack of oral recordings, and damaged or otherwise inaccessible texts, we have no evidence of *cunt* or its derivatives being used as a term of abuse or with an inherently negative connotation during this period.

One potential explanation for this is a larger trend in Middle English obscenity being religious rather than sexual in nature. General consensus in academia seems to favor this theory, with Hughes comparing the period's treatment of religious and sexual swearing:

The great and obvious force behind most medieval swearing was Christianity. Just as Black Magic is a monstrous parody of orthodox religion, so blasphemous utterance is the obverse side of an age of faith... the grisly invocation of Christ's body, blood and nails in the agony of the Crucifixion seems as grotesque and bizarre to us now as modern genital, copulatory, excretory and incestuous swearing would have seemed to medievals. Indeed, sexual swearing, now very much *de rigueur*, is hardly apparent, in fact 'non-existent in Chaucer', according to Ralph Elliott (1974, p. 241).⁵⁴

Although the Church may have supported stricter sexual morals, Hughes points out that the words used as interjections were not sexual profanities like *fuck* but those relating to Christianity.

⁵² *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. "Quoniam n.," https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED35701/track?counter=1&search_id=24449100.

⁵³ *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. "Cunte n."

⁵⁴ Hughes, "Paynims and Charlatans: Swearing in Middle English," in *Swearing*.

For example, William Langland's late fourteenth century *Piers Plowman* features a "commune womman" exclaiming: "By Crist!"⁵⁵ Chaucer's "Miller Tale," meanwhile, contains an "Ey, Cristes foo! what wol ye do ther-with?"⁵⁶ In contrast, the *OED* lists the first ever usage of *fuck* as an interjection in 1929,⁵⁷ with *shit* as an interjection only appearing little over a century earlier in 1865.⁵⁸ The lack of sexual swearing in the Middle Ages therefore suggests that sex had not yet gained the taboo needed for the mere sound of words like *cunt* and *fuck* to carry profane connotations. Furthermore, a plethora of religious profanities may have limited the need for sexual ones. One's vocabulary can never be infinite, after all, and if the taboo surrounding blasphemy was so much greater than that surrounding sexuality, to call somebody a *heathen* rather than a *cunt* may have been a more effective - and therefore a more prevalent - method of delivering injury.

IN PLAIN ENGLISH: *CUNT*, STATUS, AND PRIVACY

However, while the prevalence of religious swearing would explain why *cunt* was not obscene during the Middle Ages, it would not account for its increasing profanity as centuries passed. Even if rising secularism could explain how *hell* and *damn* lost potency, that would not explain why sexual terms in particular rose to replace them. The theory that best explains this development is instead a growing conception of privacy as exposure to nude bodies decreased. Jeremy Goldberg analyzes the construction of "private parts" during the fifteenth century, noting many medieval accounts of observers encountering naked bodies belonging to the other sex in

⁵⁵ William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman* (London: 1377), ed. Walter William Skeat (London: 1866), 2: line 641, quoted in *Green's Dictionary of Slang*, s.v. "Christ!", <https://greensdictofslang.com/entry/oabilmi>.

⁵⁶ Chaucer, "Miller," line 3782.

⁵⁷ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "fuck, int.," March 2023., <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/270302?rskey=zWrl6w&result=3&isAdvanced=false>.

⁵⁸ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "shit, int.," March 2023, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/178330?rskey=l7hE2Q&result=3&isAdvanced=false>.

their day-to-day life. According to him, only by the sixteenth century was privacy more completely realized through curtains, screens, walls, and nightwear.⁵⁹ Perhaps then *cunt* became a “forbidden” word when the sight of the vagina itself became “forbidden.” Melissa Mohr similarly ties the growing number of rooms - and therefore privacy - in late Renaissance homes of both the upper and lower classes to a growing sense of taboo surrounding genitalia:

