

STEREOTYPES AND LANGUAGE STIGMA:  
THE CAUSES OF PREJUDICE AGAINST THE WEAKER SEX IN  
EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

URSZULA OKULSKA

*Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań*

1. Introduction

For a long time there has been some dispute on the extent to which women were downgraded in the past. From the point of view of present-day cultural, political, and social norms we tend to assume that women's position as eligible community members was inferior to that of men. However, the question is whether or not it was easy for women to come to terms with such reality. Did they accept the status of a powerless and silent group because they did not know what life would be like if they had equal rights with men? Or, did the majority of them fully realise their unfavourable situation, but did not try to change it, because they were afraid to oppose both the social pressure and tradition?

On the basis of the writings of the early modern male and female authors, I shall discuss the sources of prejudice against the weaker sex, with special emphasis on female language. Moreover, this paper will also seek to examine possible effects of the stigma on women's written style through which they expressed themselves. In order to do this I shall have a closer look at stereotypes of the early modern English woman, and the way her language was viewed by male writers, lexicographers, and grammarians. The last section of the paper will give a brief account of the way stereotyping, sex bias, and prescriptive grammar impinged upon women's written style.

2. Stereotypes

The bulk of stereotypical views about female language of the 16th-18th centuries was created and spread by men. All these stigmatised opinions were circulated in jokes, songs, stories, and also in literature which at that time was

strongly dominated by men. The effects of the stereotypes, which were deeply rooted in folk culture, was that a great weight of public opinion deemed women talkative, vain, and even mentally handicapped.

The strongest criticism of women referred to their speech, and was expressed through numerous proverbs and essays on proper conduct. Perhaps the most common opinion was that women were "all tongue": "Three women make a market" or "Words are women, deeds are men", are but a few sayings that appeared in John Gough's *Academy of complements* (1684). On the other hand, books on proper behaviour and conduct stressed the ominous effects of female volubility and the danger of the evil forces it may invoke. Nicholas Breton, for example, in *The good and the badde* (1616 [1891]) states his inability to understand the strange phenomenon of talkativeness in women:

An unquiet woman is the mystery of man, whose demeanour is not to be described but in extremities. Her voice is the screeching of an owl, her eye the poison of cockatrice, her hand the claw of a crocodile, and her heart a cabinet of horror. ... Her pride is unsupportable, her anger unquenchable, her will unsatiable, and her malice unmatchable (Breton 1616 [1891]: 272).

This female vice brings to his mind a scene of horror with its typical elements, such as "the screeching of an owl", "poison", and "the claw of a crocodile", that altogether embody witchcraft present in every talkative woman. By contrast, John Donne, the author of *Paradoxes, problems, essayes and characters* (1652 [1980]), views women's talkativeness as the only female trait that cannot be denied, and, what is more, perceives women's speech as completely deprived of any value or sense:

It is agreed that we have not so much from them as any part of either of our mortal souls of sense or growth; and we deny souls to others equal to them in all but speech, for which they are beholding only to their bodily instruments, for perchance an ape's heart or a goat's or a fox's or a serpent's would speak just so if it were in the breast and could move the tongue in jaws (Donne 1652 [1980]: 28-29).

Furthermore, the prejudice against women's way of speaking is expressed in *Cures for the itch* (1626 [1891]), probably by Henry Parrot:

Is a much more heard of, than least desired to be seen or known, she-kind of serpent; the venom'd sting of whose poisonous tongue, worse than the biting of a scorpion, proves more infectious far than can be cured. She's of all other creatures most untameable, and covets more the last word in scolding than doth a combat the last stroke for victory (Parrot 1626 [1891]: 284).

Similarly, John Taylor in *A juniper lecture* (1639) is of the opinion that there is nothing more sharp and bitter than a woman's tongue:

... Then women's tongues, if into powder beaten,  
And in a potion or a pill be eaten,  
Nothing more bitter is, I therefore muse,  
That women's tongues in physic they ne'er use (Taylor 1639: 27-28).

All these examples show to what extent women's spoken style was derogated, and how often it was associated with pejorative images. Indeed, the representatives of nearly all early modern classes viewed the female as a chatterbox, scandalmonger, and a scold. Moreover, it was believed that the woman's talkativeness revealed nothing but her intellectual inferiority and a typically female inclination to moral degradation.

Women's volubility and their frivolous behaviour were interpreted in terms of their complete vanity, and often meant their seductive intentions or loose morals. A typical stereotype of the Renaissance woman was that she could never make up her mind, or through her artful tricks wanted to tempt "innocent" and "well-intentioned" men. Moreover, indulging in dressing, women were depicted as the slaves of fashion, wastrels and spendthrifts. Additionally, they were generally regarded as weak-willed creatures vulnerable to various sorts of temptation:

Except wit be tempered with discretion, and ripened by experience; improved by reading, and guarded by judgement; it is the most dangerous companion to that can lurk in a female bosom. It softens her sentiments; makes her fond of being politely addressed; curious of her fine speeches; impatient of praise; and exposes her to all the temptations of flattery and deceit (Wetenhall Wilkes, from *A letter of genteel and moral advice to a young lady*, 1740, after Jones 1994: 35).

Although any sort of generalisation in historical studies is pernicious and dangerous, I think we can risk a statement that a typical Renaissance woman was often viewed as a sex-object, her physiology being that which by nature made her sinful and unchaste. She was commonly believed to be sexually insatiable, which is clearly visible in popular chapbooks and almanacs, such as the 17th century *Nine times a night*,<sup>1</sup> *Art of courtship*, or *Cupid's solicitor of love*. Additionally, some sex manuals, such as *Aristotle's master-piece* and *Venus minsieke gasthuis*,<sup>2</sup> instigated views on female promiscuity. However, the opinions of female sexual voracity were also popularised by medical and quasi-medical writers. According to Nicholas de Venette (1712: 66), women "are more amorous than men, and as sparrows, do not live long, because they are too hot and too susceptible to love." Not only did the views of female immorality spread in medical writings, but also through religious beliefs according to which the fe-

<sup>1</sup> See Laurence (1996: 66) and Spufford (1981: 159-160).

