

**Stephen Turton.** *Before the Word was Queer: Sexuality and the English Dictionary, 1600–1930.* 2024, xv + 333 pages. ISBN 978-1-316-51873-1 (Hardback). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Price: US\$ 94.67 (Hardback)

Positioning English dictionaries as crucial historical witnesses, Stephen Turton's monograph *Before the Word was Queer* provides an in-depth analysis of sexual language over a period of 330 years (1600–1930). It not only enhances our understanding of sexual linguistics but also highlights the role of historic dictionaries in unlocking the queerness of sexual history.

This volume comprises five chapters, culminating in a conclusion. Each chapter delves into specific themes related to sexuality, especially focusing on terms concerning acts, desires, and identities grounded in relations between women and between men. Through its analytical approach, the work contributes to a deeper understanding of queer linguistics.

The first half of Chapter 1 examines the interplay between sexual practices and the laws of divine, natural, and human standards. Prior to the establishment of the term *homosexual*, lexicons pertaining to same-sex relationships were dominated by the terms *buggery* and *sodomy*. These terms exhibit three main characteristics. First, they were heavily laden with the implications of legal, moral, and natural transgression. Second, their interpretations demonstrated semantic ambiguity throughout the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, lacking explicit definitions and clear references to same-sex acts. Third, although both terms were predominantly depicted as acts occurring between sexes, their participatory scope usually displayed variability. Early legal lexicographers defined *buggery* as encompassing bestiality, male-male relations, and sometimes female-female relations, though some dictionaries excluded the latter. In contrast, *sodomy* primarily referred to male-male acts. However, by the seventeenth century, these two terms had converged to share identical participatory scopes. The second half of Chapter 1 examines *sodomy* and *buggery* in relation to semantically broader sexual terms such as *copulation*, *coupling*, *occupying*, and *fucking*, revealing two prominent features of sexual language: underlying androcentrism and cross-sex normativity. Historically, lexicographers refrained from offering explicit details about *copulation*, limiting its definition to heterosexual intercourse. It was not until the seventeenth century that the term *copulation* embraced erotic senses. Coupled with this cross-sex normativity, androcentrism also shaped the dominant paradigm of sexual vocabularies in historic dictionaries. Verbs like *swive*, *fuck* and *occupy*, despite their unmarked grammatical subject, always presupposed male agencies. This lexical framework reinforced androcentrism perspectives while marginalizing female identities. Dictionaries serve as essential repositories of sexual terminologies, documenting both semantic interpretations and syntactic structures. The definitions of *sodomy* and *buggery* in historical dictionaries were influenced by legal and religious perspectives, reflecting the socio-cultural contexts of their respective eras. Linguistic analysis through dictionaries acts as a key

to unlocking the queerness of sexual linguistics, offering valuable insights into the historical discourse on sexuality and the nuanced shifts in the semantic interpretations of sexual terms over a period of 330 years (1600–1930).

Chapter 2 begins by examining the etymologies of *sodomy* and *buggery*. The term *sodomy* was rooted in the biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah, while *bugger* was associated with medieval Bulgaria. Historically, these terms were framed as vices associated with ancient pagans, depicted as unnatural and foreign sins opposed to Protestant ethics, British customs, and national identity. To preserve the national identity and prevent the perceived negative impact of such loanwords, lexicographers often marginalized and relegated them to the periphery of linguistic discourse. Dictionaries, as repositories of language, not only offered definitions but also included etymologies, revealing the intricate relationship between sexual language and national identity. By excluding unnatural and inauthentic elements, dictionaries could better preserve and nurture a nation's unique character and cultural heritage. The origins of these sexual terms enable us to better understand their perceived exoticism and moral condemnation, as well as the rationale behind their marginalization or exclusion in historical dictionaries. Beyond *buggery* and *sodomy*, practices such as *pederasty* — denoting men's affection for boys and women's affection for girls — were also commonly labeled as unnatural and immoral, a view rooted in ancient Greece and Rome. Then, Chapter 2 transitions to an analysis of *pederasty*-related terminologies, particularly male-boy relations, to explore the concepts of male sexual passivity and dyadic recursivity. Terms like *catamite*, *ingle*, and *bardash*, which denote receptive male partners, illustrate both syntactic and sexual passivity. *Pederasty* challenges cross-sex normative conventions by establishing a unique paradigm characterized by an active older male and a passive younger male, which is contrary sharply to the androcentrism and the cross-sex normativity discussed in Chapter 1. This analysis provides a clearer framework for understanding how marginalized sexual concepts are contextualized against dominant norms. Historic dictionaries not only documented etymologies, male sexual passivity, and dyadic recursivity associated with *pederasty*, but also preserved related classical myths. From the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, lexicographers reinterpreted the myths of male stories, highlighting the boundary between fiction and reality to express reverence for ancient Greece and Rome. This strategy allowed them to retain the erotic aspects of classical mythology while keeping a cautious distance from the cultural mainstream of English lexicography. While myths of male love could find a place on the cultural periphery of hard-word and general dictionaries, myths surrounding female affection remained entirely excluded, reflecting the boundaries of acceptability in the historical linguistic tradition. The term *lacunae* most aptly describes this absence of female-female love myths. Finally, this chapter examines same-sex love in classical and bibliographical dictionaries, with a special focus on Sappho, who was renowned for her desire for women. In the early modern period, Sappho was depicted primarily in three ways: as the foremost female poet, the jilted lover of

Phaon the ferryman, and the admirer of her own sex. While largely absent from hard-word and general dictionaries, Sappho found a place in classical references during the eighteenth century. Diverse representations of Sappho across different genres highlight the inherent tensions in cultural representation. Dictionaries, functioning as linguistic repositories, not only document language but also unveil the marginalized and complex narratives of same-sex love.