... privacy is inextricably linked to the advancing threshold of shame. Just as people started to wall themselves off physically from others in their new rooms, they began to wall themselves off psychically, as it were. Privacy created what we’ve seen Elias call “the invisible wall of affects,” and with it the embarrassment and shame at the sight or mention of bodily functions that medieval people lacked.⁶⁰

There seems to be at least a correlation between the two phenomena, for it was during this late sixteenth century that obscenity entered the English dictionary. The *OED* notes its first appearance in poet Thomas Nashe’s *The anatomie of absurditie*, which was published in 1589. “I woulde not haue any man imagine,” writes Nashe, “that in praysing of Poetry, I endeuour to approoue Virgils vnchast Priapus, or Ouids obscenitie.”⁶¹ Likewise, two years later, Sir John Harington published an essay defending his translation of a lewd epic poem as “plaine enough, & yet with modest words & no obscenous phrase: and so I dare take vpon me that in all *Ariosto* (and yet I thinke is as much as three *Aeneades*,) there is not a word of ribaldry or obscenousness.”⁶² This correlation between growing conceptions of bodily privacy and sexual

⁵⁹ Jeremy Goldberg, “John Skathelok’s Dick,” in *Medieval Obscenities*, ed. Nicola McDonald (York: York Medieval Press, 2014), 114-6.

⁶⁰ Melissa Mohr, *Holy Sh*t* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 160-1.

⁶¹ Thomas Nashe, *The anatomie of absurditie* (London, 1589), quoted in *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “obscenity,” March 2023, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/129826?redirectedFrom=obscenity>.

⁶² John Harington, “A Preface, or rather a Briefe Apologie of Poetrie, and of the Author and Translator,” in *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, ed. G. Gregory Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1904; Barleby, 2012), <https://www.bartleby.com/lit-hub/elizabethan-critical-essays/a-preface-or-rather-a-briefe-apologie-of-poetrie-prefixe-d-to-the-translation-of-orlando-furioso-1591/>.

obscurity reveals how intertwined the ideas became from the fifteenth to seventeenth century. Harington could write that the “wife of *Nynus* had a strange desire, / To ioyne [join] in copulation with her sonne,”⁶³ but he refused to say that she wished “to fuck him.” For Harington, there were “modest words” that made the depiction of incest palatable, signalling a separation of word from meaning. *Fuck* and *copulate* may signify the same act, but they were not equally acceptable - this is the distinction that birthed sexual profanity. In fact, Harington directly contrasts his translation of Ariosto with Chaucer’s *queynte*-filled writing: “I can smile at the finesse of some that will condemne him, and yet not onely allow but admire our *Chawcer*, who both in words & sence incurreth far more the reprehension of flat scurrilitie.” Here again, Harington makes a distinction between the meaning of a word - its “sence” - and the word itself. To him, both could carry profane connotations, but it was this separation between signifier and signified that allowed *cunt* to become an obscene phrase and not just an obscene thought.

In fact, academics of this time seemed to use their choice in sexual language as a way to indicate their own status. For example, after expressing disapproval of Ovid’s obscenity, Nashe explains that he “commend[s] their wit, not their wantonness; their learning, not their lust; yet even as the bee out of the bitterest flowers and sharpest thistles gathers honey, so out of the filthiest fables may profitable knowledge be sucked and selected.”⁶⁴ By drawing a distinction between “wantonness” and “wit,” Nashe immediately signals himself to be a man who does not fall victim to base desires but instead pursues higher learning and virtue. Enjoying “the filthiest fables” is easy; to find meaning in them requires a mind capable of “suck[ing] and select[ing].” Likewise, Thomas Elyot’s early sixteenth century Latin-English dictionary begins with a preface

⁶³ Lordovico Ariosto, *Orlando furioso in English heroical verse, by Sr Iohn Haringto[n] of Bathe Knight* (London, 1607; Text Creation Partnership), <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A21106.0001.001?view=toc>.