<sup>2</sup> See Wiesner (1993: 46).

male's inferior anatomy and physiology was a remnant of the guilt that women had to carry as the daughters of Eve.

Apart from the prejudice against female speech and behaviour, strict rules ascribing women's place to the home were developed in the Renaissance. As an inferior group, women were practically excluded from male society, and committed mainly to supervising domestic affairs. In fact, the woman's destiny was associated primarily with the role of a wife through which she could achieve self-fulfilment and salvation. Since procreation was one of the most important family functions, the wife's duty was child breeding and rearing. However, childlessness, if ever occurring in marriage, was approached with great sorrow and pity. It hit particularly the woman, since it was viewed mainly as her, and not her husband's fault. On the other hand, as a partner in taking care of the family, in most cases the wife was accorded a position closest to her husband, and was in charge of supporting him or taking over from him whenever he was away. Moreover, typically patriarchal and hierarchical as the family was, love and high respect were the husband's fundamental duty towards his wife.

Spousal responsibilities are widely described in copious essays on marital relationships. This is how William Whatley defines wifely duties in *A bride-bush* (1617):

... The whole duty of the wife is referred to two heads: the first is, to acknowledge her inferiority; the next, to carry herself as inferior. First, then, the wife's judgement must be convinced that she is not her husband's equal, yea, that her husband is her better by far, else, there can be no contentment either in her heart or in her house ... If ever thou purpose to be a good wife, and to live comfortably, set down this with thy self, My husband is my superior, my better (Whatley 1617, after Keeble 1994: 151).

Of similar opinion are some other early modern writers, such as William Gouge in his *Of domesticall duties* (1622), Richard Baxter, the author of *A Christian directory* (1673), Robert Burton, the author of *The anatomy of melancholy* (1621), and Sir Thomas Overbury in *A wife* (1614). Moreover, what a wife has to bear in mind is that she should not burden her mind with reading or learning, which might be pernicious for her physical or mental health, and may lead to neglecting her domestic duties. This happened, for example, to an American governor's wife, as described by John Winthrop in *A journal* (1645 [1963]):

13 April 1645: Mr. [Edward] Hopkins, the governor of Hartford upon Connecticut, came to Boston, and brought his wife with him (a godly young woman, and of special parts) who was fallen into a sad infirmity, the loss of her understanding and reason, which had been upon her divers years, by occasion of her giving herself wholly to reading and writing, and had written many books. Her husband being very loving and tender of her, was loath to grieve her; but she saw his error, when it was too late. For if she had attended

her household affairs, and such things as belong to women, and not gone out of her way and calling to meddle in such things as are proper for men, whose minds are stronger, etc., she had kept her wits, and might have improved them usefully and honorably in the place God had set her (Winthrop 1645 [1963], after Keeble 1994: 46).

In general, the stereotype of a perfect wife was associated with proper house-keeping, obedience, submissiveness, and patience towards her husband. Any transgression of these norms or, still worse, pursuit of intellectual improvement were strongly ridiculed.

Not only should the early modern woman be self-effacing in her behaviour, but she should also be modest in her language, which is strongly emphasised in cultural norms of the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries. Nearly all books on proper conduct for girls and women stress the importance of moderation in speech as the embodiment of good upbringing and courtesy. Their guides instruct ladies how, when, and where to use appropriate language, and put a special emphasis on vocabulary. Nicholas Breton, for instance, in *The good and the badde* (1616 [1891]: 272-274) gives the following account of a lady's proper behaviour: "A quiet woman is like a still wind, which neither chills the body nor blows dust in the face ... She fears God and flieth sin, showeth kindness and loveth peace. Her tongue is tied to descretion, and her heart is the harbour of goodness." Similarly, Richard Brathwait in *The English gentlewoman* (1631) concludes that silence is the greatest virtue of every woman:

Thou that art young, speak, if need be, and yet scarcely when thou art twice asked. Comprehend much in few words; in many be a sone that is ignorant; be a sone that understandeth, and yet hold thy tongue' (Eccelus. [xxxii.7-8]). The direction is general, but to none more consequently useful than to young ones, whose bashful silence is an ornament to their sex. Volubility of tongue in these, argues either rudeness of breeding or boldness of expression (Brathwait 1631: 82).

Additionally, Richard Allestree in *The ladies calling* (1673) treats the tactful "measure of speaking" as an example of good manner and modesty: "And a modesty prescribes the manner, so it does also the measure of speaking, restrains all excessive talkativeness, a fault incident to none but the bold. It is indeed universally an insolent unbecoming thing, but most peculiarly in women" (Allestree 1673, after Keeble 1994: 103). Moreover, Anthony Walker in *The holy life of Mrs. Elisabeth Walker* (1690: 168), admires his wife's splendid values, such as modesty of word, conversation, gesture, and dress: "... For her modesty ... I never heard a word proceed from her mouth of unpure defiling sound or sense ... Her garb and dress, her carriage and gestures, and her whole conversation were all of a piece with her communication, which was always savoury."

The opinions that women should remain silent did not change much before the end of the 18th century. Accordingly, John Gregory in *A father's legacy to his daughters* (1775) preaches to his children that "... modesty, ... so essential to your sex, will naturally dispose you to be rather silent in company, especially in a large one." He tries to persuade his daughters that wise and educated people would never mistake one's silence for dullness or intellectual inferiority. By contrast, shyness, in his view, would be received as the embodiment of a lady's good manner and her elite background. What is even more, according to him, "One may take a share in conversation without uttering a syllable" (Gregory 1775, after Jones 1994: 46). Likewise, Vicesimus Knox in *Essays moral and literary* (1792), through a fictional female correspondent, and more precisely, her letter to her father, advises girls how they should behave and speak in the company of others: "He [my father] likewise inculcated the necessity of avoiding a pedantic manner of conversation, and strictly charged me never to be overbearing, or to shew in the company of others the least appearance of superiority" (Knox 1792, after Jones 1994: 108).

