

**Julie Coleman.** *A History of Cant and Slang Dictionaries. Volume I: 1567–1785.* 2004, xii + 259 pp. ISBN 0 19 925470 2 (Hb.). Oxford: Oxford University Press. Price: £45.

**Julie Coleman.** *A History of Cant and Slang Dictionaries. Volume II: 1785–1858.* 2004, xiv + 338 pp. ISBN 0 19 925470 2 (Hb.). Oxford: Oxford University Press. Price: £45.

These two beautifully printed and presented volumes document a complete history of dictionaries of English cant and slang from 1567 to 1858. Coleman investigates the wealth of dictionaries and glossaries of cant and slang that are, as she puts it, 'far more often used than studied' but which, nonetheless, form an essential part of the 'tangled tradition' (I: 1) of early lexicographical study. She goes beyond just documenting this history, though, and the range of her work is wider than that implied by the title. She investigates the social history behind these dictionaries, the criminal (auto)biographies that gave rise to some of them, how these dictionaries in their turn were used in some literary texts from *Beggar's Opera* to *Guy Mannering* and how they contributed to a culture that became obsessively interested in crime. In the process Coleman turns what could have been dull chronology into a lively and intellectually-engaging account.

Coleman begins her documentation with a contextual history of criminality, including such matters as bridewells, Tyburn tickets, belly pleas, benefit of clergy, transporation, hulks and other standard topics in the history of crime. What is made clear from this history is that the wandering poor, from vagrants to runaway apprentices, were an object of great fear to the respectable citizenry and numerous laws were passed to restrict the movements of the poor across the countryside. Thomas Harman's *Caveat or Warening for Commen Cursetors* first appeared in 1567, just after changes to the parish poor laws had divided the poor into 'deserving' and 'undeserving' and made vagrancy both more common and more harshly punished. Appended to Harman's work was a brief glossary of beggars' language that begins the *History of Cant and Slang Dictionaries*. As a Justice of the Peace, Harman was concerned to enable householders to identify and then to understand the nefarious practices of the gypsy and the vagabond in order to be able to protect their properties. As Coleman wittily puts it, 'For Harman, the vagabond is lazy, parasitic, thieving, and deceitful. His was the progressive view' (I: 21). 'The cant dictionary, then,' argues Coleman, 'began its life as a practical measure for the suppression of crime and vagrancy: as a defensive tool for the magistrate and the householder' (I: 22).

Volume I, 1567–1785, deals with cant dictionaries, their origins and their influence on both language and literature. There were well over a hundred cant dictionaries and word lists published in this period so this is an ambitious undertaking. 'Cant' in this context means the secret language used by beggars and criminals to conceal their activities from their victims or the authorities. Its

very nature as an oral, secret and constantly-changing language would naturally tend to make its documentation, both by contemporaries in cant dictionaries, and by Coleman in her investigation of these texts, a very tricky enterprise, and, not surprisingly, etymology is a lexicographical feature often absent from these dictionaries.

Some of these terms, though they started life as cant, have, by whatever process (and their documentation in dictionaries of cant may well have been part of that process), become part of the mainstream language and could no longer be called cant, such as *to filch*, to steal. Coleman is fully aware of the potential unreliability of her sources and raises the (ultimately unanswerable) question throughout this history about how accurate these cant dictionaries are. She turns the focus of her attention from the empirical historical question of what these dictionaries tell us about the language of the underworld in this period to an investigation of what these dictionaries can tell us about contemporary attitudes to crime and its practices. Most of the recorders of cant were not themselves part of the criminal underworld and some, like Harman, represented the authorities, so there is at least the possibility that the criminals they consulted were deliberately misleading them, or even having a joke at their expense. There were exceptions such as Thomas Dekker and S.R., who both claimed to have personal experience of the underworld, though S.R. uses Dekker's *Bellman of London* (1608) lists and Dekker in turn uses Harman as the basis of their own lists, thus conforming to the wide practice of plagiarism in early lexicography and at least raising a question mark against their claims of authenticity. However, Coleman does include some texts written by authors who were later hanged for their crimes.

Like the chapter on 'The Harman-lists', the next chapter shows the influence of central canting texts, in this case Richard Head's *The English Rogue* (1665) and *Canting Academy* (1673), on their numerous imitators. Here Coleman charts a publishing history for the English–Cant list from *Canting Academy* that is significantly different from the Cant–English list. The latter is found mainly in editions of Head's own works while the English–Cant list is found in a wide variety of publications. Coleman concludes that 'the wider circulation of the English–Cant list may demonstrate that these glossaries were more popularly used for producing mock-cant than for understanding the real thing' (I: 65). She demonstrates that Head's *English Rogue* and *Canting Academy* were sources for the cant list contained in the anonymous *History of the Lives and Actions of Jonathan Wild* (1725), which recounted the life of the notorious criminal and thief-catcher Jonathan Wild along with Jack Sheppard and Joseph Blake.