⁶⁴ Thomas Nash, *The Anatomy of Absurdity*, ed. John Mark Ockerbloom (London, 1589), <https://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/book/lookupid?key=olbp32593>.

that Mohr translates as a warning to those who would desire “obscene words, with which to arouse dormant desire while reading,” where he encourages them to “consult other dictionaries and spurn mine, under this excuse, if he likes, that it lacks words of this very sort.”⁶⁵ Elyot’s pride in delineating between his dictionary and those featuring sexual profanity is clearly meant to establish his own work as that of a higher quality. The preface is even structured as a dare, so that to put the book down then would reveal a reader’s true colors. In doing so, Elyot creates an us-versus-them dynamic between dictionaries based on whether they employ sexual obscenity. *You can be moral like us*, Elyot says, *or you can be immoral like them*. The subtext makes the “correct” answer to this challenge clear. In line with this commitment to his “superior” morals, Elyot’s dictionary eschews *cunt* altogether, instead defining the Latin *cunnus* as “a womans wyket,” *gremi* as “the space between the twoo thighs, specially of a woman,” and *Inter•oemineū* as “a womans priuy tokē, wher|by she is knowen from a man.”⁶⁶ By labeling the female genitalia as private - “priuy” - Elyot makes more direct terms like *cunt* unspeakable. It is important to note though that this change was not unique to the female sex organs: his dictionary also defines *naturalia* as “the priuy membres,” and *strutheus* as “the priuye membre of a man.” This would suggest that terms related to women’s genitalia began to be seen as obscene during this period not because they belonged to women but because they had a sexual function.

However, this was not a universal and immediate transformation, as some scholars did continue to use *cunt* in their work. For example, John Florio published in 1611 an influential Italian-English dictionary that uses the word around five times.⁶⁷ In it, *póttā* is defined as “a womans cunt or quaint,” *pottáchia* as “a filthy great cunt,” and *potteggiāre* as “to vse, touch or

⁶⁵ Mohr, *Holy*, 148.

⁶⁶ Thomas Elyot, *The Dictionary of Syr Thomas Eliot Knyght* (London: 1538; Text Creation Partnership), <http://name.umd.umich.edu/A21313.0001.001>.

⁶⁷ John Florio, *Queen Anna’s World of Words* (London, 1611; Project Gutenberg, December 18, 2017), <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/56200>.

play with cunts.” Yet even here, the beginnings of negative associations with *cunt* can be seen, especially with the appearance of *cunt-botch* in six places referring to venereal diseases. Unlike its synonyms *quaint* and *private parts*, *cunt* is the only one employed in this dictionary as the name for a symptom of STIs. Perhaps then *cunt* became such a potent obscenity because it, unlike other terms for genitalia, was more closely associated with the dangers of sexual intercourse. There is some evidence of this, as a Scottish poem from the sixteenth century uses *cunt-bitten* as slang for syphilitic,⁶⁸ but there are too few sources using *cunt* in this manner to make a definitive judgment.

Nevertheless, the transformation underlying this stigmatization of the term and other words related to the genitalia was a rise in the conception of privacy. Yet privacy, too, was not a universal phenomenon, as Lawrence Stone notes that the poor continued to live in one or two-roomed houses as their wealthier counterparts increasingly sectioned off their homes, leaving privacy “neither a practical possibility nor, one imagines, even a theoretical aspiration” for members of the working class. The upper classes, on the other hand, did not suffer from the same financial and spatial constraints, which allowed them to pursue what Stone dubs a “Renaissance Humanist stress on ‘civility.’” According to Stone, the purpose of this process was “to create a culture in which the elite, the gentleman and the lady, were clearly distinguished by a whole set of immediately recognizable external behaviour traits.”⁶⁹ He notes the impact not only on architectural design and manners but also on the vernacular as the aristocracy began to prefer a more standardized and refined language over the local dialects that had previously dominated the English landscape.

⁶⁸ William Dunbar, *The Poems of William Dunbar* (Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 1998), quoted in *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “cunt, n.,” March 2023, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/45874>.

⁶⁹ Lawrence Stone, *The family, sex and marriage in England, 1500-1800* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979; Internet Archive, December 6, 2019), 169-72, https://archive.org/details/familysexmarriag0000ston_u8e9/page/170/mode/2up?q=privacy.