To conclude, it is easy to observe that in the England of 1500-1800 women were confronted with a strong male voice that was responsible for spreading stereotyped opinions about their language and the way they should behave. The opinions could easily become stigmatised in a situation where women – the other party in the debate – were completely deprived of the floor from which they could redress the balance of the dispute. The time span when women remained silent undoubtedly resulted in rooting the stereotypes in the social consciousness, and impinged upon the way female language was portrayed by male authors and women themselves.

### 3. Female language and gender variation as viewed by male authors 1500-1800

Apart from social culture, the stereotypes and folklinguistic views related to the matter of gender variation in language marked also philological studies during the Renaissance. The interest in the differences between the male and female linguistic style goes back to the 16th century. Indeed, not only did early linguists, writers, or translators try to explore this field, but it was also historians and anthropologists who probed this same question. They all sought evidence for the permeating belief that men and women speak differently. Moreover, they persevered at establishing acceptable norms of how male and female *genderlects* should be perceived, often manifesting a good deal of bias in the conclusions they reached.

Some of the earliest traces of gender studies have remained in 16th century literature and prescriptive grammar. The references to the language of the two sexes can be found in the literary works of Elyot and Shakespeare, to name but a few, as well as in the writings of Wilson, Mulcaster, and Smith.

In 1531, Sir Thomas Elyot wrote *The book named the governor*, wherein he reflects his views on male and female ways of swearing. He claims that every child of a nobleman should be looked after by a woman speaking pure and refined language: "[she shall] at the lest way ... speke none English but that which is cleane, polite, perfectly and articulately pronounced, omittinge no lettre or sillable, as folisshe women oftentimes do of a wantonnesse, whereby have attained corrupte and foul pronounciation" (Elyot 1531 [1970], after Coates 1993: 31). On no account may she use "any wanton or unclene worde" (Elyot 1531 [1970], after Coates 1993: 22) in conversation with the child. Moreover, Elyot advises that men should not be allowed into the nursery because they tend to use unbridled profanity. On the whole, Elyot's articulation seems to emphasise a view, typical of all the Renaissance writers, that male usage is the norm, whereas female usage is a flawed variety of English.

At the close of the 16th century, in *Henry IV*, Shakespeare returns to the problem of swearing. In Act III, in his conversation with Lady Percy, Hotspur rebukes her for swearing not like an aristocratic woman, but like someone from the bourgeoisie. Hence, his words imply that at the time when the play was written the manner of swearing was connected not only with gender, but also with social class.

Some remarks on female language could also be found in grammar handbooks and pronunciation guides. It was in the 16th century that "the natural order", that is "correct order" of the words *man* and *woman* was established. Wilson (1560 [1909]), for instance, proposes that the word *man* be put before *woman*, and claims that the violation of this rule would be comparable to "putting the cart before the horse":

Some will set the Carte before horse, as thus, My mother and my father are both at home, even as though the good man of the house were no breaches, or that the graye Mare were the better Horse. And what thoughte it often so happeneth (God wotte the more pitte) yet in speaking at the least, let us kepe a natural order, and set the man before the woman for maners Sake (Wilson 1560 [1909]: 189).

In addition, the problem of women's and men's pronunciation was raised in 1567 by Sir Thomas Smith, and in 1582 by Mulcaster. Otto Jespersen (1922: 248) comments on their findings, as follows:

In connection with some of the phonetic changes which have profoundly modified the English sound system we have express statements by old grammarians that women had a more advanced pronunciation than men, and characteristically enough these statements refer to the raising of the vowels in the direction of [i].

He attributes these words primarily to Mulcaster, who claims that [ai] is a male diphthong reflecting rather vulgar pronunciation, while the corresponding female sound is [ei], which to him sounds more refined.

The 17th century brought a more intense interest in the problem of gender in language. The grammarians preoccupied with English were, to name only a few, Gill and Poole, and with foreign languages Breton, and Rochefort. What is more, it was in the 17th century that the first dictionary for women was written, and women started to proclaim outspokenly the idea that they used a more refined variety of English than men.

Alexander Gill in his *Logonomia Anglica* (1619) confirms the idea that women's language in the 17th century is still inferior to that of men:

... in speech the custom of the learned is the first law. Writing therefore is to be adjusted, not to that sound which herdsmen, girls [mulierculae] and porters use; but to that which the learned or cultivated scholars [docti aut culte eruditi viri] use in speaking and recitation (Gill 1619: 21).

He compares women's pronunciation to the utterances of low-status men. Moreover, he advises the readers to follow the pronunciation patterns of educated male speakers (*virii*), who speak a more correct and refined variety of English than females (*mulierculae*). Furthermore, what we may infer from Gill's work is that in the 17th century prestigious speech was undoubtedly linked to education. Similarly, Poole treats male language with greater respect than that of the female. In 1646, he comes to grips with the problem of masculine and feminine personal pronouns. In the sentences where the sex of the antecedent is unknown, he unequivocally prescribes the usage of the pronoun *he* instead of *they* or *she*, irrespective of the doer's sex: "The Masculine gender is more worthy than the Feminine" (Poole 1646: 21). To sum up, the works of the 17th century grammarians imply that in the 17th century men's language was perceived as superior to that of women.

