

THE WOMAN AND THE WORD: VOCABULARY, A MIRROR  
OF THE WOMAN'S SOCIAL EXPERIENCE

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## PREFACE

Words are tools that organize and document a culture's experience. Recently, critics of the English language have expressed concern over words pertaining to women. The critical studies of woman-related terms reveal that many of the words synonymous to woman at one time related the female to positive and active social and economic roles. However, many of these terms have regressed semantically and define the woman as an ineffectual member of society. As of yet, however, none has sought to link these transitions in meaning to specific causes. My intention in this study is to correlate the etymology of woman-related terms to events in England's social and economic history to validate the declining role of women.

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The Woman and The Word: Vocabulary, a Mirror  
of the Woman's Social Experience

A culture classifies experience through language; especially words and their meanings are transformed as perceptions evolve. Women have not fared well in the English experience, for many terms in the English language "have negative connotations when related to a female."<sup>1</sup> Alleen Pace Nilsen has shown animal terms that were applied to women have portrayed the female as being ineffectual or ill tempered. Casey Miller and Kate Swift's Words and Women, as well as Ethel Strainchamps' article "Our Sexist Language,"<sup>2</sup> discusses certain words in English and their association with gender. Both sources claim that the English vocabulary is embedded with sexual discrimination. Strainchamps points out that terms which originally denoted women in positions of prestige eventually were extended to include men. For instance, virago initially referred to a heroic woman but was later generalized to mean heroic woman or man. On the other hand, Strainchamps reports that words of a pejorative nature which originally included both sexes evolved to a usage that was restricted to women only. For example, harlot once referred to an itinerent jester, buffoon, or juggler without regard to sex; however, harlot later regressed semantically to define an unchaste woman.

Words do not exist in a vacuum, and the modifications discussed above have not occurred by chance. Though Strainchamps and others have pointed to the fact that the usage of women-related terms exemplifies massive pejoration, none has examined the basis of the semantic

regression. This study seeks to expand Strainchamps' hypothesis: it will not only examine a lexicon of women-related words but will further explore the dates at which specific definitions have come to signify this pejorative trend and to correlate these dates to specific factors in England's social and economic history which gradually swept the women laborers out of the major trades. Using the Oxford English Dictionary, I have studied each word by examining the shift in word meaning, by noting the date when the words entered the English language, and by noting the date of semantic transition (if any). Further research included a study of England's development from an agrarian economy to an economy of mercantile interest in order to establish the significant occurrences along with their essential dates which prompted such a change.

The aristocracy and the peasantry were polarized in the medieval society. The lady or mistress of the court resided in a world unlike that of a townswoman. The medieval lady, theoretically, was a ruler; nevertheless, in reality, depending on her marital position, she exerted minimal power. It is, however, critical to note that her role did in fact set a precedent for woman's future status. The woman of the town, contrary to her courtly sister, did have an unflagging influence on the female's general position of the day. The peasant woman vigorously participated, alongside the man, in the fundamental crafts and trades. Nevertheless, traces of woman's declining economic status in medieval England are evident. Though the woman was active in town trade and commerce, those groups which exercised legal and religious influence publicly questioned the woman's social position. The aristocracy who had wealth and the clergy who were the most educated and articulate crystallized attitudes toward women that filtered down to the lower social

classes of England.<sup>3</sup> Both groups were concerned with female sexuality and status. On the one hand, it was claimed that "the lady, by her social and feudal position, is the arbitress of manners and the scourge of 'villany.'"<sup>4</sup> Yet a contrary view was popular: "the loathing of women constantly appears as indicated by an anonymous poet, 'women, man's confounder, mad beast, stinking rose, sad paradise, sweet venom, luscious sin, bitter sweet.'"<sup>5</sup> These arguments failed to establish a humanist view toward the woman; she was forced to symbolize qualities that were sub- or superhuman. The roles defined by medieval ideologues took root: "It was these classes who determined the concept of marriage which prevailed far into the nineteenth century and who established the status of women under the law. Since they were in agreement in placing woman in subjection to man, neither the concept of marriage nor the law took note of her as a complete individual, as what Maitland calls a 'free and lawful person.' The fact which governed her position was not her personality but her sex, and by her sex she was inferior to man."<sup>6</sup> Such controversies prevailed in England's feudal structure; consequently the lady's original economic power was diluted.

The feudal system encouraged a stronger bond between men than between men and women: "The deepest of worldly emotions in this period is the mutual love of warriors who die together fighting against odds, and the affection between the vassal and lord."<sup>7</sup> This affiliation constituted the keystone of the feudal system. The lord or master of the land hired out sections of his property (fiefs) to other men (vassals); the vassals then had the right to farm these parcels. In exchange for a fief, the vassal or retainer swore a loyalty oath to his lord obligating him to protect the master's land. The loyalty oaths were critical to



the lord who depended upon the vassal's strength and trust to protect his property. It was this system that placed a woman in an uncertain legal status. "A woman could not fulfill the duty of a warrior. If a young woman inherited land from her father or husband she was in a precarious position. The overlord demanded and could enforce marriage or remarriage; it was her duty to change the anomalous position."<sup>8</sup> Marriage was the inescapable route for the woman, though the nuptial bonds hardly provided her with legal security.