This linguistic “civility” is further evident in the way slang associated with lower socioeconomic statuses became labeled as “dirty.” For example, a popular Renaissance manners book translated from Italian and published in English in 1576 condemns innuendos and slang, with Archbishop Giovanni Della Casa explaining that “you must knowe, that albeit two, or moe wordes, otherwhile chaunce to tell one selfe thinge, yet the one is more cleanly then the other... it better becomes a mans and womans mouth, to call Harlots, women of the worlde (as Belcolore did, who was more ashamed to speake it then to doe it) then to use their common name: Thaide è la Puttana.”⁷⁰ Here, Della Casa - or at least Della Casa’s translator, Robert Peterson - makes it clear that there are words that are “cleanly” and those that are not. Euphemisms like *women of the world* were acceptable; the equivalent “common name” was not. This both reflects an increasing expectation of privacy surrounding the body - phrases that were less blunt and more vague were less uncouth - and a desire for the upper class to avoid that which was “common.” Della Casa goes on to attack “base wordes that come out of the Tavernes, [that] bee verie uncomely for suche a worthy discours,” as well as “such woordes [that] do put us in minde of y^e Oyle, & the stuffe of the kitchin” and those that “savour of y^e dregges, & y^e filth of y^e common people, as every man may easily see.” The more terms became associated with the vernacular of the working classes, the more socially unacceptable they became to the upper classes. The difference in privacy between the upper and lower classes thereby intertwined with the aristocracy’s desire to make their status clear in a mutually reinforcing cycle. The working classes’ lower levels of privacy and therefore greater comfort with sexual language made the upper classes shun such language as too “common,” which only furthered the taboo surrounding genitalia among the upper classes that widened the socioeconomic gap in conceiving privacy,

⁷⁰ Giovanni Della Casa, *A Renaissance Courtesy-book: Galateo of Manners & Behaviours*, trans. Robert Peterson (Boston: Merrymount Press, 1914; Project Gutenberg, January 16, 2015), <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/47993>.

which then led to more shock and outrage at laymen's bawdy vocabulary. It is this snowballing effect that might explain how terms related to the genitalia and sexual behaviors became steadily more obscene over these centuries.

Some may point out that Della Casa wrote not of British manners but of Spanish manners and should therefore be irrelevant in discussing English conceptions of privacy. However, for Della Casa's book as well as all other translations I cite in this section, I have relied upon English translations produced by British writers during this period. It is these translated texts that I am interested in analyzing the impact of, and because these translations were circulating amongst elite classes, these books originally produced in foreign languages could still effect and reflect British society during these centuries.

It should be noted though that the manners listed by Della Casa - namely, his dislike of innuendo - were probably informed by his position within the Catholic Church and not followed strictly by the Protestant British aristocracy. In fact, the drama of the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras are well-known ribaldry. Shakespeare, for example, makes numerous puns on *cunts* throughout his plays and sonnets: Malvolio exclaims in *Twelfth Night* that "these be her very C's, her U's, and her T's; and thus makes she her great P's."⁷¹ In *Hamlet*, meanwhile, Shakespeare both puns off of *cunt* and a penis being known as a *thing* - with the vagina therefore being *nothing* - when Hamlet asks to lie down in Ophelia's lap:

HAMLET.

Do you think I meant country matters?

OPHELIA.

I think nothing, my lord.

⁷¹ William Shakespeare and John Philip Kemble, *Twelfth Night; Or, What You Will* (Edinburgh: James Ballantyne and Co.; Project Gutenberg, February 16, 2012), 35, <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/38901>.

HAMLET.