However, as was already noted, 17th century linguistic research into gender variation in language was not only restricted to English. Dominican Breton was the first to decode the mysterious dialects of the Small Antilles. Through his findings he was able to prove that the Caribbean men and women spoke "different languages". His research was demonstrated in the *Dictionnaire Caraïbe - français* (1664) (Jespersen 1922: 237). Moreover, the fullest and most reliable account of the history and nature of the Caribbean language was comprised in Rochefort's *Histoire naturelle et morale des Iles Antilles* (1665). He was a traveller who spent a long time among the Caribs, and was thus able to observe various customs connected with male and female usage:

... the men have a great many expressions peculiar to them, which the women understand but never pronounce themselves. On the other hand, the women have words and phrases which the man never use, or they would be laughed to scorn. Thus it happens that in their conversations it often seems as if the women had another language than the men. ... The savages natives of Dominica say that the reason for this is that when the Caribs came to occupy the islands these were inhabited by an Arawak tribe which they exterminated completely with the exception of the women whom they married in order to populate the country. Now, these women kept their own language and taught it to their daughters. ... But though the boys understand the speech of their mothers and sisters, they nevertheless follow their fathers and brothers and confirm to their speech from the age of five or six. ... It is asserted that there is some similarity between the speech of the continental Arawaks, and that of the Carib women. But the Carib men and women on the continent speak the same language, as they have never corrupted their natural speech by marriage with strange women (Rochefort 1665, after Jespersen 1922: 237-238).

However, what we learn from Jespersen (1922) is that a re-examination of the study on the Carib language showed that the Caribbean men and women did share 90 per cent of the words on which Rochefort based his research. To sum up, it turned out that only some vocabulary, not the whole Caribbean language, was gender specific.

As was mentioned at the beginning of this section, the 17th century was a kind of breakthrough in lexicography in that first dictionary for women appeared. Moreover, it was at that time the first voice claiming that female register is superior to that of the male could be heard. Accordingly, in 1694 *The ladies dictionary* by N. H. was published that was intended to popularise reading among women. In fact, it was a male production that provided ladies with some useful definitions of female names, and numerous terms connected with religion, love, and family life. However, a real breakthrough in female studies came in 1696, when Judith Drake outspokenly alleged that boys' excellence in languages was much impaired by their classical education:

... Girles after they can Read and Write ..., are furnish'd among other toys with Books, such as *Romances, Novels, Plays* and *Poems*; which ... give 'em very early a considerable Command both of Words and Sense; which are further improv'd by their making and receiving Visits with their Mothers, which gives them betimes the opportunity of imitating, conversing with, and knowing the manner and address of elder Persons. These I take to be the true Reasons why a Girl of Fifteen is reckon'd as Ripe as a Boy of One and Twenty, ... These advantages the Education of Boys deprives them of, who drudge away the Vigour of their Memories at Words, useless ever after to most of them, and at Seventeen or Eighteen are to begin their Alphabet of Sense, and are but where the Girles were at Nine or Ten (Drake 1696: 57-58).

On the whole, the aim of Drake's dissertation is to point at the fact that girls are better language learners than boys, because they are exposed to a good variety of English via their relatives. Moreover, according to Drake, girls exceed boys in language skills even though they are often careless readers.

Unfortunately, the 18th century did not bring an upturn in opinions about women's language, even though it introduced a revival of prescriptive grammar and lexicography. In fact, the two disciplines again gave voice to stigmatised views on female usage. However, noteworthy is the fact that it was in the 18th century that male writers declared for the first time that women's "variety" of English is superior to that of men's.

In 1712, Jonathan Swift in *A proposal for correcting, improving and ascertaining the English tongue*, reports on the imbalance in the language of men and women. He discovered some linguistic differences connected with gender as a result of an experiment in which he asked people of different sexes to spontaneously write down any letters that first came to their minds: "... upon reading this Gibberish we have found that which the Men had writ, by the frequent encountering of rough consonants to sound like High Dutch, and the other by Women, like Italian, abounding in vowels and liquids" (Swift 1712 [1957]: 13). Accordingly, Swift concludes that it is natural that women discard consonants and men vowels, which means to him that both sexes are phonologically complementary. This is why, he suggests, they should take part in polite conversation, because together they are able to balance the process of interpersonal interaction. Interestingly enough, Swift's report was without precedent, since it was the first time women's influence on language had not been deplored.

The 18th century is peculiar for the history of English prescriptive grammar and lexicography for two reasons. Firstly, in 1715 the first Anglo-Saxon grammar by a female author, and in 1794 the first English thesaurus by a woman writer were published. In fact, both these authors still needed to justify their "bold" attempt to trespass the borders of the so-far "male realm" of philological study. Hence, the author of the former, Elizabeth Elstob, dedicates her work to the Princess of Wales with a note that it is probably the first time that her royal highness has received a book written by a member of the female sex (Kramarac – Treichler 1990: 156). Additionally, Hester Lynch Piozzi, the author of the thesaurus, apologises for dealing with the sphere of lexicography which she perceives as a typically male branch:

If then to the selection of words in conversation and elegant colloquial language a book may give assistance, the Author, with that deference she so justly owes a generous public, modestly offers her's; persuaded that, while men teach to write with propriety, a woman may at worst be qualified – through long practice – to direct the choice of phrases in familiar talk (Piozzi 1794 [1968], 1: ii).

In short, the above cases show how great were the personal inhibitions that women had to overcome if they wanted to exist as scholars in academic circles.

As regards grammar, a much more heated debate than ever before continued about the Latin-derived Three ConCORDS in English. The first 18th century grammarian to take up this issue was Samuel Saxon (1737 [1974]). Expanding on the Three ConCORDS and describing three additional ones, he finally ends up with thirty-three rules, none of which specifically discuss the agreement of personal pronouns and sex-indefinite antecedents. According to Bodine (1975: 172), this was so, because "first, most of these grammarians include a version of the Third ConCORD among their syntactic rules, and, second, until Ward (1765 [1974]: 127), *she, her, he, him* were often classed as relative pronouns. Thus, although androcentrism was present, it had not yet resulted in the proscription of singular *they*, which was still freely used along with *he or she* and sex-indefinite *he*."

