

Hard Words for the Ladies: The first English Dictionaries and the Question of Readership

Abstract

Women are often addressed in or associated with the first English vernacular dictionaries, but their relationship to dictionary-making is in fact more figurative than literal. This paper asks what this figurative use of the female reader signifies for the original conception and intentions behind the first English dictionaries. Although these dictionaries have often been understood as unproblematic products of the growth and enrichment of the English language, the 'domesticating' function of the female reader indicates a much more anxious and complex response to 'hard words,' especially those borrowed from foreign tongues. This response, particularly in the case of Robert Cawdrey's *A Table Alphabeticall*, can best be understood in terms of a godly rhetoric of plain intelligibility and reformation, for which woman stands as the exemplary subject.

It has long been accepted that the first English dictionaries sprang from the accelerated growth of the language – through borrowing, coinage, and generally through greater linguistic awareness and inventiveness – during what is sometimes called the English Renaissance. While the growth of the language in this period is undeniable¹, this paper will question the adequacy of such a general explanation for the genesis of English dictionaries, and will attempt to identify, with greater specificity, the intentions and programmes of the first dictionary-makers themselves. For whom did they compile their works, and to what ends? I shall show that, far from participating in the enrichment of the English language, their attitude to the growth of English was more ambivalent and complicated, and that their activities can be shown to serve other than purely linguistic ends. Their lexicographical projects, I shall argue, were as much a part of the English Reformation as the English Renaissance.

Although pedagogical texts of the late sixteenth century include word lists, with or without definitions², the first book which can properly be called an English dictionary is Robert Cawdrey's *Table Alphabeticall*, published in 1604. Like the word list in Edmund Coote's *English Schoole-Maister*, Cawdrey's dictionary offered to teach "the true writing, and understanding of hard usuall English wordes, borrowed from the Hebrew, Greeke, Latine, or French. &c. With the interpretation thereof by *plaine English words*"³. But while Coote's work is conventionally

pedagogical in that it is aimed at boys preparing for grammar school, or their teachers, Cawdrey's primary audience is different. The 1604 title page states that the *Table Alphabeticall* has been

gathered for the benefit & helpe of Ladies, Gentlewomen, or any other unskilfull persons. Whereby they may the more easilie and better understand many hard English wordes, which they shall heare or read in Scriptures, Sermons, or elsewhere, and also be made able to use the same aptly themselves.

The second, somewhat expanded, edition in 1609 does away with the specific targeting of Ladies and Gentlewomen, and offers itself more generally "for the benefit and help of all unskilfull persons."

Dictionaries after Cawdrey, however, picked up the practice of addressing themselves to and purporting to be for the use of women. In 1616, John Bullokar dedicates *An English Expositor* to Jane, Viscountess Montague, hoping that her patronage will cause it to be "gracefully admitted among greatest Ladies and studious Gentlewomen, to whose reading (I am made beleeve) it will not proove altogether ungratefull" (sig. A2v). Henry Cockeram also puts 'Ladies and Gentlewomen' first on his list of those who should use his *English Dictionarie* of 1623 (sig. A5r). By the middle of the seventeenth century and into the eighteenth, the title-page formula has become standard. As Noyes and Starnes have shown, Bullokar, Cockeram, and their successors looked to Cawdrey for word lists and definitions (1946: chapters 2 through 5). But they also seem to have inherited the convention of addressing a female audience. More generally, I would argue, they compile their dictionaries in the shadow of Cawdrey's original programme.

But what was that programme, and what role (real or symbolic) did female readers play in it? By starting from the question of intended audience – and specifically the question of female readers, and their metaphorical as well as practical relationship to dictionary-making – I believe we may gain some clues about the original intentions behind Cawdrey's work and come to a revised account of why the first English dictionaries were printed, as well as for whom.

The first vernacular dictionaries invariably justified their appearance and recommended themselves to buyers by claiming to make the learned languages accessible and understandable to those who had no learning. For 'hard words' were produced by borrowing from Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and French, and they were hard especially to those who could only understand English. As a class, women on the whole lacked languages, especially the learned languages⁴, and so might have been thought to comprise a particularly fit audience for 'these dictionaries.