That's a fair thought to lie between maids' legs.⁷²

However, even though Shakespeare flirted with *cunt*, he never actually used the explicit term, preferring euphemisms like *case*, *commodity*, *corner*, *count*, *goose*, *house*, *pie*, *porridge*, *score* and *nothing*.⁷³ This type of sexual humor without obscene terminology was quite commonplace in the dramaturgy from this period, and especially in the Jacobean era, when the court became acting companies' main revenue source and playwrights had a financial incentive to adapt to courtly tastes.⁷⁴ For example, in a play by Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, a Spanish sexton condemns those who "write *Sunt* with a *C*, which is abominable."⁷⁵ Although the Victorians may be more famed for their commitment to sexual purity, the growing censorship of *cunt* in texts made to appeal to the upper classes reveals the rise of a larger taboo amongst the aristocracy towards genitalia during this period.

Perhaps the text that best exemplifies the interaction between class and privacy is *School of Venus*, a pornographic novel translated from French in 1680. In it, an experienced male lover named Frank explains to the less experienced Katy that when men engage in sexual intercourse, "[w]hat they usually called Loves Paradise and the centre of delight they now in plain English call a Cunt."⁷⁶ Here, a clear distinction is drawn between a romantic vision of female genitalia - one in which the vagina is celebrated as a delightful paradise - and that implied by *cunt*. This

⁷² William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, (Project Gutenberg, May 18, 2023), <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/100/pg100-images.html>.

⁷³ Beirne, "Animals," 338.

⁷⁴ Philip J. Finkelpearl, "The Role of the Court in the Development of Jacobean Drama," *Criticism* 24, no. 2 (1982): 138, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23105042>.

⁷⁵ Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, *The Spanish Curate: A Comedy* (London, 1647; Project Gutenberg, April 25, 2004), <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/12141>.

⁷⁶ *The School Of Venus, or The Ladies Delight, Reduced Into Rules Of Practice* (1680; Internet Archive, February 12, 2017), 108, <https://archive.org/details/TheSchoolOfVenusOrTheLadiesDelightReducedIntoRulesOfPractice/page/n7/mode/2up?q=plain>.

switch from euphemism to “plain English” illustrates how the term became attached to both a less refined, more direct vernacular as well as a much less positive perspective on female sex organs by the late seventeenth century. In fact, this source provides at least a partial answer to Goldberg's question on the growing conceptions of privacy in Britain: “[i]f the adult naked body came to be hidden from the gaze of the opposite sex, but particularly the female body from the male gaze, may it not also have become eroticized because forbidden?”⁷⁷ In *School of Venus*, men use euphemisms in public to avoid describing the actual sex organ itself in clear terms. *Cunt*'s power came from the fact that it cut through all of the layers of delicate sophistry designed to conceal women's private parts and instead laid them out in simple language. When *cunt*'s usage could fracture upper class norms about privacy, it transformed the word into the paradox that is obscenity: uncouth in public but titillating in private, and especially so in the pornography the upper class consumed.

“In plain English it is called a Cunt,” Frank explains, “though they out of an affected modesty mince the word, call it a Twot, and Twenty such kind of Names, when a man thrusts his Prick into a Womans Cunt, it is called Fucking, But pray do'nt talk of such kind of things before Company, for they will call you an immodest bawdy Wench, and chide you for it.”⁷⁸ He identifies civility as “affected” and therefore fundamentally insecure - a mere performance of modesty that quickly disappears during sex. The usage of *cunt* during intercourse thereby highlights how sex was conceptualized as the great equalizer: in *School of Venus*, sex is a primal experience in which the distinction between “plain English” and refined English disappear as all men are brought to the same level. It is no wonder then that conversations about sex might be feared by an upper class which wished to differentiate itself from the lower classes and their language.

⁷⁷ Goldberg, “John Skathelok's Dick,” 115-6.

⁷⁸ *School of Venus*, 16.

IN NASTY ENGLISH: *CUNT* AS WOMAN OR WOMAN AS *CUNT*?

