GIS: A DATABASE FOR UNDERSTANDING GENDER AND GENITALIA IN SLANG

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ABSTRACT

Current academic literature that comparatively assesses gender's relationship with obscenity is limited. Some scholars examine profanity's misogyny, others analyze slang's evolution. What is understudied then is a history of sexism in profanity — if slang changed, how has its relationship with women changed, too? *Genitalia in Slang (GIS)* is a database that aims to address this gap. By synthesizing 648 primary sources, *GIS* compiles 1,424 British English slang terms (642 for the male genitalia, 783 for the female) as well as 4,726 quotations of their usage before the twentieth century (2,193 for the male genitalia, 2,533 for the female). Thanks to its legibility by computers, *GIS* can be used for a diverse range of studies, from those that zoom in only to examine one particular term to those that explore the development of over a thousand, from those that analyze a specific time period to those that span up to seven centuries. Through *GIS,* researchers can compare terms' first and last recorded date of usage, gendered associations, and shifting connotations over time. In doing so, *GIS* enables researchers to both quantitatively and qualitatively examine the development of a cultural taboo surrounding sex and sexual organs, as well as how that development played out differently for masculinized and feminized bodies in England.

INTRODUCTION

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 most circumstances, use. By stigmatizing words for being too good at communicating their message, the existence of bawdy expletives almost seems to defy the very purpose of language itself. After all, what crime has the term *cunt* committed, other than that each one of us knows all too well what it means?

This research project will explore the question of why and how humans label certain terms or subject matter "obscene" by building *Genitalia in Slang (GIS)*. This database enables scholars to understand the development of slang related to the female genitalia and that of the male genitalia in England until 1910. By synthesizing 648 primary sources, *GIS* compiles 1,424 British English slang terms (642 for the male genitalia, 783 for the female) as well as 4,726 quotations of their usage before the twentieth century (2,193 for the male genitalia, 2,533 for the female). This project will not study all profanities, such as those in the religious and scatological

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

vein.[2] It will not examine all gendered profanity either — excluding words like *bitch, whore,* and *bastard,* this project instead narrowly focuses on those related to parallel anatomical parts. Nor will this project encompass the full spectrum of genitalia but rather only those labeled as male and female, due to both time constraints and a lack of British slang referring to intersex organs during the period this project analyzes. Because of the nature of the subject matter, this paper will employ terms that may make some readers uncomfortable. 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.*

First, I will first develop working definitions for some relevant terminology. Then, I will survey the existing academic literature on slang, gender, and sexuality in language, so as to highlight how *GIS* can supplement and enhance scholars' efforts to understand the relationship between gender and profanity. Finally, I will explain how *GIS* was built, how *GIS* can be used, what *GIS*'s limitations are, and potential future areas of research that *GIS* makes possible.

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

[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.

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 understandings of "obscenity" vary 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, using it generously as a synonym for *very* in the same way Americans use *fucking*.[5]

But if profanity cannot be characterized by its content, perhaps obscenity can be identified by the reactions it prompts. Maybe it is how we perceive the word *shit*, rather than its actual dictionary definition, that earns the term 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, and 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 an 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.

Perhaps then 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. Yet even that explanation seems inadequate, for while the sailor may not be

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[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).
[5] *That's fucking hilarious* might translate to *that's bloody hilarious,* for example.

very offended by the term, they would still probably group the word *asshole* under the profanity header, despite being unable to clearly articulate why it belongs or how it arrived there.

To avoid this conundrum, and to more accurately describe the developments of sociolinguistic phenomena, this project will not concern itself with identifying the exact moment when a word has transitioned from being mundane to obscene. Instead, this project will view 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 of the word's development would be that *piss* simply moved further down the spectrum over the centuries and became considered more obscene. Words can even move in the opposite direction, as terms such as *hell* and *damn* becoming more socially acceptable with the passage of time. This development need not — and mostly likely does not — occur in a linear fashion, as words can "spike" in obscenity as they become at times more socially acceptable and at other times less socially acceptable.