A woman's position as a vassal was uncertain, but it was a fact that she was able to own property and acquire wealth, thus holding a rank of social dominance. Such a position was reflected in the early definition of two words, lady and mistress. The Oxford English Dictionary cites that prior to the year 1000, lady referred to a female whose status was equal to that of a lord; she ruled over subjects. Later, mistress defined a woman who held considerable responsibilities which were essential to the maintenance of the estate. "The mistress of the manor worked very hard indeed. She supervised a considerable work force, including many woman laborers, the care of domestic animals and poultry, production of butter and cheese, butchering of livestock for table and for market, spinning, weaving, and sewing. . . . She supervised marketing, ran school for children, provided nursing services. When the husband was away she supervised the entire estate."<sup>9</sup> According to the Oxford English Dictionary, both terms associated the woman to positions of power, authority, and ownership: "At all stages of her life the woman, considered as a landowner, was a person of importance."<sup>10</sup> Eventually, both words reflected the female's loss of economic power. By 1374, lady related to a woman who was the object of chivalrous devotion. Mistress by the

sixteenth century denoted a woman who only "had command over a man's heart." The power associated with these words, obviously, was ephemeral.

Together these terms and their related dates exhibit the woman's vulnerable legal status. Mistress maintains, for the time being, the woman's governing role, while the lady shifts to a subordinate meaning. These transitions are significant as they reveal that a woman's rank as a property owner was not assured. A woman possessed estates; nevertheless, once she married, property rights were transferred to her husband. Also, the woman and any children that she might bear were considered "property" of the husband. The woman's authority as a landowner was not maintained, as marriage for a woman was inevitable. Neither partner to be wedded asserted a preference since the marriages were arranged, and it was not unusual for a girl of twelve to be a wife. For both parties concerned the marital agreement served as an economic and political alliance, and it insured that the property remained in the possession of aristocratic families. A desired union between families was based on two crucial elements which operated simultaneously: a woman's virginity and a woman's dowry. If a woman lost her virginity before marriage, essentially she "lost her saleability."<sup>11</sup> Thus her family could not profit by such a status, as the inheritance rights would not be so clearly defined if the paternity of a child were in question. "In a feudal society the woman's chastity was jealously guarded. . . . Among the upper class marriage was used to consolidate property in land, and so the seduction of an heiress carried a severe penalty, and women from noble families were disinherited if they lost their virginity."<sup>12</sup> The woman's infirmity was compounded in the event of marriage. As a wife,

a woman surrendered all that she owned to a man she was hardly acquainted with. The lady's vassals swore a new allegiance to their lord. If the woman maintained dominion over any subjects, they were domestic servants. Women did retain the authority over vassals, however, in the event of their husband's absence or his death. But the loyalty sworn to the lady simply did not have the strength of tradition to match the oath sworn to the lord, and it was not unusual for the lady or the mistress of the land to find herself subjugated by her own retainers.

A lady or mistress did exert authority in the arena of courtly love; as the transition of the words' meanings obviously signifies, a woman's power in aristocratic circles was diminished from ruling over lands and subjects to controlling only the hearts of men. Courtly love was a viable institution in the wealthier segment of the medieval world, although not all mistresses had the opportunity to participate in such affairs. Love, in this particular arrangement, existed outside of marriage between the lady and her chosen knight. Such feelings within marriage were unheard of as the nuptial union was an absolute, utilitarian merger. The feelings shared between lord and vassal were now possible between the woman and the man. The romantic visions of the courtly lady "bring most readily to mind the image of the lady in her complicated love affairs, half formal and half passionate; or else in her amusements, playing interminable games of chess, flying her hawks in long blue days by the river, training up young squires in the art of love and polite society."<sup>13</sup> The women involved in these affairs of love "placed themselves on an absolute level with men."<sup>14</sup> Yet from all sources it is apparent that the mistress did not always acknowledge the knight as her equal but seized the authority in the matter. The knight devotes his

services to his lady as he was obedient to her every wish. The knight's conduct was based upon the premise of courtesy, gentleness, and honor. "There is a service of love closely modeled on the service which a feudal vassal owes to his lord. The lover is the lady's man. He addresses her as 'midons,' which etymologically represents not 'my lady' but 'my lord.' The whole attitude had been rightly described as a 'feudalisation of love.'"<sup>15</sup> As lady came to indicate, the woman involved in the intrigue was revered and honored, the object of her knight's loyal devotion. Courtly love placed men and women in unconventional roles, as the woman's supremacy over her knight could have been relentless. Yet, outside of this affair she was a wife to another man. "She may be a queen of beauty and of love, the distributor of favours, the inspiration of all knightly virtues, and the bridal of 'villany'; but as your wife for whom you have bargained with her father, she sinks at once from lady into a mere woman."<sup>16</sup> Courtly love reached its peak in the fourteenth century, and no doubt this institution softened the woman's original economic position.

There also existed in Medieval England forces which were critical to the entire feudal system. The tradition which the landowner's position was based upon was jeopardized; consequently, the inevitable displacement of custom contributed to the further demise of the lady's governing power. Scarce land, changing climate, and bubonic plague created in the fourteenth century an agrarian depression. Until the thirteenth century England's population steadily increased, and this growth resulted in a scarcity of productive land. While more land was

cleared to facilitate the growing population, these virginal lands proved to be only marginally productive.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, in approximately 1315, floods and cold temperatures, replacing the usually mild and dry climate, depleted the expected successful harvest, and a famine was created. Moreover, as erratic weather persisted, the Black Death devastated England's population in 1348 and 1349. "Before the Black Death the population may have exceeded four million; after the plague it probably dropped as low as two and a half million."<sup>18</sup> Consequently, because of the labor shortage many fields were neglected and the unattended soil soon deteriorated. Land revenues decreased considerably, and for those peasants who survived, the labor value of field workers increased. The customary alliance between aristocratic families and valuable land holdings inevitably was penetrated by those people who belonged originally to the peasantry.