In 1746, John Kirkby in his *New English grammar* returns to the problem of the sex-indefinite pronoun *he*: "The Masculine Person answers to the general Name, which comprehends both Male and Female; as *Any Person, who knows what he says*" (Kirkby 1746 [1971]: 117). In fact, Kirkby still continues the 17th century androcentric rule, and treats masculine forms as a norm that should be the basis for 18th century prescriptive grammar. However, in this rule Kirkby is the first grammarian to explicitly advocate the usage of *he* as a sex-indefinite pronoun. Moreover, he no longer refers to the masculine gender as the "worthier" gender; instead, he substitutes the "comprehensive" masculine for the "worthy" masculine (Bodine 1975: 172).

The unmarked gender proposed by Kirkby was strongly criticised by two other 18th century grammarians, Ward and Murray. In reply to Kirkby's Rule 21, Ward (1765 [1974]: 459) wrote: "... *he* must represent a male; *she* a female; and *it*, an object of no sex. ... But the plural *they* equally represents objects of all the three genders; for a plural object may consist of singular objects, some of which are masculine, others feminine, and others neuter ..." Similarly, Murray (1795 [1974]: 95) attacked the singular *they*: "Pronouns must always agree with their antecedents, and the nouns for which they stand, in gender, number, and person ...", and his stance was later favoured by many of his followers.

As regards lexicography, in 1755 Samuel Johnson published his two-volume *Dictionary of the English Language*. Its aim was "to fix English orthography, to preserve the purity and ascertain the meaning of English idiom and to lengthen its duration" (Fisiak 1995: 125). Successful though it was, Johnson's work, like the books already mentioned, was full of bias and personal prejudice. Namely, to quote some of the notions from his dictionary, the words *flirtation* and *frightful* received pejorative definitions of being "female cant" (Coates 1993: 19). Thus what can easily be deduced is that Johnson, too, joins the group of those linguists who accept the male-as-norm attitudes on language.

Apart from grammar books and dictionaries, copious articles devoted to male and female ways of speaking were published in various periodicals in the 1750s. The authors grappling with the problem of lexical change are Arthur Murphy, the contributor to *The Gray's Inn journal* of 29th June 1754, and Richard Cambridge, the author of an article published in *The World* (12th December 1754). Moreover, some individual observations on language of letters were, too, made at that time.

As regards the articles in scholarly magazines, in *The Gray's Inn journal*, Murphy proposes that a Register of Births and Deaths for words be made to distinguish whether they are of male or female origin:

A Distinction might be made between a kind of Sex in Words, according as they are appropriated to Men or Women; as for Instance, 'D-n may Blood' is of Male extraction, and 'Pshaw', 'Fiddlestick' I stick to the female (Murphy 1754, after Tucker 1961: 86).

In *The World*, on the other hand, Richard Cambridge mentions the tendency towards fixing language into a standard, and shares the view that it is ladies who are responsible for adding unimportant, or "fluffy" vocabulary to the language: "I must beg leave [...] to doubt the propriety of joining to the fixed and permanent standard of language a vocabulary of words which perish and are forgot within the compass of a year. That we are obliged to the ladies for most of these ornaments to our language, readily acknowledge" (Cambridge 1754, after Tucker 1961: 93). Thus, it may be concluded that Cambridge would fully agree with the statement that women's speech is ephemeral, overworded, and meaningless.

Since adverbial forms were very fashionable in 18th century speech, many writers critically approached this issue. The vast majority of them would blame women for the excessive use of these expressions. Lord Chesterfield, for example, in *The World* (5th December 1754), makes the following observation:

Not content with enriching our language with words absolutely new [again the accusation that women destabilise the lexicon] my fair countrywomen have gone still farther and improved it by the application and extension of old ones to various and very different significations. They take a word and change it like a guinea, into shillings for pocket money, to be employed in the several occasional purposes of the day. For instance, the adjective 'vast' and it's [sic] adverb 'vastly', mean anything and are the fashionable words of the most fashionable people. A fine woman [...] is 'vastly' obliged, or 'vastly' offended, 'vastly' glad or 'vastly' sorry. Large objects are 'vastly' great, small pronouns by a happy metonymy, a very small gold snuff-box that was produced in company to be 'vastly' pretty, because it was 'vastly' little (Chesterfield 1754, after Tucker 1961: 92).

Similarly, an anonymous writer in *The World* of 6th May 1756 mocks the habit of using too many adverbs by women:

Such is the pomp of utterance of our present women of fashion; which, though it may tend to spoil many a pretty mouth, can never recommend an indifferent one. And hence it is that there is so great a scarcity of originals, and that the ear is such a daily sufferer from identity of phrases, whether it be 'vastly', 'horridly', 'abominably', 'immensely', or 'excessively', which, with three or four more calculated for the same swiss-like service, make up the whole scale or gamut of modern female conversation (after Tucker 1961: 96).

Apart from their vehement criticism of female language in the press, some men made comments on the other sex's language in their private letters. This is what Richard Steele (1713) wrote about women's ignorance of spelling and grammar:

I came yesterday into the Parlour, where I found Mrs. Cornelia, my lady's third Daughter, all alone, reading a Paper, which, as I afterwards found, contained, a Copy of Verses upon Love and Friendship. [...] By the Hand [i.e. handwriting], at first sight, I could not guess whether they came from a Lady, but having put on my Spectacles, and perused them carefully, I found by some peculiar Modes in Spelling, and a certain Negligence in Grammar, that it was a Female Sonnet (Steele 1713, after Tucker 1961: 69).

Additionally, in a letter to his son, Lord Chesterfield (1774 [1989]) mentions women's problems with grammar: "most women and all the ordinary people in general speak in open defiance of all grammar" (after Coates 1993: 25). Once again, female language is compared here to the speech of common people, who are usually far from reaching the level of grammatical correctness comparable to that of standard English. Furthermore, Henry Tinley in his letter to Catherine Morland enumerates "three particulars" in which women's language is fallible: "a general deficiency of subject, a total inattention to stops, and a very frequent ignorance of grammar" (*Northanger Abbey*, 1813, after Coates 1993: 25).