Similar problems occur when trying to define "slang." For the purposes of this paper, its working — and imperfect — definition 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. To borrow from Justice Stewart, we may never be able to land on a coherent definition for the term, but we 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 binaristic paradigm of sex and gender. 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 body parts sexed as male. Exploring the relationship that trans, intersex, and gender non-conforming English speakers share with gendered obscenity is its own valuable project. However, for the sake of conciseness, this study will use descriptors that can neither fully nor accurately capture the complexity of the gender and sex spectrum(s). 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.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this next section, I will summarize the existing literature on sexual obscenity and its relationship to gender, in order to explain the gaps in the literature *GIS* hopes to address.

REDUCTIVE YET PRODUCTIVE: SEXUAL OBSCENITY

Even without a comprehensive database of terms related to male and female genitalia, much academic work has already addressed 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.[6] 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."[7] According to Douglas, what society considers profane is subject to change based on the agenda of those with political, social, and/or economic capital. She argues that elites deem things "dirty" not in order to escape from the inescapable but rather to re-shape subjects' desires in society at large. 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."[8] To Douglas, limitations on our

[6] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966).
[7] Ibid, xiii.
[8] Ibid, 79.

language become limitations on our thought. When we do not have a way to describe a concept in words, we cannot properly consider that concept in our heads either. The words we have for sex and those terms' 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 more limited relevance to a study of English obscenity. Sociologist Edward Sagarin, on the other hand, tackles the issue of profanity more directly in his book *The Anatomy of Dirty Words.*[9] There, 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 *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 the association of the word *dick* with the nonsexual concept of *being a dick* bleeds over into an aversion towards the sexual organ itself. This leads him to call into question the work of sex-positive advocates who use profanity generously in order to subvert constructions of "polite conversation" and break the taboo surrounding the public discussion of sex. In Sagarin's eyes, telling people to yell *fuck* will not do much to promote healthier attitudes towards sex when everybody still associates *fuck* and its derivatives — *motherfucker, fuckhead,* etc — with negative imagery.

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

Lisa Z. Sigel, meanwhile, traces the usage of sexual profanity in Victorian pornography and in relation to nineteenth century Britain's preoccupation with pollution politics.[10] She argues that over 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.[11] Vaginas, initially described as the "luscious mouth of nature"[12] in John Cleland's 1748 pornographic novel *Fanny Hill* had become a *cunt* by the latter half of the nineteenth century. According to Sigel, this shift in language reflects a shift in how Victorians perceived sexuality. Rather than a polysemous component within the complex natural and manufactured systems of human life, sex was dissociated from all other social interactions. Intercourse was simplified 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.

Sigel also observes that many pornographic works from the nineteenth century 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, in addition to reflecting the Victorian view that sexual desires are involuntary, 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

[10] What Sigel 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" to construct them as polluting the elites' "pure" minds.
[11] 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.
[12] John Cleland, *Fanny Hill: Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1748; Heritage Illustrated Publishing, 2014), 77.

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 effectively provides a case study for Douglas's thesis about the way elites use taboos 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 that which lends *bitch* the vast majority of its potency. This potency 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 by association. 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."[13] There can be no such thing as "dirty" words, after all, if "clean" words do not 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." By relegating working class language to the gutter, elites create a hierarchy in which the language of the upper class becomes seen as educated, refined, and elevated, while still letting them flex their social power by dipping into the language of the lower class at will. 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.*

Some feminist scholars have posited theories to explain these differences. "Man fucks woman," wrote Catharine MacKinnon in 1982. "[S]ubject verb object." To her, the language of (hetero)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."[14] MacKinnon's analysis, although not directly focusing on profanity, is similar to that of Douglas

[13] Michel Foucault, Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977. (New York City: Pantheon Books, 1980), 119.
[14] 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.

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 view gender in relation to sexuality. MacKinnon's emphasis on sexual objectification speaks specifically 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 an *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.*[15] 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.