The tendency by 1399 was for two things to happen. First, free men with freeholds (land held for a fixed rent which passed from generation to generation in the family of the freeholder) evolved in substantial land proprietors. . . . Second, the bondsmen and copyholders (those who held land on the basis of the custom of the manor which might involve personal service obligation) tended to fall to the level of wage laborers . . . generally working the soil for wages paid by the lord. . . . The result of this twofold process was the weakening and eventual destruction of the bonds that once welded land and labor into an economic unit. . . .<sup>19</sup>

The position of both the man and the woman as a landowner was in jeopardy; needless to say, the woman's status as a governing person certainly deteriorated from the pressure of more men from the lower social ranks having access to large portions of land. The semantic regressions of lady and mistress no doubt reflect this truth.

This particular role change of the woman was not without consequences as is visible two or three hundred years later. By the end of

1500, a new class was emerging. As feudalism disintegrated with the lower segments of society gaining more power, the extremes of wealth and poverty were not so evident. A "middlin" class emerged; with a growing capitalist economy, more families were able to partake of the good life. Values from both the higher and lower ranks merged; a man might not be lord over vast territories, but certainly he was lord over his wife, children, and servants. The family unit of Renaissance England replaced the community units of the feudal period. The "lady" of the house replaced the mistress of the court, although several modifications were employed. The middle class lady modified her affairs of love and devoted her loyalty to her husband. She remained, however, a symbol of her husband's success. "The lady of civilization surrounded by false homage and estranged from all real work, has an infinitely lower social position than the hardworking woman of barbarism, who was regarded among her people as a real lady."<sup>20</sup> Like the mistress of the medieval court, the lady of the house now pursued education in the arts (though somewhat restrained), and again her domestic reign had little if any authentic power.

In comparison to the lady of leisure and her secondary rank, the woman of the medieval peasantry had a greater impact upon attitudes toward women. The townswoman actively participated in trade, and the man was more likely to perceive the woman in an egalitarian sense. The woman's role can be best viewed in the typical marital arrangement. Yoke-fellow originally referred to a work partner, and eventually the term was extended to include a husband-wife partnership. Women did, in fact, work alongside their husbands; also girls were encouraged, along with boys, to take up the trades of their fathers. "The actual life situation for most couples was a more equal partnership than appears on

the surface. Essentially, the woman and man each had her or his own production labor in or outside the home and was self-supporting, with both of them contributing resources for the care of the children."<sup>21</sup> The woman operated many of the town trades such as carpentry, surgery, and shipping primarily because it was not demanded of her to marry, or in the event of the husband's death the woman was expected to take charge of the shop.<sup>22</sup>

Trades which were exclusive to women were those that could be done in the home, such as spinning and brewing. Most labor, whether male or female, was carried on in or near the home, as "domestic life and industrial life were not clearly separated."<sup>23</sup> Several terms related women to these particular crafts; however, through pejoration these words have acquired different meanings or have become obsolete. Women for the most part operated the textile and drink trades; consequently, these industries attracted the independent woman. For instance, spinster did not refer to a woman who was not married. Originally the term denoted a woman who was employed in the textile industry. The current meaning found in the Oxford English Dictionary can be traced to the fact that most spinsters were unmarried and had no husband with whom to share a business, and an unmarried woman found a sufficient income in the textile trade. Brewster, likewise, was an occupational term applied to a woman who brewed ale. These two trades were primarily in the hands of women, though females certainly were active in most of the town's other businesses.

Unfortunately, the value of women's employment was not to be maintained. Already in the thrust of their work activity, though women were not low-paid workers, their position in commerce was not as secure as

that of their male counterparts. Women were apprentices; they managed shops, and they participated in industries; nevertheless, women were not allowed to join many of the guilds. Even in those areas exclusively designated as women's trades, guilds were nonexistent. These organizations were essential to any craftsman or tradesman, as each association was centered on one craft or trade. In order to begin and maintain a business, an apprentice found it crucial to be sworn into a guild representative of the master's trade. "A guild member was forbidden to divulge any technical secrets of production to anybody who was not a member of his guild and was compelled to let his fellow guild members share in any advantageous buying of new raw materials."<sup>24</sup> To be a guild member was not only a mark of a true craftsman, it confirmed a person's status in the community. Though the woman was actively involved in town trades, it was not common for a woman to be a guild member. The only guilds associated with the woman were those of social or religious purpose. However, in some instances, the woman was allowed to join these craft organizations alongside their husbands or in the event of the husband's death, but the female member held no voting rights, a fact which certainly hindered her social status, as the 'guildmerchants were for a time so closely linked to local government structure that guild membership created the basis for civil rights."<sup>25</sup> If any discomfort was aroused in the men toward their female associates, it might be traced to these organizations. Eileen Power theorizes that threads of jealousy were found in the codes concerning the guild woman. It was against guild regulations for a man to hire a woman besides his wife or daughter to work in his shop. Several of the codes might have been initiated from a real concern for the woman's welfare in the industries that



involved rigorous labor. It might be more realistic to assume that the male craftsman had an underlying concern for a woman's willingness to work for a lower wage.<sup>26</sup> Another reason why a woman was barred from the guilds was that a man could work at only one craft since a man swore fellowship to one guild. The woman, on the other hand, might work at two or possibly three trades simultaneously. Such work was known as "bye industries."

The guild regulations and the woman's lack of organization are a critical factor to the woman's vulnerable economic status. A brewster or a spinster could maintain an adequate livelihood; yet, without formal organization the women were not cohesive as a labor unit to fight the new and growing demands of commerce. Until the seventeenth century, England's economy was agriculturally based and trade remained primarily within England. Crafts were essentially begun and finished by the same person; therefore, production was slow. While quality might have been the result, efficiency was not. By the end of the sixteenth century, England's commerce had extended to other countries, and new demands were placed upon productivity. Quantity became the goal; division of labor and efficiency were the means. A craft which might take one person to complete in a matter of weeks or months was now performed by several in perhaps a few days. "The division of labour, however, so far as it can be introduced, occasions, in every art, a proportional increase of the productive powers of labour. The separation of different trades and employments from one another seems to have taken place, in consequence of this advantage . . . what is the work of one man in a rude state of society, [is] generally that of several in an improved one."<sup>27</sup> Although

production increased and satisfied the accumulating demands, the working people were confronted with the dynamics of competition.