Ironically, the development of profanity reflects a paranoid transformation in which a term's meaning becomes so taboo that the word gains taboo even when detached from its meaning. During this process, the taboo itself becomes the referent: calling somebody a *dick* does not imply that they are a literal phallus but that they should be viewed as negatively as one. This stigma surrounding *cunt* clearly grew during the eighteenth and nineteenth century, with Francis Grose defining the word in 1811 as “a nasty name for a nasty thing.”⁷⁹ By then, not only was the meaning of the word stigmatized, but the sound of the word itself was stigmatized, too. Indeed, by the nineteenth century, the term had become so infamous that some referred to it as simply *the monosyllable*. “Of all the thousand monosyllables in our language,” one dictionary explains in 1823, “this one only is designated by the definite article—the monosyllable.”⁸⁰

It is during the late seventeenth century that the self-censorship of *cunt* explodes, with the *GDoS* first noting *the monosyllable* appearing in 1680.⁸¹ One 1654 pamphlet describes “[n]ot caring how you live, nor how you die; / So you enjoy C--- and good Company.”⁸² Similarly, a 1672 book declares that “[t]hese C’s these C’s take heed my Son / These C’s has many a man undone.”⁸³ One song from the late seventeenth century drops the first letter entirely: “[m]y Words they were ready and wonderful blunt, / Quoth I, I had rather been stobb’d in my ---.”⁸⁴ As

⁷⁹ Francis Grose, *1811 Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (London, 1811; Project Gutenberg, December 28, 2020), <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/5402/pg5402.html>.

⁸⁰ Jon Bee, *Slang: A Dictionary of the Turf, the Ring, the Chase, the Pit, of Bon-Ton, and the Varieties of Life* (London: 1823), 120, <https://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/book/lookupid?key=olbp89196>.

⁸¹ *Green's Dictionary of Slang*, s.v. “cunt n.,” <https://greensdictofslang.com/entry/w7hgqcy>.

⁸² John Crouch, *Mercurious Fumigosus*, no. 10 (August 2, 1654; Department of Linguistics, Lancaster University), <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/projects/newsbooks/fumig.htm>.

⁸³ John Phillips, *Maronides*, vol. 6 (London, 1672), 147, quoted in *Green's Dictionary of Slang*, s.v. “C n.1,” <https://greensdictofslang.com/entry/w7hgqcy>.

⁸⁴ “Tom Tinker,” in *Wit and Mirth: or Pills to Purge Melancholy*, ed. Thomas d’Urfey (New York: Folklore Library Publishers, 1959; Project Gutenberg, August 10, 2010), 6:265, <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/33404>.

does a poem by John Wilmot: “She was so exquisite a Whore / That in the Belly of her Mother, / She plac’d her ... so right before / Her Father ... them both together.”⁸⁵ This increasing self-censorship of *cunt* in the latter half of seventeenth century coincided with the term’s usage as a term of abuse towards women. The *OED* attributes its first usage in this manner to diarist Samuel Pepys, when he described in 1663 a fellow Parliament member’s desire to “make all the cunts in town run after him.”⁸⁶ While the term had long been associated with sexual promiscuity - with the original *Gropecuntlane* appearing during a time when streets were named for their most prevalent businesses⁸⁷ - before, the word had denoted the actual vagina being “sold” in such transactions rather than the woman herself. It therefore certainly seems tempting to argue that the conflation of the two represents the diminution of women into sex objects, especially since this first citation is clearly referring to sexual conquest.

However, without comparing *cunt* to other obscenities, there is no way to know if this objectification and stigmatization is unique to terms referring to women or if it is a broader trend with all profanities. After all, it is difficult to think of a single obscenity that does not have a noun version which can be readily applied to a person: *damn* becomes *the damned*, *fuck* becomes *the fucker* or *the fucked*, *shit* becomes *the little shit* or *the shitface*. This seems especially true with terms relating to a person’s private parts, gendered or otherwise, as *dick*, *prick*, and *asshole* can all define a person by their sexual anatomy even though none are exclusive to women. Perhaps then personification is the fate of all swear words, and not just those related to female sexuality. Perhaps the appearance of a taboo surrounding a word always coincides with it being applied to a person; after all, it certainly does not seem an outlandish thought that humans’

⁸⁵ John Wilmot, “Written Under Nelly’s Picture,” in *Collected Works Of John Wilmot Earl Of Rochester*, ed. John Hayward (London: Nonesuch Press, 1926; Internet Archive, January 18, 2017), 120, <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.208065/page/n5/mode/2up>.