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. Lexicographer 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

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

fourteenth century — along with its cousins *piece of stuff* from the seventeenth century, as well as *piece of ass, piece of tail,* and *piece of stray* all from the twentieth century, each of which signifying *woman* — to illustrate how slang views women as sex objects by defining them in terms of their anatomy or their sexual function.[16] 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.[17] His own compendium — which he himself admits is probably incomplete — lists almost nine hundred terms for the female genitalia. 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 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."[18]

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.[19] His argument contrasts sharply with that of

[16] Jonathon Green, *Slang Through the Ages* (Chicago: NTC Publishing Group, 1997), 8-9.
[17] 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.
[18] Ibid, 31-32.
[19] John McWhorter, *Nine Nasty Words: English in the Gutter: Then, Now, and Forever* (New York: Avery, 2021), 160-62.

Sagarin, who worries that the negative connotation surrounding sexual swear terms is more harmful than beneficial. Suppose 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 that shunning the word *cunt* alone 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."[20] 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 expressing anger through cursing is through violence. 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, on average, 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.[21]

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 as the speaker's identity, tone, relationship to the insulted, and/or

[20] Melissa Mohr, *Holy Shit: A Brief History of Swearing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 255.
[21] Ibid, 252.

surroundings, can all potentially change the amount of harm calling somebody a *cunt* is meant to inflict.[22] One recently published article in the Guardian, for example, even records the usage of the c-word as a term of endearment.[23] 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 women ever were, 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."[24] Another concerning — and potentially more significant — trend Hughes examines is the deterioration in connotation of 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."[25]

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[22] Hughes, "Sexuality in Swearing," in *Swearing*.
[23] 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.
[24] Hughes, "Sexuality in Swearing."
[25] Ibid.

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.[26] 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. 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 demeaning and obscene labels to indicate a woman's sexual willingness. Before the war, when men would negotiate directly with 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 women, profane slang became increasingly objectifying, a deterioration process that ocurred 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

[26] 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.

changed."[27] Here, Sigel argues that the word *cunt* deteriorated from its more neutral meaning as a vagina to a rather derogatory term denoting any 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.[28] Sigel notes that in making the term more general, the meaning of *cunt* was actually reduced. Its importance to the female body's reproductive and pleasure-seeking capabilities were not thought to be its defining characteristics. Instead, the thing that makes something a *cunt* was how it can satisfy a man.

Piers Beirne also examines the development of the c-word, but through an ecofeminist lens.[29] Ecofeminism is an intersectional field of study that connects sexual violence to animal abuse, arguing that patriarchal structures view women and animals in a similar manner and therefore use 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."[30] 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 sounds phonetically like *cunt*, too. This similarity 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

[27] Sigel, "Name Your Pleasure," 407.
[28] Ibid.
[29] 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.
[30] Ibid, 336.

speciesist and sexist practices."[31] According to him, once language associated *cunt* with animals, the term began to connote something that could be hunted, tamed, and 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.[32] 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 c*unny-houses* and *cunny-warrens,* places where prostitutes went "at it like rabbits."[33]

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 always to be negative or imply the subjugation of women. In fact, from the sixteenth century onward, *coney* is recorded in many places as a term of (albeit infantilizing) 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."[34] Similarly, another Tudor theatrical, comedic interlude features a fond "[m]y darlynge,

[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid, 337.
[33] Ibid, 341.
[34] John Skelton, *Elynour Rummynge: 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.

my Conye, my Bryde."[35] 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.*

WHAT A DATABASE CAN DO: GAPS IN THE LITERATURE

There are two major gaps in the literature that *GIS* seeks to address: first, in the content of research, and second, in the process of research. As to the first gap, 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 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. Mohr dubbed this pattern the *Holy Shit* phenomenon, whereby the "Holy" has become increasingly more socially acceptable and the "Shit" has become increasingly less so.[36]

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. In particular, Sagarin and Green both agree that slang tends to display sexist as well as anti-sex roots.