However, despite the omnipresent criticism of women's language, in the 18th century the first male voices praising the natural correctness of women's speech could be heard. This is what Charles Gildon (1718: 224) alleged through Laudon, one of the characters – a man of taste and erudition – in a conversation with Manilia: "I confess ... I am not surprised to hear this from a fair Lady, since that Sex has a mighty *Tendre* for *fine Things* and *fine Language* ..." Indeed, the author acknowledges the fact that language began to be treated, at least by some, and often superficially, as a special quality of female perception. Moreover, in 1770 Robert Baker remarks that "Women of polite Education, who are used to good Company, though they have studied Grammar no more than this Ser-

vant-maid, talk, if not quite correctly, yet more correctly than such Men in ordinary Life as have passed some Years at a Latin-school" (Baker 1770 [1968]: xv). Though his main idea is probably to indicate the futility of a traditional classical education for men, Baker does not hesitate to express his true admiration of women's language.

In general, female language of the 18th century was still viewed as inferior to the prestigious speech of men. Practically, all the grammarians, lexicographers, and individual writers, with few exceptions, would treat it with contempt or criticise it for being erroneous.

#### 4. Women's writing in the Renaissance – the remains of silence

As was pointed out earlier, the nature of female writing in Early Modern England strongly reflected the stigma attached to women's intellectual abilities and their quality as speakers and writers. First of all, this is mirrored in the literary forms they created and the bashfulness that permeated their private works.

Women's writing constitutes a small, but a very precious part of all printed works in the early modern period. It is preserved in the forms of letters, diaries, personal collections of quotes, biographies, and memoirs, and ranges between a mere one and two per cent of the total number of works written between 1500 and 1800. Despite the fact that all of these forms were officially regarded as private, their real aim in many cases was to express the writers' true ideals, political views, and spiritual or moral guidance. They were an unofficial floor that enabled women to express themselves in public. Hence, we may presume that personal writing in early modern England did not fully serve the same purpose as it does today; it was often a means by which its authors wanted to get their views across.

Indeed, it can often be observed that the early modern women viewed letter writing in terms of literary writing. They frequently made use of classical references, and were very cautious of their language. Letters for them was the easiest way to demonstrate their learning, linguistic creativity, and personal literary style – the virtues permanently questioned in them. Moreover, it is the 16th and 17th century female autobiographies and letter writing that reinforced the birth of the novel, a new genre first written in the epistolary form.

Women's writing was such an uncommon phenomenon in the early modern era that its authors felt very uncomfortable in their roles. Such a stance might have resulted from unequal educational opportunities with men, and the subjective impression that women's mental inferiority confines their linguistic skills. This is what Margaret Cavendish writes in the preface to *The worlds olio* (1655):

It cannot be expected I should write so wisely or wittily as men, being of the effeminate sex, whose brains Nature hath mixed with the coldest and softest elements. And to give my reason why we cannot be so wise as men, I take leave and ask pardon of my own sex, and present my reasons to the judgement of truth. (Cavendish 1655, after Keeble 1994: 47).

Similarly, Elizabeth Jocelin (1624) in her letter to her husband Tourell Jocelin portrays herself as an under-educated writer who is certain about her lack of competence: "I knew not what to do, I thought of writing, but then mine own weaknes appeared so manifestly, that I was ashamed, and durst not undertake it. But when I could find no other means to express my motherly zeal, I encouraged my self with these reasons ..." (Jocelin 1624, after Keeble 1994: 267). Moreover, as was briefly mentioned, in the 18th century there are plenty of works by female authors who give justifications or excuses for writing. Apart from the already mentioned Elizabeth Elstob and Hester Lynch Piozzi, such excuses appear in the writings of Mary Chudleigh, Anne Dutton, and Dorothy Leigh, to name but a few. For instance, in *Essays upon several subjects in prose and verse* (1701), Mary Chudleigh tries to persuade her reader that it is not language correctness or the quality of style that are her priorities, but the content of her work:

I hope they will pardon the Incorrectness of my Style: The Subject of which I write are worthy of their Attention; 'tis those I recommend to them: Truth is valuable though she appears in a plain Dress; and I hope they will not slight her because she wants the Ornaments of Language: Politeness is not my Talent; ... it cannot be suppos'd I should understand the Delicacies of Language, the Niceties of good writing; those things I leave to happier, more accurate Pens ..." (Chudleigh 1701, after Jones 1994: 147-148).

As a matter of fact, we do not know whether similar justifications reflect solely the effects of female silencing, or whether there are some other reasons behind them. Apart from avoiding the suspicion of immorality, it is obvious that these explanations were to help the authors to escape censure, and make publishing their works easier. We can judge this on the basis of numerous external factors enumerated in these writings that supposedly got the writers to publish their works. The most frequent causes that pushed women to write were, for instance, divine inspiration, mentioned by Anne Dutton in *A letter to such of the servants of christ, who may have any scruple about the lawfulness of PRINTING any thing written by a woman* (1743), motherly care, referred to by Dorothy Leigh in *The mothers blessing* (1616), patriotism, or just friends' persuasion. What seems to be certain, however, is that all these authors felt the need to justify their boldness in order to avoid being accused of immoral conduct or "loose behaviour" associated with revealing private thoughts and feelings in public.

## 5. Conclusion

Needless to say, the four centuries that separate us from the 16th century have caused an irreparable loss to the written female tradition, a fundamental source of the knowledge of the Renaissance woman. However, the remnants of her writings, as well as the copious works by male authors, show how deeply rooted sex stereotypes were in folk culture of the early modern times. The constant exposure of the public to the stigma surrounding gender differences between male and female communicative styles impinged upon the fact that the woman *per se* and her language were constantly downgraded throughout the ages. In consequence, the bias against the woman's "inability" to speak and write undoubtedly resulted in her silencing, and evoked in her the feeling of insecurity and incompetence that influenced all her literary activities.