Other factors existed that aggravated the competition of labor. While England appeared to recover from the earlier agrarian depression and the Black Death, there existed as early as the 1400's the phenomenon of inclosure. Inclosure, the process by which the landowner consolidated fields into one mass and inclosed this large area by constructing bordering hedges or ditches, resulted in the landlord reclaiming fields that he originally had hired out to peasants. "Large scale reclamation, undertaken by the landlord or the community, especially in the fens or marshes was not unknown in medieval England, but it reached a peak between 1570 and 1640. Inclosure of the common fields, wholly or in large part, was also in full flood in 1500, and the tide flowed strongly over much of England until 1830."<sup>28</sup> While inclosure initially seemed to affect only the marginally productive fields, the process boomed as the demand for wool increased, and the once productive lands were soon used for grazing sheep. "To social critics of the ages, sheep were devouring the realm, eating up fields that had once grown wheat, pushing back the forests, depopulating the countryside, and creating hunger and unemployment. With wool in incessant demand, the lord of the manor discovered that lands for which he had once been unable to find renters or owners could now be converted into sheep runs. A single shepherd and his dog were all the labor required; the sheep did the rest. Once the landlord was liberated from a scarcity of labor and assured of a market for wool, the value of his land soared."<sup>29</sup> Changing agricultural trends created in the fifteenth century inflation of prices and a surplus of labor which resulted in the ruin of many small villages. Consequently, the unemployed

gravitated toward the larger commercial areas to seek a more sufficient livelihood.

Because of the growing population, the larger commercial areas witnessed increased competition among the laborers, especially the men. The craftswoman inevitably was swept aside. The rise in unemployment prompted men to spill into those industries that were originally in the hands of the woman, and the female laborer was pushed to take on lesser tasks for minimal pay. The food and drink trade was one area dominated by the female. In fact brewster initially referred to a female's trade, but the increase of competition served to the woman's disadvantage. The women threatened by the flood of unemployed men were intent upon keeping their jobs and were therefore willing to work for lesser pay. In response to the turmoil the guilds tightened their regulations and modified more rigidly the codes concerning the female worker, and the new codes insisted that wives and daughters not be allowed to work in the shops. "As the newly formalized rules were used against women the appeal to custom lost its force. In 1639, Mary Arnold went to jail because she had continued to brew contrary to an order of brewers of Westminster. Women were excluded from the brewing trade by the end of the century."<sup>30</sup> In 1744, wife was added to brewster to signify that one was referring to a woman. A brewster-wife only sold ale; the new definition does not relate her to the brewing process itself.

The textile trade too exemplifies other critical factors which proved detrimental to the woman laborer. During the Middle Ages the production of cloth remained virtually unchanged, and the process was slow. Cloth, however, became a major export item, and the spinsters and weavers working independently could hardly satisfy the accelerated

demands; thus, one option in hastening the manufacture of material was to converge the line of production under a single roof. "The fifteenth century clothier soon became the prototype of the modern industrial entrepreneur, supplying raw materials and transportation, paying wages on the basis of piece work or by the hour, utilizing the farmer's wife and child as a source of labor, and avoiding the older towns with their hampering guilds and trade restrictions. Occasionally, such industrial organizers took the final step and brought the weavers together under a single roof, converting their own home into nascent factories where the weavers became the hired servants."<sup>31</sup> The expansion of the craftsman's shop hindered the working man from investing in a shop of his own because of the greater expense; therefore, the craftsman found himself working under another person. At this point, the woman, including the master's wife or daughter, took on the menial tasks.

The guilds were threatened by the evidence of the growing factory system and the fact that their cherished skill could be taken up by those with minimal aptitude. The traditional craftsman resented the process of specialization and the division of labor. Despite the guildman's opposition, new commercial interest dominated and surmounted the traditional force, and innovations to generate faster cloth production were continually being sought. In England, by the 1600's, textile inventions appeared which enabled the productivity rate to gain momentum but which also decreased the labor demand. In fact, the threat of mechanization of labor prompted the English government to prohibit the use of any machine that would replace workers.

The gigmill, used in teasing cloth, was banned in England in 1551, but was fully established two centuries later; the calendar employed to give a lustrous finish to cloth came into

England and France almost simultaneously in the 1680's. Some inventions were intended to save labor; others to improve the finish; yet others to increase the range of patterns, styles or quality of goods available in the market. . . . The most important English contribution to the stock of European textile technology before 1700, William Lee's stocking frame of 1598, however, was much more specialized. Lee was spurred by Elizabeth I who saw the inventions as a threat to employment, and his frame was not widely adopted in England and Southern France for at least a generation after his death.<sup>32</sup>

Population growth, guild restrictions, and industrial expansion created for the market laborer an unsettling situation. As the structure of labor was modified, the woman found it more difficult to maintain the crafts that she had originally dominated. "The decline was rather an acceleration of a process that began with the primordial urbanization and the rise of urban laboring class of women in antiquity."<sup>33</sup> By 1719, spinster generally referred to an unmarried woman, and showed no reference to a working woman.