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[35] Thomas Ingelend, Disobedient Child (New York: AMS Press, 1970; Hathi Trust), 40, https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000004848.
[36] Mohr, *Holy Shit.*

Within these two veins of the field, some scholars have studied the history of profanity, others sexism in profanity. What is understudied 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 providing a database that could enable comparisons between 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 trends that have dictated changes in the English vernacular's treatment of male and female bodies over time. Furthermore, a database with more primary source documentation on individual terms could provide interested scholars with a larger corpus of material to draw from.

In particular, *GIS* will be helpful in critically assessing the more focused studies of this third category, which largely attempt to understand gendered differences in slang by examining only terms related to women, such as Beirne's analysis of the term *cunt.* Such research — while valuable — is limited in its ability to draw a causal relationship between gender and taboo if it lacks a non-feminine group of comparison. For example, because Beirne does not compare the

development of terms like *cunt* to those related to the male genitalia, his evidence may only suggest that the degradation of the natural world is connected to the degradation of sexuality in general, rather than female bodies in particular. Any study that only looks at one particular term or category of term will be inherently restricted in this regard, for it will be unable to control effectively for the development of a general taboo against genitalia irrespective of which sex that genitalia belongs to. *GIS* will address this gap by allowing comparisons between parallel gendered terms to better understand whether changes in usage and tabooness were or were not related to gender.

The second major gap this project aims to address is in the process through which scholars have studied this topic. All of the studies cited in this literature review have primarily relied on qualitative analysis to determine how taboo a term was. However, by using a database encoded into a spreadsheet format easily read by a computer, future research can supplement this qualitative understanding with more quantitative backing. This data could address the concerns of scholars like William Eggington, who worry that feminist studies of language make "folk linguistic" arguments not supported by sufficient empirical evidence in which "an unsupported claim becomes a given fact."[37] Although qualitative analysis is valuable, quantitative analysis can more efficiently track general trends in terms related to the male and female genitalia, while also providing more insight into specific terms. For example, *GIS* would allow researchers to assess a term or type of terms' popularity over time by tracking spikes in written records of its usage, and by noting the first and last dates of its recorded usage. Such data could be used for a number of different purposes, especially if researchers want to understand the changing ways in which slang has treated different genders over time, or if researchers want to propose theories as

[37] William Eggington, "Can There Be a 'Feminist Linguistics?'," *Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium* 17, no. 1 (1991): 196. https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/dlls/vol17/iss1/24.

to why certain terms have lasted the longest. Furthermore, through *GIS*, it would be possible to asess whether terms tended to refer first to people of a specific gender and then to the genitalia associated with that gender, or vice versa. This etymological data could provide insights into the siphoning off of genitalia from the rest of the body in our cultural imagination, as well as the objectification of differently gendered bodies, thereby elucidating how the development of an anti-sex taboo impacted men and women differently.

METHODS AND RESULTS

In this final section, I will first explain how *GIS* was built, then how researchers can use it, and finally, what areas of future research scholars can explore with *GIS*.

HOW *GIS* WAS BUILT: A GUIDE

In building *GIS,* I drew primarily from *Green's Dictionary of Slang (GDoS)*.[38] Green first published in 2010 a 6,200-page print version of *GDoS,* drawing from a database of 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. I used the website's advanced search function to filter words based off of the search terms "vagina" and "clitoris," as well as "penis," "scrotum," and "testicles," for the feminine and masculine lists, respectively. In order to further refine my search, I constrained the results to only those terms whose period of use was before 1900, as well as those whose usage was in the United Kingdom.[39] I then created two sheets: one listing all of the masculine terms, and one listing all of the feminine terms. I also added terms that I encountered over the course of my research.