## REFERENCES

- Allestree, Richard  
1673 *The ladies calling*. Oxford: At the Theater.
- Anonymous  
1686 *The art of courtship, or, The school of delight containing amorous dialogues, complemental expressions, poems, letters and discourses upon sundry occasions relating to love and business ...: And rules for carving flesh, fish, fowl ...: With other delightful and profitable things necessary for the accomplishment of all persons: To which is added the significance of all persons: To which is added the significance of moles ...: As likewise the interpretation of dreams*. London: Printed by I. M. for I. Back.
- Aristotle (pseud.)  
1694 *Aristotle's master-piece, or, The secrets of generation displayed in all the parts thereof ... very necessary for all midwives, nurses, and young-married women*. London: Printed for W. B.
- Aughterson, Kate  
1995 *Renaissance woman. Constructions of femininity in England*. London: Routledge.
- Baker, Robert  
1770 *Reflections on the English language*. London: J. Bell.  
[1968] [Reprinted Menston: Scholar Press.]
- Baxter, Richard  
1673 *A Christian directory*. London: Printed by Robert White for Nevill Simmons.
- Bodine, Ann  
1975 "Androcentrism in prescriptive grammar: Singular *they*, sex-indefinite *he*, and *he or she*", in: Deborah Cameron (ed.), 166-186.
- Brathwait, Richard  
1631 *The English gentlewoman*. London: Printed by B. Alsop and T. Favvcet, for Michaell Sparke.
- Breton, Nicholas  
1616 *The good and the badde*. London: Printed by George Purslowe for Iohn Budge.  
[1891] [Reprinted in: Henry Morley (ed.), *Character writing of the seventeenth century*. London: Routledge.]

- Burton, Robert  
1621 *The anatomy of melancholy*. Oxford: Printed by Iohn Lichfield and Iames Short, for Henry Cripps.
- Cambridge, Richard Owen  
1754 *The World*, Dec. 30.  
[1803-1804] [Reprinted Philadelphia: T. S. Manning, T. L. Plowman, T. & G. Palmer for Samuel F. Bradford and J. Conrad & Co.]
- Cameron, Deborah (ed.)  
1990 *The feminist critique of language*. London: Routledge.
- Cavendish, Margaret  
1655 *The worlds olio*. London: for J. Martin and J. Allestyre.  
1656 *A true relation of my birth, breeding and life*. [No indication of publisher.]  
[1906] [Reprinted in: C. H. Firth (ed.), *The life of William Cavendish, Duke of Newcastle. to which is added the true relation of my birth, breeding and life*. London: Routledge.]
- Chesterfield, Philip Dormer Stanhope  
1754 *The World*, Dec. 5.  
[1803-1804] [Reprinted Philadelphia: T. S. Manning, T. L. Plowman, T. & G. Palmer for Samuel F. Bradford and J. Conrad & Co.]  
1774 *Letters written ... to his son, Philip Stanhope*. London: Published by Mrs. Eugenia Stanhope.  
[1989] [Reprinted in: Piers Dudgeon – Jonathan Jones (eds.), *Dear boy: Lord Chesterfield's letters to his son. Selections*. London – New York: Bantam Press.]
- Coates, Jennifer  
1993 *Women, men and language. A sociolinguistic account of gender differences in language*. (2nd edition.) London – New York: Longman.
- Cressy, David  
1980 *Literacy and social order. reading and writing in Tudor and Stuart England*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Crimsal, Richard  
1680 *Cupid's soliciter of love with sundry complements, wherein is shown the deceitfulness of loving, and lovers, now a days commonly used with certain verses and sonnets, upon several subjects that is written in this book*. London: Printed by Tho. Haly, for Fra. Coles.
- Donne, John  
1652 *Paradoxes, problems, essayes, and characters*. London: Printed by T. N. for Humphrey Moseley.  
[1980] [Reprinted Oxford: Clarendon Press.]
- Donovan, Josephine  
1980 "The silence is broken", in: Deborah Cameron (ed.), 41-56.
- Drake, Judith  
1696 *An essay in the defence of the female sex*. London: Printed for A. Roper, and E. Wilkinson, and R. Clavel.
- Dutton, Anne  
1743 *A letter to such of the servants of christ, who may have any scruple about the lawfulness of PRINTING any thing written by a woman*. Philadelphia: Printed by William Bradford.
- Elstob, Elizabeth  
1715 *The rudiments of grammar for the English-Saxon tongue, first given in English: With an apology for the study of northern antiquities: Being very useful towards the understanding our ancient English poets, and other writers*. London: Printed by W. Bowyer.

- Elyot, Thomas  
1531 *The book named the governor*. London: Printed by Tho. Bertheleti.  
[1970] [Reprinted Menston: Scolar Press.]
- Fisiak, Jacek  
1995 *An outline history of English: External history*. (2nd edition.) Poznań: Kantor Wydawniczy SAWW.
- Gildon, Charles  
1718 *The complete art of poetry*. 2 vols. London: Printed for C. Rivington.
- Gill, Alexander  
1619 *Logonomia Anglica. Qua gentis sermo facilius addiscitur. Conscripta ab Alexandro Gil Paulinæ Scholæ magistro primario*. London: Printed by Iohannes Beale.
- Goody, Jack (ed.)  
1968 *Literacy in traditional societies*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Gouge, William  
1622 *Of domesticall duties: Eight treatises*. London: for William Bladen.
- Gough, John  
1684 *Academy of complements, with many new additions of songs and catches a-la-mode. Stored with variety of complemental and elegant expressions of love and courtship ... composed for the use of ladies and gentlewomen*. London: Printed for R. Parker.
- Gregory, John  
1775 *A father's legacy to his daughters*. Philadelphia: for William Aikman.
- Jespersen, Otto  
1922 *Language: Its nature development and origin*. London: G. Allen & Unwin.
- Jocelin, Elizabeth  
1624 *The mothers legacie to her unborn childe*. London: Printed by Iohn Hauiland, for William Barret.
- Johnson, Samuel  
1755 *A dictionary of the English language: In which the words are deduced from their originals, and illustrated in their different significations by examples from the best writers. To which are prefixed, a history of the language, and an English grammar*. London: W. Strahan, for J. and P. Knapton.
- Jones, Vivien  
1994 *Women in the eighteenth century. Constructions of femininity*. London: Routledge.
- Keeble, N. H.  
1994 *The cultural identity of seventeenth-century woman. A reader*. London: Routledge.
- Kenyon, Olga  
1995 *800 years of women's letters*. Stroud: Alan Sutton Publishing.
- Kirkby, John  
1746 *A new English grammar*. London [No indication of publisher.]  
[1971] [Reprinted Menston: Scolar Press.]
- Knox, Vicesimus  
1792 *Essays, moral and literary*. Vol 1. Philadelphia: Printed for H. and P. Rice, and B. Johnson.
- Kramarae, Cheri – Paula Treichler  
1990 "Words on a feminist dictionary", in: Deborah Cameron (ed.), 148-159.
- Laslett, Peter – Richard Wall (eds.)  
1972 *Household and family in past time*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Laurence, Anne  
1996 *Women in England 1500 – 1760. A social history*. London: Phoenix.
- Leigh, Dorothy  
1616 *The mothers blessing. Or the godly counsel of a gentlewoman not long since deceased, left behind her for her children*. London: For Iohn Budge.