The last factor which weakened the woman's position was the process of the work being taken out of the home. Though domestic industry, at times, provided dreary and difficult circumstances, it at least furnished an advantage for women with children. It was feasible to combine household tasks and childrearing with these industries. Also, the family as a production unit could incorporate the children as laborers (which is not to say that the children were not exploited in the home as later in the factories). Simultaneously, domestic labor was being separated from the home; those women who did rely on trades of these sorts found it burdensome to attend to household obligations. Meanwhile, those women who were forced out of the workshops could not fall back on domestic productivity. The final blow dealt to the women was technology, which barred both men and women from jobs and further aggravated the competition

among men. By the end of the sixteenth century, the cloth industry remained the one area where women found work. However, with the construction of large factories, the woman's wage deflated and her value as a worker declined. By the end of the 1600's, women had withdrawn dramatically from the townmarkets. Occupational terms, too, regressed semantically or essentially became obsolete.

In the beginning of the sixteenth century, a woman found that to earn a sufficient income was difficult, and this difficulty increased throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as the Industrial Revolution escalated. Marriage for most women became essential, but this option certainly imposed its own problems as the surplus of women boomed. England was never without this imbalance, and by the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries men eligible for marriage were scarce.<sup>34</sup> The plague recurred in 1603, 1625, 1636, and 1665, and devastated the metropolitan population. Roger Thompson asserts that men at this time, as in the past, were more susceptible to this disease. Though a higher birth-rate of male babies existed, the death rate for men was even greater, and it was estimated that for the death of one woman at least six men died. Another reason for the sharp decline of the male population was that a vast number of men were immigrating at this time to the new colonies. "Sex ratio in London was ten men to every thirteen women; in other cities eight men to nine women, in villages and hamlets (more unreliable) one hundred men to ninety-nine women. In total numbers Gregory King calculated that there were 2.8 million women in England to 2.7 million men. . . . The number of males under sixteen is in fact in excess of the number of females by 1,112,000 to 1,118,000."<sup>35</sup> Thompson further suggests that with such a discrepancy between the male and

female population, the value of the woman was lowered still. A man, if he chose to marry, had a pool of women from which to select a wife. A woman's worth still hinged upon her virginity and her dowry, and families did what they could to enhance the daughter's assets. Related to this "market" of women and their "saleability" is the term ware. Before 1000, the word was defined as articles of merchandise or manufacture; the things which a merchant, tradesman, or peddler sell; goods, commodities. By 1200, the meaning changed and became a figure of speech often referring strictly to goods rather than money. Sometimes ware cast a deprecatory implication as in "stuff." In 1558, the term was applied to a woman. If a woman was not an attractive ware, she accepted her fate and remained with her family; unfortunately, not all women had dowries or dependable families.

For those women who needed to work, the few remaining alternatives were bleak. The textile industry still was an area where a majority of women were employed, but the conditions were deplorable and the wages below the national scale. A woman might also earn a living by selling matches or coal. Obviously, a significant number of women were unskilled, and charity houses were built to alleviate the unemployment problem. Women were trained for domestic services, and they flocked to these positions. Consequently, several words concerning the woman were altered to relate her specifically to such services. Maid originally meant a young girl; by the late fourteenth century, it was restricted to mean a female servant or attendant. Slut, by 1450, had transformed from denoting a kitchen maid to mean a woman with a loose character. Hussy derived from the Old English hus wif and in 1530, it strictly denoted a thrifty housekeeper. It, too, went through a process similar to slut and came to

allude to a female who had an immoral character. Domestic service was one alternative for the woman seeking work. The women who held these positions were not organized and were subject to conditions of any kind. "The lot of the servant girl in the seventeenth century was unenviable. Even though the number of servants which the rich employed seems to have increased during the century, the status of the labour market remained against them. Indeed this very increase might have well resulted from the cheapness of the labour force. In such a situation there was little protection for the employed against the employer."<sup>36</sup>

Another economic option that was increasingly drawing women was prostitution. Without doubt, sexual repression aided in making this a profitable career choice. Arguments stirring in Medieval England which debated the female's sexual nature were reiterated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Pamphlets, books, debates all served as the means to cast woman as a sexual temptor or idolize her as a goddess. "Between Adam and God in Paradise there was only one woman, and she had no rest until she succeeded in banishing her husband from the garden of delight and in condemning Christ to the torment of the Cross."<sup>37</sup> In defense of the woman it was said that she "is to be preferred to man, to wit in material: Adam made from clay and Eve from side of Adam; in place: Adam made outside paradise and Eve w'in; in conception: a woman conceived God which a man did not do; in apparition: Christ appeared to a woman after the Resurrection. . . ."<sup>38</sup> Such attitudes crystallized in the mainstream of the English society and had repercussions upon the monogamous family unit. Marriage for the middle class couple resembled the arrangements maintained in aristocratic Medieval England. Husbands and wives were not equal partners; yoke-fellow rarely applied anymore to



a married couple. If a woman did work in the marriage, her wage was usually supplementary; more than likely the lady remained at home. A wife's duty was to be virtuous, and it was required of the daughter to remain a virgin until marriage; these were the social rules of the day. On the other hand, there was no argument concerning the male; by his very nature he was liable to go astray, as the monogamous family "was based on the supremacy of the man, the express purpose being to produce children of undisputed paternity; such paternity is demanded because these children are later to come into their father's property as his natural heirs."<sup>39</sup> Obviously, this "double standard" created a problem. How was a man to live up to the capacity of his nature if the woman was ordained virtuous? "The answer lay in prostitution and the widespread view that a class of fallen women was needed to keep the rest of the world pure."<sup>40</sup>