Or, more obliquely, the woman reader might have stood synecdochally for the particular kind of ignorance which made dictionaries of 'hard words' necessary in the first place. For it is not clear that the earliest dictionaries were in fact *practically* compiled for women's use, as distinct from being *conventionally* addressed to, or figuratively or symbolically linked with, women. Robert Cawdrey's dedication 'on of his dictionary to five aristocratic sisters seems quite separate from his recommendation of his work for the use of 'strangers' and, borrowing from Coote, for preparing children for the study of Latin (1604a: sigs. A2r - v). The aristocratic women are the presiding muses, but school-children and foreigners learning English are to be the actual users of the dictionary.

Yet, even as the conventional audience for vernacular dictionaries, women did not simply represent ignorant, and therefore educable, readers. There is more to the story than that. While, in one sense, the first dictionary-makers classed women as standing in the same relation to the English language as strangers and children, in another, women were closer to English than anyone else. Their lack of foreign tongues made the vernacular peculiarly their own. So, not only might a vernacular dictionary 'belong' to them more than to anyone else; women's ignorance of foreign tongues also associated them with a 'pure' form of English, untainted by the far-fetched terms which were enriching, but also simultaneously debasing and inflating, the currency of the English language. Thus, the equivocal status of the woman reader of dictionaries – both ignorant and knowing of language – is an extension of the more general ambivalence dictionary-makers of the seventeenth century felt about the hard, borrowed terms which they were elucidating. If such terms were making English more copious and capable of varied and elevated expression, they were simultaneously corrupting and polluting the language by filling it with words which stood between the reader and true understanding. Cawdrey conventionally lays the blame on the rather foppish figure of the 'far journied' gentleman, who on his return home infects his native land with alien speech as well as alien manners and costume. Later dictionary-makers, who are on the whole more positive about borrowed words than Cawdrey, also display their linguistic nationalism in insisting that these lexical foreigners be naturalised and made to 'speak English' (Blount: sig. A6r).

All the dictionary-makers present themselves to some extent as defenders of their mother tongue against outlandish invasion, but Cawdrey inserts a passage which connects (it seems, playfully) a true native English with real English mothers:

Some men seek so far for outlandish English, that they forget altogether their mothers language, so that if some of their mothers were alive, they were not able to tell, or understand what they say, and yet these fine English Clearks, will say they speak in their mother tongue, but one might well charge them, for counterfeiting the Kings English (1604a: sig. A3r).

Here women are made to represent both a nationalistic and a stylistic ideal: plain English speech, such as Cawdrey recommends in his prefatory epistle 'To the Reader.' There he recommends that public speakers, and 'especially Preachers,' ought to use words which are 'proper unto the tongue we speake' [that is, our 'mothers language'] and that are 'plain,' for all men to perceive (1604a: sig. A4r). That Cawdrey is here using the example of women, and in particular, mothers, to make a point about rhetoric (as opposed to the actual linguistic practice of women and men) is underlined by the fact that he borrows this entire passage from the section on 'Plainnesse' in Thomas Wilson's *Arte of Rhetorique* (1560:162).

But, as the passage quoted above shows, there is still a confusion between woman as a figure for language and women as users of language which makes it difficult to assess what the invocation of a female readership *means* in the early dictionaries. Moreover, women are involved with further linguistic paradoxes. Although they clearly signify ignorance of foreign or learned languages in the period, highly sophisticated linguistic works – such as John Florio's Italian-English dictionaries of 1598 and 1611 – typically single out royal or aristocratic women who are exceptionally learned in languages and make them not only the patrons of the work, but exemplary for all its readers and users, whether men or women.

Florio's first dictionary had held up the remarkable skill in languages of Queen Elizabeth (in Italian, Latin, Greek . . .) after whom 'the best' wished to pattern themselves; but it also congratulated the 'copie and varietie of our sweete-mother-toong, which under this most Excellent well-speaking Princesse or Ladie of the worlde in all languages is growne . . . farre beyond that of former times' (Florio 1598: sigs. b1v, a5r). Florio's succeeding dedicatee explicitly reigned over the lexical treasury in the title of his next work, *Queen Anna's New World of Words*.