⁸⁶ Samuel Pepys, *Diary*, vol. 4 (1971), 209, quoted in *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “cunt, n.,” March 2023, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/45874>.

⁸⁷ Beirne, “Animals,” 332.

creative spirit is always grasping for the newest, most effective insult for its fellow man. To accept this premise, one only needs to search for the latest diss track on YouTube or read Mark Twain to expel all doubts about the human imagination's aptitude for innovative disparagement.

It is precisely answering this objection that will guide my research for the next year. In the next section, I will explain how my data collection will aim to avoid the problems I have just outlined and achieve a more comparative outlook on the gendered development of slang related to the genitalia.

CONCLUSION

This past year, I have reached the halfway point for my research. I have spent the majority of the year gathering background information and collecting data on vaginal slang, concluding the semester with a brief analysis of the word *cunt* in particular. However, the project is far from complete, and this final section is not so much a “conclusion” as it is a blueprint for how I plan to build upon my current research over the next year.

CURRENT LIMITATIONS

As is evident from the case study in *cunt*, looking at only terms related to the vagina is an incomplete strategy for demonstrating a convincing correlation between a term’s gender and how it has developed as an obscenity. Any study that only looks at one particular term or type of term - such as Piers Beirne’s “Animals, Women and Terms of Abuse: Towards a Cultural Etymology of *Con(e)y*, *Cunny*, *Cunt* and *C*nt*” - will be inherently limited in this regard, for it is unable to control effectively for the development of a general taboo against genitalia irrespective of which sex that genitalia belongs to.

Even disregarding that inherent constraint, however, my own analysis of *cunt* is limited in its scope. While I focused primarily on how status, class, and privacy interacted to produce a taboo surrounding *the monosyllable*, I did not explore in detail some other factors that could have contributed. For example, if *cunt* began to be censored in the late seventeenth century, how might that have been influenced by the tumult produced by the Glorious Revolution and a rise in Puritanism? And what of Joan DeJean’s argument, that the concept of obscenity only developed in France with the invention of the printing press as the upper class feared how “obscene material could, for the first time ever, circulate outside the public of elite male readers who, until then,

had been virtually the sole audience for sexually transgressive literature?”⁸⁸ Can a similar trend be found in England? These are all potentially interesting explanations that could provide a jumping-off point for other scholars.

AREAS FOR FUTURE INVESTIGATION AND RESEARCH PLAN

Unfortunately, however, this project can not tackle every one of those limitations and theories, so my next year will be spent primarily addressing the first. To do so, I will use this next summer refining my current database in three ways. First, I will compile a parallel compendium of terms in the *GDoS* relating to the penis. Next, I will add some crucial data points to the vaginal and phallic lists in noting when and whether specific words became synonymous with the sex attached to the sex organs to which the words refer. This will help me see whether or not there was a difference along gendered lines in how terms relating to the genitalia came to signify an entire individual. Finally, I will add citations and terms from the *OED*, *MED*, and primary sources that I have encountered on my own to the compendium in order to gather a more complete dataset on genitalia in slang during this time period.

The next school year will be spent with a mentor analyzing this dataset in order to produce a paper that will hopefully be ready for submission to a peer-reviewed journal by next summer. I might also try using my coding experience to make this reference source of genitalia in slang available online, similar to how the *OED*, *MED*, and *GDoS* are all housed on the web. (I have already built one such reference source before in partnership with the Los Angeles Food Policy Council. *Foodle* - Google, but for research on food insecurity in the Los Angeles area - is available [here](#).)

⁸⁸ Joan DeJean, *The Reinvention of Obscenity: Sex, Lies, and Tabloids in Early Modern France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 3-4.

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