The reality is more profound than the theory. Barred from opportunities to learn profitable skills, facing uncertain possibilities in marriage, many women swarmed to the ranks of prostitution. "While figures are hard to come by for the 17th century, there is little doubt that prostitution was rife and rising in London, and probably was considerable through the country as a whole. Though some women may choose this career, many more are driven to it by the prevailing economic conditions."<sup>41</sup> Roger Thompson, utilizing calculations by the philanthropist Jonas Hamway, estimates that by 1770 there were fifty thousand prostitutes in London. Many of the terms originally related to women meant or have come to relate to a prostitute or "loose" woman. Even words such as aunt, madame, and wife refer to woman with sexual allusions. It has been suggested that England has always been a country where prostitution has run rampant; yet, England itself was unable to cope successfully

with the situation. There were attempts to curtail the number of brothels in London. Black lists were compiled; prostitutes and madames were hunted, arrested, and prosecuted. Most likely, though, they returned to the brothels more disturbed by the inconvenience than reformed.<sup>42</sup> The societies for reformation of manners were urgent in their quest to squelch the bawds, and though they boasted of arresting an impressive number of women, Roger Thompson asserts that these were only a fraction of the whole, and that many of those caught had been arrested time and again. He claims that prostitution was (and is) a hard offense to prosecute. Essentially, it was a difficult crime to discover and to prove. He states that many agencies hired informers who were likely to gain more by forewarning those they were to inform on. Tracing the etymology of stew reveals this problem of regulating prostitution. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, stew in 1305 meant a vessel for boiling and later was extended to mean a heated room or a room with a fireplace. The definition transforms to mean a heated room specifically used for hot air or vapor baths, hence, a hot bath. By 1362, stew, in speech, was used in reference to public hot-air baths which fronted brothels. By 1536, the term specifically referred to a bawd or prostitute.

Traces of woman's diminishing economic status can be detected as early as the Medieval period, and this phenomenon was generated by the prevailing attitudes and by the evolving factory system. The English vocabulary, particularly those terms relating to the woman, proves to be the key to bringing this monumental shift into focus. Terms singled out in this thesis are only representative of those in the lexicon, as they reflect with certainty through semantic transition the woman's changing role in England commerce. The lady or mistress was an asset to feudal

England; yet, her authority was debilitated. The townswoman, on the other hand, actively participated in trades and crafts, and she enjoyed a choice of labor from which to draw a sufficient income. Brewster and spinster reflected the townswoman's activity. The commerce swelled, however, and new demands aggravated the competition for jobs; women, unfortunately, were compelled to surrender the more profitable tasks. Career alternatives remained few: marriage, factory work, domestic service, and prostitution. Ware delineates the debased station of women in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. Those who could not marry or obtain domestic skills turned to prostitution, often working in one of the many stews in London. Perhaps some comfort is gained when viewing the lady of the house who more than likely lived in a home which sheltered her from these harsher realities. However, neither station credited the woman with any marked influence; she was often bored, ill treated, and dissatisfied, and her capacity to simply govern herself had practically disintegrated. By her sex she was restricted from participating in the productive forces acclaimed by the man. Essentially, the prevailing conditions handed to men the power; consequently, the woman's competence was subdued. The medieval lady was perhaps the first woman to feel the repercussions of the female's regressive social role, as reflected in the following:

When her confession with absolution and penance was ended, I said to her, "Think you, lady, that you will pass to the Kingdom of Heaven when you die?" She replied "This believe I firmly." Said I "That would be a marvel. You were born in fortress and bred in castles and for many years now you have lived with your husband, the Lord Duke, ever in midst of manifold delights, with wine and ale, meat and venison, and yet you expect to fly away to heaven directly when you die." She answered, "Beloved father, why should I not now go to heaven? I have lived here in this castle like an anchoress in a cell. What delights or pleasures have I enjoyed here, save that I made

shift to show a happy face to my servants and gentlewoman? I have a hard husband (as you know) who has scarce any inclination toward women. Have I not been in this castle even as it were a cell?"<sup>43</sup>

This undercurrent of dissatisfaction undoubtedly grew more widespread as England restructured the focus of her economy to accommodate the capitalistic demands.

Today the housewife "who lives as an anchoress in a cell" and the woman who toils in a secretarial pool without advancement endures this same dissatisfaction. But women from all stations are beginning to tap a reservoir of energy, and the social perimeters that have bound their vigor are being cast aside. Action, for the woman, is critical in generating a positive reality. Language, too, is crucial in classifying as well as reinforcing this unquestionable phenomenon. An effort not only to examine but to cultivate the English language, particularly the vocabulary, in order to define the woman's experience as a human experience is essential in both moving and documenting any change.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Alleen Pace Nilsen, "Sexism as Shown Through the English Vocabulary," in Sexism and Language (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of English Teachers, 1977), pp. 27-41.

<sup>2</sup>Ethel Strainchamps, "Our Sexist Language," in Woman in Sexist Society, ed. Vivian Gornick and Barbara K. Moran (New York: Mentor Books, 1971), pp. 347-361.

<sup>3</sup>Eileen Power, Medieval Woman, ed. M. M. Postan (Cambridge: University Press, 1975), p. 53.

<sup>4</sup>C. S. Lewis, "Courtly Love," in Allegory of Love (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 12.

<sup>5</sup>John Langdon-Davies, A Short History of Women (New York: Viking Press, 1927), p. 277.

<sup>6</sup>Power, p. 9.

<sup>7</sup>Lewis, p. 9.

<sup>8</sup>Langdon-Davies, p. 9.

<sup>9</sup>Elise Boulding, "Millennialism and New-Old Roles for Women in the Middle Ages: A European Story, A.D. 1000-1450," in The Underside of History (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1976), p. 481.

<sup>10</sup>Power, p. 10.

<sup>11</sup>Keith Thompson, "The Double Standard," Journal of the History of Ideas, 20 (1959), 210.

<sup>12</sup>Sheila Rowbathan, Hidden From History, 2nd ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), p. 4.

<sup>13</sup>Power, p. 35.

<sup>14</sup>Langdon-Davies, p. 269.