Part of the point was surely that women such as Queen Anne and Queen Elizabeth were exceptions (in both status and skill), and so more effective totems for Florio's work. But there was also a sense – which worked against the theory of female linguistic ignorance – in which women were thought to be naturally good at languages and interested in words. In other words, women participated in a more down-to-earth way

in the Muses' governance of *copia* and *variatio*. Even the first dictionary-makers themselves acknowledge this: remember Bullokar's expectation that the 'greatest Ladies and studious Gentlewomen' will want to use the *English Expositor*. The more usual cultural expression of women's linguistic ability and interest is negative, related to women's legendary garrulousness, for instance. To make the point that eloquence is attained by practice, Thomas Wilson asks, "Yea, what maketh women goe so fast awaye with their wordes?" and answers himself, "Mary practise I warrant you" (1560: 4). Similarly, women's concern with words is often cited as proof of their triviality; as in Montaigne's essay 'Of the vanitie of Words,' where words, and in particular the terms of rhetoric, are described as 'chamber maids tittle-tattle' (Florio 1603: 355).

Like the far-fetched words themselves, then, women can both fertilise and destroy language. To return to the question of women as the *audience* for language, and in particular the first dictionaries, one needs to make sense of their contradictory relationship to language, of their ignorance and expertise: one needs to ask to what end this contradiction was used. One needs, therefore, to inquire further into the ends of the first vernacular dictionaries themselves.

One emphasis which Robert Cawdrey adds when he borrows Thomas Wilson's passage on plainness is the suitability of the plain style for 'Preachers.' Among historians of lexicography, it does not seem to be known that Cawdrey was a preacher himself who was persecuted for his puritanism⁵. Cawdrey's puritanism, I suggest, motivates his undertaking of the first English dictionary. By looking at his own statements of intention, it is clear that Cawdrey published *A Table Alphabeticall* not so much to enrich the English language with borrowed words, or even to naturalise those words and make them 'speak English,' but rather to elucidate hard words by '*plaine English words*,' so that they do not become hindrances to the understanding, especially of 'Scriptures' and 'Sermons.' Cawdrey's prime aim is to promote understanding – as is suggested by the motto he chooses (and, of course, translates) for the title page of the *Table Alphabeticall*, "*Legere, et non intelligere, neglegere est*. As good as not read, as not to understand." Furthermore, as a godly puritan, the understanding he wishes to promote is specifically understanding of the Word of God, in such a way that it will be thoroughly digested and efficaciously practised. Thus, his project is as much evangelical as lexicographical.

Indeed, Cawdrey had published a treatise on catechizing in 1580, augmented and republished in 1604, the same year *A Table Alphabeticall* appeared: "*A Short and fruitfull Treatise, of the profit and necessitie of Catechising: . . . instructing the youth and ignorant persons in the*

principles and grounds of Christian Religion.” Its very title announces the role of this text in an explicit policy of godly evangelism. Cawdrey’s other extant works, *A Treasurie or Store-House of Similies* and *A Table Alphabeticall*, which have been understood heretofore as purely linguistic or pedagogical projects, are also, I suggest, integral parts of this godly programme. Like the treatise on catechizing, their conception and their intended audience and effect mark them as godly treatises. Cawdrey makes clear that he has put together *A Treasurie or Store-House of Similies* not as a collection of rhetorical ornaments, but rather as an aid to godly reading and understanding: “For many times that thing which cannot bee perceived or understood of Readers of Bookes, and hearers of Sermons, by a simple precept, may yet by a Similitude or plaine example, bee attained unto” (Cawdrey 1600: sig. A2v). True and lively expression, which makes use of similes as well as of other figures and tropes, ‘according to the plaine meaning of the word of God,’ will inflame the godly reader with an active love of virtue (sigs. A2v, A3v-A4r). Thus, although Cawdrey’s godly rhetoric is by no means unadorned, he is committed to an ideal of plainness which places a lively evangelical understanding before all, and which is suspicious of foreign borrowings (as in *A Table Alphabeticall*) which may not be understood by all the members of a congregation or all readers of Scripture. One of Cawdrey’s ‘heads’ in *A Treasurie* – ‘*Straunge Tongues edifie not*’ – makes this clear:

As it were a madnes, or at the least a great folly, for one man in communicating with an other, to speake in a Tongue which the other understandeth not: Even so, it is much more folly for a man to speake to a multitude, or a whole Congregation, in that sort or order; and to speake Latine, Greeke, or Hebrew, to the unlearned multitude at Church (1600: 753).