- Macfarlane, Alan  
1978 *The origins of English individualism*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- McDonald, Michael  
1981 *Mystical bedlam: Madness, anxiety and healing in seventeenth-century England*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Moore, Edward (ed.)  
1753-1756 *The World*. Nos. 1-209. Jan. 4, 1753-Dec. 30, 1756.  
[1803-1804] [Reprinted 4 vols. Philadelphia: T. S. Manning, T. L. Plowman, T. & G. Palmer for Samuel F. Bradford and J. Conrad & Co.]
- Mulcaster, Richard  
1582 *The first part of the elementarie which entreateth chefelie of the right writing of our English tung, set furth by Richard Mulcaster*. London: By Thomas Vautroullier.
- Murphy, Arthur  
1754 *The Gray's Inn journal*. June 29. London: W. Faden for P. Vaillant.
- Murray, Lindey  
1795 *English grammar*. York [No indication of publisher.]  
[1974] [Reprinted Menston: Scolar Press.]
- N. H.  
1694 *The ladies dictionary, being a general entertainment of the fair-sex*. London: Printed for John Dunton.
- Orme, William  
1830 *The practical works*. 23 vols. London: James Duncan.
- Overbury, Thomas  
1614 *A wife. Now the widdow of Sir Tho: Ouerburys. Being a most exquisite and singular poem of the choice of a wife. Whereunto are added many witty characters, and conceited newes, written by himselve and other learned gentlemen his friends*. London: Printed by Edward Griffin for Lawrence Lisle.
- Parrot, Henry  
1626 *Cures for the itch: Characters, epigrams, epitaphs*. London: Printed by J. Haviland and M. Fleisher for Thomas Iones.  
[1891] [Reprinted in: Henry Morley (ed.), *Character writing of the seventeenth century*. London: Routledge.]
- Piozzi, Hester Lynch  
1794 *British synonymy; or, an attempt at regulating the choice of words in familiar conversation. Inscribed with sentiments of gratitude and respect, to such of her foreign friends as have made English literature their peculiar study, by Hester Lynch Piozzi*. London, G. G. and J. Robinson.  
[1968] [Reprinted Menston: Scolar Press.]
- Poole, Joshua  
1646 *The English accidence*. London [No indication of publisher.]
- Rochefort  
1665 *Histoire naturelle et morale des Iles Antilles*. (2nd edition.) Rotterdam [No indication of publisher.]
- Saxon, Samuel  
1737 *The English scholar's assistant*. Reading: Printed by D. Henry.  
[1974] [Reprinted Menston: Scolar Press.]
- Schofield, Roger S.  
1968 "The measurement of literacy in pre-industrial England", in: Jack Goody (ed.), 311-325.
- Spufford, Margaret  
1981 *Small books and pleasant histories*. Cambridge: CUP.

## Stone, Lawrence

1977 *Family, sex, and marriage in England 1500 – 1800*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

## Swift, Jonathan

1712 *A proposal for correcting, improving and ascertaining the English tongue*. London  
[No indication of publisher.]

[1957] [Reprinted in: Herbert Davis (ed.), *Prose works of Jonathan Swift*. Vol. 4. Oxford:  
Basil Blackwell.]

## Taylor, John

1639 *A juniper lecture. With the description of all sorts of women, good, and bad*. London:  
for William Ley.

## Thompson, Roger

1978 *Women in Stuart England and America*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

## Tucker, Susie

1961 *English examined*. Cambridge: CUP.

## Venette, Nicholas de

1712 *The mysteries of conjugal love reveal'd*. (3rd edition.) London [No indication of  
publisher.]

## Walker, Anthony

1690 *The holy life of Mrs. Elizabeth Walker*. London: Printed by John Leake for the  
Author.

## Ward, William

1765 *An essay on grammar*. London [No indication of publisher.]

[1974] [Reprinted Menston: Scolar Press.]

## Whatley, William

1617 *A bride-bush, or wedding sermon: Compendiously describing the duties of married  
persons*. London: for Nicholas Bourne.

## Wiesner, Merry E.

1993 *Women and gender in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge: CUP.

## Wilson, Thomas

1560 *The arte of rhetorique*. London: By Ihon Kingston.

[1909] [Reprinted London: Clarendon Press.]

## Winthrop, John

1645 *A journal of the transactions and occurrences in the settlement of Massachusetts and  
the other New-England colonies, from the year 1630 to 1644*. [No indication of  
publisher.]

[1963] [Reprinted in: Perry Miller – Thomas H. Johnson (eds.), *The puritans: A sourcebook  
of their writings*. 2 vols. New York: Harper & Row.]

## Wrigley, Edward Anthony – Roger S. Schofield

1981 *The population history of England 1541 – 1871. A reconstruction*. London: Edward  
Arnold.