- <sup>15</sup> Lewis, p. 2.
- <sup>16</sup> Lewis, p. 18.
- <sup>17</sup> C. Warren Hollister, The Making of England 55 to 1399, 3rd ed. (Lexington, Massachusetts: D. C. Heath and Company, 1974), p. 214.
- <sup>18</sup> Lacey Baldwin Smith, This Realm of England, 3rd ed. (Lexington, Massachusetts: D. C. Heath and Company, 1976), p. 61.
- <sup>19</sup> Baldwin Smith, p. 28.
- <sup>20</sup> Frederich Engels, The Origin of the Family (New York: International Publisher, 1942), p. 43.
- <sup>21</sup> Boulding, p. 484.
- <sup>22</sup> Power, pp. 59-60.
- <sup>23</sup> Boulding, p. 480.
- <sup>24</sup> Erich Fromme, "Freedom in the Reformation," in Escape From Freedom, 2nd ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., 1965), p. 58.
- <sup>25</sup> Boulding, p. 486.
- <sup>26</sup> Power, p. 60.
- <sup>27</sup> Adam Smith, The Wealth of Nation, 6th ed. (Great Britain: Butler and Tanner, 1961), 1, 9.
- <sup>28</sup> B. A. Holderess, Pre-Industrial England: Economy and Society 1500-1750 (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1976), p. 52.
- <sup>29</sup> Baldwin Smith, p. 71.
- <sup>30</sup> Rowbathan, p. 2.
- <sup>31</sup> Baldwin Smith, p. 72.
- <sup>32</sup> Holderess, p. 112.
- <sup>33</sup> Boulding, p. 502.

<sup>34</sup>Thompson, "The Double Standard," p. 33.

<sup>35</sup>Roger Thompson, Women in Stuart England and America (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), p. 35.

<sup>36</sup>Thompson, Women in Stuart England and America, p. 67.

<sup>37</sup>Power, p. 16.

<sup>38</sup>Power, p. 14.

<sup>39</sup>Engels, p. 54.

<sup>40</sup>Thompson, "The Double Standard," p. 33.

<sup>41</sup>Thompson, Women in Stuart England and America, p. 65.

<sup>42</sup>Thompson, Women in Stuart England and America, p. 241.

<sup>43</sup>Quoted in Power, p. 36.

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**APPENDIX**

**WOMAN-RELATED TERMS AND RELEVANT DATES**

Woman-related terms that have entered the English language pejoratively or have semantically regressed between 1000-1788

#### 1000-1299

1. concubine: 1297, entered English language with pejorative meaning
2. man: 971, human being: 1000, an adult male person
3. witch: 890, man who practices witchcraft, a magician or a sorcerer; 1000, female magician, esp. a woman, supposed to have dealings with the devil or evil spirits
4. whore: 1000, entered English language with pejorative meaning

#### 1300-1599

5. adulteress: 1382, entered English language
6. baggage: 1582, entered English language with pejorative meaning
7. bitch: 1000, female dog: 1575, lewd or sensuous woman
8. dowager: 1530, woman, who is enjoying title or property of dead husband
9. doxy: 1530, entered English language with pejorative meaning
10. female: 1382, belonging to sex which bears offspring: 1593, womanish; effeminate, weakly: 1601, applied to various material and

Economic and historical events that signify social changes in England between 1000-1770

#### Year

- 1070 William assigns quotas for knights' services total force 5,000
- 1085 William receives oath of allegiance at Salisbury from major landholders
- 1174 Courtly love reaches zenith in the court of Eleanor of Aquitaine at Poitier
- 1215 Magna Carta signed
- 1290 England suffers drastic seasonal changes and bad harvest
- 1297 The Lincoln Fullers ordered that no one of craft shall work at wooden bar unless with wife of the master or her handmaid
- 1300 Clearing of forest land begins
- 1315- Flood and unseasonable cold temperatures;  
1317 famine occurs
- 1320 Population reaches peak
- 1337- Hundred Year War, trade is curtailed  
1453
- 1343 London girdlers prohibit women other than the master's wife or daughter to work in shop
- 1348 Black Plague (recurs 1369, 1379, 1390, 1407)
- 1351 Statute of Labor aimed at freezing laborer's wages

- immaterial things denoting simplicity, inferiority, weakness or the like
11. girl: 1290, child or young person: 1530, female child: 1711, a prostitute
  12. harlot: 1225, vagabond, beggar, rogue: 1340, itinerant jester, buffoon, or juggler: 1386, applied to a woman: 1432, unchaste woman
  13. jade: exhaust, wear out: 1560, applied to woman, contemptible
  14. lady: 1000, woman who rules over subjects 1374, woman who is object of chivalrous devotion
  15. madame: 1297, a form of respectable address 1598, kept lady, a courtesan
  16. maid: 1203, a girl: 1390, a female servant or attendant
  17. matron: 1375, a married woman, usually with the accessory idea of rank or dignity: 1491, a married woman considered as having expert knowledge in matters of childbirth
  18. midwife: 1303, a woman who assists other women in child birth, a female accoucher  
man-midwife: 1596, one who helps to produce or bring anything to birth: ????, an effeminate man (obs.)
  19. minx: 1542, a pert dog: 1592, pert girl: 1598, lewd or wanton woman
  20. mistress: 1426, a woman who has power, authority or ownership: 1509, a woman who has command over a man's heart
- 1353 Population decrease significant, lack of laborers, land value declines
- 1375 Purchasing land now a common transaction
- 1377-1380 French invasion of England
- 1377-1381 Poll taxes assessed on rich and poor alike
- 1381 Peasant revolt
- 1400 Demographic recovery
- 1440 Economic crisis peaks
- 1445-1485 War of the Roses
- 1450 England's export interest shift from raw wool to manufactured broadcloth. Organization of labor changes
- 1461 Weavers forbidden to employ women who did not give the king service in war and defense of his land
- 1486 Merchant Adventures receive official recognition
- 1500 Population of England is three million
- Inclosure in full force
- 1500-1540 In general cost of living doubles
- 1548 Land value on the increase
- 1551 Gigmill banned in England