A third and fourth sheet includes a selection of quotations for each term on the masculine and feminine lists, respectively. These quotations were pulled from *GDoS,* as well as other secondary sources and my own perusal of primary sources.[40] I then went through the sheet and attempted to track down the primary sources themselves. For each primary source publicly available online for free, I have included a citation — consistent with the notes format of Chicago's 17th edition — that includes a direct link to the source. For quotations whose primary

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[38] Jonathon Green, *Green's Dictionary of Slang*, https://greensdictofslang.com.
[39] The reasoning behind these two constrictions will be examined in the third section of "Methods and Results," where I explain *GIS*'s limitations.
[40] While *GIS* only records slang created before the twentieth century, I included quotations up until 1910 to capture terms' usage at the turn of the century.

source is unavailable, I have simply included Green's citation, in his own shorthand. Through my research, I was able to track down the sources of 1,379 quotations about the female genitalia, and 1,249 about the male genitalia. I checked Green's quotations for typos and errors, making edits accordingly. I also tried to include the full context, without any bracketed text, for each quotation whose primary source I could locate. Whereas Green originally created *GDoS* for print and therefore shortened some quotations for the sake of conciseness, the online format of *GIS* has allowed me to expand quotations to enable a more thorough understanding of each term's usage. The only other changes made from the original text were light grammatical edits to ease a modern scholars' reading of the quotations: whenever it was clearly a typo, I exchanged the letters *v* and *u*, *vv* and *w,* as well as *j* and *i.*

There were, however, edits made to other parts of Green's citations. Whenever there was substantial doubt about a primary source's place or date of publication, I defaulted to Green's judgment. However, when it was clear Green made a mistake in citing a source, I corrected the error.

This is not a comprehensive explanation of the information included in *GIS.* In total, I collected eight data points for the masculine and feminine terms lists, as well as five data points for the masculine and feminine terms' usage lists. A full explanation of each column can be found in Appendices A and B.

HOW *GIS* CAN BE USED: A MANUAL

Interested scholars should download the database from *MARS,* where this article is published online. Sorting a column using a from-A-to-Z function will order any numerical data either chronologically, or from least to greatest. Appendices A and B contain column guides for

each sheet in the database, and Appendix C includes a comprehensive bibliography of the primary sources *GIS* references.

GIS'S LIMITATIONS: A DISCUSSION

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 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 have produced vastly different obscene vocabularies. While Canadian English developed alongside French influence, South African English has borrowed heavily from Afrikaans.[41] 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.[42]

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

[41] Hughes, *Swearing*.
[42] Hughes defines *moer* as a synonym for *cunt*.

creation of colonial empires, interactions within the English-speaking world 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 solution is, of course, imperfect, 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, until 1910, 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 first section — that is, our inability to settle on a precise definition of what even qualifies as "slang" 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' tabooness? 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 profanity was used in a friendly manner or as an 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 tabooness is not by its usage, but by its absence. *GIS* attempts to provide as

accurate a tabooness gauge of taboo as possible. In order to do so, the database traces 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*.

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 were not often written down, there is no guarantee that English speakers did not often use *fuck* in regular conversation. Further complicating matters, up until the mid-seventeenth century, the majority of the English population was illiterate,[43] which means that there is a large lack of written documentation by and for the primary creators and users of slang: the working class.

Furthermore, even for the terms and quotations that can be tracked down, this database is not a complete compendium of each terms' usage. As such, using the number of times a term was included in *GIS* as a gauge of its popularity is an imperfect measure, as is taking a term's first and last date of *recorded* usage to be its first and last date of *actual* usage. Moreover, because multiple editions of certain texts were cited, the usage number for a term in *GIS* may be misleadingly high. However, whether this last point is a real limitation can be debated, for a term appearing in multiple editions may signal that it was more widely used.

[43] 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.

Due to the confluence of these factors, *GIS* is 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.

AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH: A CONCLUSION

Despite its limitations, *GIS* opens up the potential to engage in many new research projects. Interested scholars can employ the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *Middle English Dictionary*, or *GDoS* to determine whether and when each term in *GIS* was first recorded as referring not to a certain gender's genitalia, but to the person attached to that genitalia. For example, one could determine whether *cunt* was first used to refer to a woman's vagina, or to the woman herself. One could also examine why certain terms referring to genitalia have become insults while others carry a neutral or even positive connotation. Such a study would provide insight into whether there has been a difference across gender or century in how terms' meanings multiplied, how a sexual taboo has developed, and whether that taboo developed differently for men and women.

Interested scholars could also compare whether masculine or feminine terms tended to be associated with themes such as food, animals, nature, or weaponry. Such research would illustrate how both genders have been imagined throughout British history. For instance, if vaginal terms tended to be associated with food, this trend might suggest that women's bodies have been imagined as nourishing yet consumable. Nature associations, meanwhile, might be used to support ecofeminist critique, while the potential connection between terms for male genitalia and weaponry might highlight how men's sexual behavior have been constructed as a violent act of domination over the female body.

By standardizing, expanding, and unifying multiple sources on genitalia in slang, *GIS* enables this data to be easily read by computers and visualized through data analysis programs. Researchers can examine why some terms have been the longest lasting or the most popular over the centuries. They can also look only at the terms that have been used to refer to both the male and the female genitalia. With *GIS,* scholars can now explore many possible avenues of research, and I hope that my work on this database proves helpful for those seeking to further our understanding of the connection between gender, sex, and taboo.

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APPENDIX A: COLUMN GUIDE FOR THE LISTS OF MASCULINE AND FEMININE TERMS

Column A [Term]: The term itself.

Column B [Usage Number]: The number of quotations in the database that include the term.

Column C [Green's Notes]: Green's notes on some of the dictionary entries included in *GDoS*. This column is empty for some terms sourced from *GDoS*, as Green did not make notes for all the terms he included in his compendium.

Column D [Ambidextrous?]: Whether or not the term functions both as a masculine and feminine term. *Y* indicates that the term has been used to refer to both sexes' genitalia before 1910, while *N* indicates that the term has only been used to refer to a single sex's genitalia.

Column E [First Date]: The first date the term was used to refer to either the male or female genitalia, according to *GIS*'s compendium of quotations.[44]

Column F [Last Date]: The late date the term was used to refer to either the male or female genitalia, according to *GIS*'s compendium of quotations.[45]

Column G [Years Used]: The years between the first and last recorded date of usage, calculated by subtracting Column E from Column F.

[44] For both Columns E and F, a quotation's date of publication can sometimes be unclear due to lack of appropriate documentation. In those cases, only the earliest date in the potential band has been included, so that the sheet may be sorted easily, and a note includes the full band of dates.

[45] The dates in this column may fall in the twentieth or twenty-first century, because the term has been used since the twentieth century.

APPENDIX B: COLUMN GUIDE FOR THE LIST OF MASCULINE AND FEMININE TERMS' USAGE

Column A [Term]: The term itself.

Column B [Date]: The date of the quotation.[46]

Column C [Notes Citation]: A citation, consistent with the notes format of Chicago's 17th edition. This citation has only been included when the primary source is publicly available online for free. Otherwise, the column has been left blank.

Column D [Green Citation]: Green's citation for the quotation, in his shorthand. If this column is blank, the quotation does not appear in *GDoS.*

Column E [Quotation]: The quotation.

[46] A quotation's date of publication can sometimes be unclear due to lack of appropriate documentation. In those cases, only the earliest date in the potential band has been included, so that the sheet may be sorted easily, and a note includes the full band of dates.

APPENDIX C: PRIMARY SOURCES REFERENCED IN *GIS*

A Catalogue of Jilts, Cracks, Prostitutes, Night-Walkers, Whores, She-Friends, Kind Women, and Others of the Linnen-Lifting Tribe, Who Are to Be Seen Every Night in the Cloysters in Smithfield, from the Hours of Eight to Eleven, during the Time of the Fair, Viz. London, 1691. http://name.umdl.umich.edu/A78309.0001.001.

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