Coleman credits Head with being the first to include 'citations' in his cant dictionary, but this seems to me to be a confusion between examples and citations. Citations are quotations taken from other people's writing and quoted as an instance of some word in use, whereas examples are most often made up by the lexicographer himself to exemplify some word or usage. Coleman argues that two of Head's entries are 'citations', included 'long before Johnson made

illustrative citations a normal feature of mainstream dictionaries' (I: 52). The first of these is:

*Earnest A Part*

*As tip me my Earnest Give me my part or share*

This, however, seems to be clearly an example and Johnson, who also includes examples as well as illustrative quotations, uses the same formula "as, ..." preceding all of his examples.

The chapter on B.E.'s *New Dictionary of the Terms Ancient and Modern of the Canting Crew* (1698 or 1699) is the part of the story of the development of cant dictionaries that moves into the mainstream. It was the first to appear as an independent volume rather than attached to a larger work, the first to include features found in mainstream dictionaries and the largest by far of the early canting dictionaries at over 4 000 entries. B.E. used several sources including Coles's *English Dictionary* (1676) and, Coleman lucidly demonstrates, Thomas Shadwell's play, *The Squire of Alsatia* (1688). Coleman provides an admirably thorough analysis of B.E.'s *New Dictionary*, though, again, a confusion about citations leads to some puzzling statements, such as, 'Where citations are at all predictable in this way, it is tempting to assume that B.E. just made them up' (I: 79) and she argues that multiple 'citations' are 'lexicographically unnecessary' (I: 78). It seems to me that B.E. is fulfilling the promise on the title page of including 'Proverbs, Phrases, Figurative Speeches, &c.' and in this he is also followed by Johnson along with many others.

The colourful lives of some of the people in Coleman's source material is part of the attraction of these volumes. One such is Bamfylde-Moore Carew who 'ran away to join the Gypsies and was elected their king, but was subsequently convicted of vagrancy and sentenced to transportation to Maryland' (I: 127), from where he escaped dressed as a Quaker and later avoided imprisonment by faking smallpox.

The dominant text of Volume II, which covers the period 1785–1858, is Francis Grose's *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* and the main subject of this volume is slang rather than criminal cant. Coleman also extends her history to cover the U.S.A. and Australia. Whereas the earlier canting texts were mainly anxious about rural crime among floating populations of gypsies, vagrants and beggars, later texts tend to concern themselves with urban crime. Coleman carefully distinguishes colloquial language, dialect terms, slang, jargon, cant and flash (fashionable slang of the demi-monde) at the outset of this volume. She estimates that 'by the 1780s, editions of cant and slang word-lists were being published at the rate of two each year' (II: 7), which seems an astonishing output for works on non-standard English. Coleman suggests that social distinctions in language may have arisen as a consequence of industrialization which mixed old money with new money, and a desire to document and preserve rural dialects may have been one of the consequences of rural migration. Again, Coleman includes a consideration of literature influenced by cant

or slang, such as *Oliver Twist*, and the way in which literature provided source material for slang dictionaries, such as Grose's use of Swift's *Polite Conversation*.

One problem throughout these volumes is an unfortunate one of timing. The OED is on the process of being fully revised and edited but Coleman has been forced back frequently on the unrevised version for comparison, commentary on its coverage of these early dictionaries and for antedatings, when these remarks will surely be rendered obsolescent by the appearance of the new OED.

One of the most fascinating parts of this work, though, is the word indexes, which are taken from the various cant and slang dictionaries but form, in effect, a sort of cant/slang dictionary in themselves:

cabal "a group of conspirators"  
cabbage "the part of a deer's head where the horns grow"  
cacafuego "a blustering man"  
cackling-cheat *also* cackling chete "a chicken"  
cackling-fart *also (erron)* crackling-fart "an egg"  
cad "an untrustworthy man"  
cadater "a beggar"

Included in an appendix in each volume are analytical tables of subject matter and lexicographical features of the main dictionaries covered. An additional appendix in Volume I contains canting songs. The bibliographies are followed by word and subject indexes.

This is a learned, admirably thorough and lively history of lexicography which considers dictionaries of cant and slang that are, as Coleman rightly says, more often used than studied. It is more than a linguistic and lexicographical study, though, since it includes a great deal of literature as well.

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