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| <p>21. mother: 1050, female parent: 1386, a term of address for an elderly woman of the lower class</p> <p>22. paramour: 1386, entered English language with pejorative meaning</p> <p>23. princess: 1400, female sovereign or ruler 1400, wife of a prince: 1508, daughter or granddaughter of a sovereign</p> <p>24. prostitute: 1530, enters English language with pejorative meaning</p> <p>25. shrew: 1250, wicked, evil disposed or malignant man: 1315, thing of evil nature: 1386, a woman</p> <p>26. siren: 1366, entered English language with pejorative meaning</p> <p>27. slut: 1402, a woman of untidy habits: 1430, a kitchen maid: 1450, a woman of low or loose character</p> <p>28. stew: 1374, stove or heated room: 1552, prostitute</p> <p>29. streetwalker: 1592, enters English language with pejorative meaning</p> <p>30. vixen: 1410, female fox: 1575, ill tempered quarrelsome woman</p> <p>31. virago: 1387, heroic woman (obs.): 1386, a bold impudent woman</p> <p>32. ware: 1000, collective term for articles of merchandise or manufacture; the things which a merchant, tradesman, or peddler sell; goods, commodities: 1200, transf. and fig. formerly often in distinction from money like goods,</p> | <p>1570-1650 England's shipping industry doubles</p> <p>1572 Focus on silver and rise of silver output, value of money and traditional coinage reduced, purchasing power regresses</p> <p>1577 Bad harvest and depression exist</p> <p>1589 William Lee's stocking frame spurned by English government; employed a generation after his death</p> |
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sometimes deprecatory implication like "stuff":  
1558, applied to women: 1561, applied to privy  
parts of either sex

33. wench: 1290, a girl, maid, young woman: 1362,  
a wanton woman
34. widow: 1257, a woman whose husband is dead  
1576: prefixed as a title to the name (dia-  
lectal or vulgar)
35. wife [fr. wifman]: 725, a woman in the general  
sense: 888, a woman joined to man by marriage:  
1425, a kept mistress, concubine
36. woman (wifman): 893, an adult female human  
being: 1561, a lady-love mistress, a kept mis-  
tress, paramour
37. yoke-fellow: 1536, person yoked or associated  
with another, esp. in work or occupation; a  
fellow worker; an associate or partner, esp. in  
task: 1545, a person joined in marriage to an-  
other, a husband or wife, spouse
38. Quean: n.d., entered English language with  
pejorative meaning

#### 1600-1800

- |  |      |   |
|--|------|---|
| 39. aunt: 1297, sisters of one's father or mother:<br>1607, a bawd, prostitute     | 1600 | Population of England four million; London's<br>population two hundred thousand                               |
| 40. adventuress: 1759, a female adventurer, woman<br>on the lookout for a position | 1603 | Plague (recurs 1625, 1636, and 1635) forty<br>thousand people perish (six to ten men for<br>every woman dies) |
| 41. amazon: 1398, a race of female warriors<br>1758, a very strong masculine woman | 1617 | Spinster's wage bottom of national scale  |

42. bawd: 1362, one employed in pandering to sexual debauchery; a procurer or procuress, originally in a more general sense, and in majority of passages masculine "go between" a panderer; since C. 1700 only feminine and applied to a procuress, or a woman keeping a place of prostitution
43. brewster: originally a woman that brews, a female brewer: 1377, extended to both sexes: 1744, brewster-wife, a woman that sells malt liquor or brews
44. gammerstang: 1570, tall awkward person: 1788, rude wanton girl
45. governess: 1483, a woman who governs (e.g., kingdom, province, etc.): 1712, wife of a governor
46. harridan: originally old jade of a horse: 1700, gaunt ill favored woman
47. houri: 1737, entered English language with negative meaning
48. hussy (huswife): 1530, thrifty housekeeper: 1647, female of the lower order of improper behavior
49. male: 1375, sex which begets offspring: 1645, applied to various material and immaterial things denoting superiority, strength, greatness
50. moll: 1567, female personal name: 1604, a prostitute
51. procuress: 1413, a female advocate or defender: 1712, a woman who makes it her trade to procure women for the gratification of lust; a bawd
- 1622 Suffolk justice of the peace reports that two-thirds of textile workers were hired and not apprenticed
- 1630 One thousand English men and women arrive in Massachusetts
- No longer common for wives and daughters to help in shop
- 1634 Four thousand English people arrive in Massachusetts
- 1639 Mary Arnold jailed because she brewed contrary to the orders of Westminster brewers
- 1680 Calendar employed in textile manufacturing
- 1690 Sex ratio in London ten men to every thirteen women, in other cities eight to nine women. In total numbers Gregory King calculated that there were 2.8 million women in England to 2.7 million men
- 1694 Gregory King believed that half of the population in London were earning annually less than their keep
- 1700 England's population is six million
- 1700 Gigmill now used in England
- 1730-1740 Continual depression caused by bad harvest
- 1744-1745 Cattle plague
- 1750 Modern farming was coming to birth
- 1770 It is calculated that fifty thousand prostitutes are in London

52. spinster: 1326, a woman who practices spinning as a regular occupation: 1719, a woman unmarried beyond the usual age for marriage
53. tart: 1410, small pie or pastry: 1887, applied to a girl
54. termagent: 1205, name of imaginary diety held in medieval Christendom to be worshipped by Mohammedans in mystery plays representing a violent overbearing person: 1659, a violent overbearing turbulent woman
55. weaver: 1392, one who weaves textile fabrics; a workman or workwoman whose occupation is weaving: 1723; -ess is added to denote a female weaver



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