In *A Table Alphabeticall*, Cawdrey is also concerned with the plain-speaking of the preacher as the correlative to the good understanding of the general godly reader. Before launching into the passage on plainness lifted from Thomas Wilson, Cawdrey addresses the reader in his own words: “Such as by their place and calling, (but especially Preachers) as have occasion to speak publicly before the ignorant people, are to bee admonished that they never affect any strange inckhorne termes . . .” (1604a: sig. A3r). I would suggest therefore, that the first English dictionary arose from more than ‘the general Renaissance interest in the vernacular’ which Cawdrey shared with his contemporaries, and owed its inspiration and conception not merely to pedagogical texts of the sixteenth century, as Noyes and Starnes have argued. It was both a

product of godly culture and one of its constituent texts: participating in a programme of religious edification, and holding to ideals of plain-speaking and intelligibility rather than linguistic virtuosity.

To conclude, I return to the question of the 'Ladies and Gentlewomen' and their significance in my revised reading of the first English dictionary as a godly text. In the general project of godly edification, women held a special place. They were often the focus for preachers and for devotional tracts, for it was felt that, as daughters of Eve, they were in particular need of spiritual attention. Once converted, moreover, they would be in a good position to convert their families⁶. Again, they are assigned the contradictory attributes of ignorance and expertise. But women were also considered potentially fertile ground for godly rhetoric *because* of their unstable, contradictory, paradoxical nature. Women were thought to be more easily subject to impressions, and therefore more capricious. Cawdrey has a simile on this aspect of 'Woman':

As the perfect Gold which is of a pure substance, sooner receiveth anye forme then the sturdie Steele, which is a grosse and massie mettall: So Womens effeminate minds, are more subject to suddaine affection, and are sooner fettered with the snares of fancie, then the hard hearts of men (1600:828).

This malleability makes women more vulnerable than men to bad impressions; but also to good, and so they become the fittest subjects for education, an open field for the persuasion of good (or godly) rhetoric. If they have capricious 'effeminate' minds, they also lack the 'hard hearts' which make conversion impossible. They are eminently reformable. The association of the first dictionaries with malleable, reformable women readers suggests that 'hard words' were not only being collected, presented, and elucidated, but were also being tamed and made to serve another purpose than the simple enrichment of the English language. Women were enlisted to domesticate foreign words and, at the same time, to domesticate and propagate a godly programme of reformation.

Notes

1. Neuhaus: 31 plots the growth – peaking around 1600 – based on first citations in the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*. Schäfer (51–3) shows that this growth curve is partly explainable by *OED*'s over-representation of sources from the Shakespeare-Nashe (or English Renaissance) period. But Schäfer still admits the evidence for a 'remarkable growth' in vocabulary in the sixteenth century' (53–4).
2. The lists could be of 'hard' or 'usual' words. Coote 1596 contains a table for 'the true writing and understanding of any hard english word, borrowed from the Greeke, Latine, or French . . . with the interpretation thereof by a plaine English word (sig. A2v). Richard Mulcaster's earlier *Elementarie* (1582) included a table of short and familiar words but with no definitions, and appealed for a dictionary of both learned and unlearned terms.
3. Cawdrey, 1604a: title page. Cawdrey obviously relied on Coote's work (see note 2 and Noyes 1943); although he claims to include words of Hebrew derivation, which Coote does not.
4. Salmon 1994 documents the exceptions to the generally accepted rule.
5. Noyes and Starnes write, 'We have scanty information on the life of Robert Cawdrey' (13). Brook (1813:430–43) gives a detailed account of Cawdrey's life and, especially, the persecution he suffered as a puritan preacher.
6. Women's part in household religious instruction is acknowledged by Cawdrey in his treatise on catechizing: 'divers zealous and Christian gentelwomen, who as they have bene forward and earnest in the love of the truth, so there is likewise no doubt, but that they have diligently laboured so farre as unto them appertained, to have vertuous and Christian families' (1604b: sig. *vijr).

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