Chapter 3 begins by exploring the translation of the term *Tribade*. Historically, lexicographers addressed sexual terminology in two primary ways: by borrowing definitions from bilingual dictionaries or by creating new terms. Headwords related to female sexuality, such as *fricatrix* and *tribade*, derived from Latin and Greek, respectively, and were often considered unnatural, impolite and improper. While these terms appeared in some Latin–English word lists, they were conspicuously absent from certain hard-word dictionaries, likely due to the inclusion of ladies and gentlewomen among their target audience. Both lexicographers and users play a crucial role in shaping dictionary content. By examining the historical lexicographic treatment of terms and definitions associated with erotic relations between women, we can better understand how sexual linguistics was shaped by the intended audience and propriety constraints. Turton subsequently shifts focus to the representation of lesbian relationships in general dictionaries. Beyond *fricatrix* and *tribade*, the word *Sapphic* also signifies same-sex intimacy between women. Historically rooted in ancient Greek narratives, the concept of *Sapphic* love acquired negative connotations within the Catholic theological framework. This perspective subsequently influenced its reception in Victorian Britain, where moral objections significantly impeded both its social acceptance and linguistic integration into mainstream discourse. Consequently, the term *Sapphic* turned into a "ghost-word", occurring in classical writing but lacking entries in dictionaries. Similarly, many obscene or non-procreative sexual terms were excluded due to prudent and pious concerns. Turton's survey of same-sex terminologies in dictionaries revealed a sharp decline in their representation between 1755 and 1830, followed by a revival from 1831 to 1883, reflecting the complex interplay of reader's comprehension, moral consideration, and linguistic documentation. Despite the reviving coverage of *pederasty*, *buggery* and *sodomy* in general dictionaries in the nineteenth century, explicit terms for sexuality between women remained absent. The latter half of Chapter 3 contrasts dictionaries of proper English with lexicons of cant and fashionable slang to trace the limits of the polite and impolite expressions. Notably, terms about same-sex love between women remained overlooked by cant and slang lexicographers. By tracing historical dictionaries, we can analyze how sexual vocabularies entered or exited these lexicons from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. The omission of certain words from English dictionaries serves as a means of reinforcing the exclusion of certain groups from English society. Through this analysis, historic dictionaries offer deeper insights into the evolution of sexual language shaped by societal scruples and cultural discourses of deflection.

Chapter 4 focuses on sexual language in medical dictionaries, beginning with an analysis of the pathologization of unnatural sexual practices. Medical dictionaries not only documented diseases associated with such behaviors, but also served as frameworks for public health management, behavioural regulation, and bodily control. The discussion then shifts to entries on the clitoris and the tribade's phallus, noting that an enlarged clitoris was often linked to immoral practices and female same-sex desire. Medical dictionaries frequently recommended surgical intervention for this condition, a practice more prevalent in Arab and Egyptian contexts than in Europe. In medical dictionaries, terms like *Confricatrices* were employed to describe learned or imitative female same-sex interactions. Driven by the revival of classical scholarship and advancements in forensic medicine, the topic of female same-sex relationships gained particular attention. This chapter concludes by emphasizing the material constraints of medical lexicons, arguing that the scope of sexual knowledge produced by lexicographers was deeply influenced by material limitations of the dictionaries themselves. Terms related to sex bears distinct interpretations in different types of dictionaries. By examining medical dictionaries, we can gain insights into the representations of sexual intercourse, particularly female homosexuality.

Chapter 5 examines the intersection of science and sexuality within the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED). The OED employed a scientific methodology in its compilation, characterized by empirical principles and extensive volunteer involvement. The OED's treatment of sexual vocabularies aligned with the moral, legal, and natural standards that were prevalent from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. Old discourse could be found in OED as evidence. While the OED surpassed other general dictionaries in documenting same-sex terms, its scientific rigour was compromised by incomplete linguistic coverage, inadequate definitions, and insufficient or unsatisfactory quotations as supporting evidences. These limitations partly stemmed from the diverse backgrounds and biases of its contributors, as well as the potential expurgation by lexicographers, despite volunteers providing direct and faithful reports about sexual lexis. Then, Turton explores the evolution of sexology and its representation in the OED1 (1888–1928) and its supplement (1933). Sexology redefined sexual desire as a psychological phenomenon rather than a matter of sinfulness, criminality, or anatomy, marking a significant shift from legal to medical, and ultimately to psychological interpretations. This evolving perspective influenced Western articulations of sexuality. Notably, OED1 omitted sexology. But the continuing advance of sexology resulted in vast nomenclatures, which posed challenges for lexicographers in incorporating the expanding terminology of sexual terms. Space and time constraints during OED1's compilation precluded adequate coverage of sexology, making it a crucial subject for the OED Supplement in 1933. The OED Supplement typically included citations from terms related to homosexuality and sexual inversion to same-sex relationships, with most citations drawn from medical sources. At the end of this chapter, the author turns to the Sapphic and Uranian writers in the supplement. This chapter examines the OED's editorial methods

and the representations of sexology in both OED1 and its Supplement. It underscores that scientific methodologies are invariably influenced by the prevailing social mores of their respective contexts. While the OED serves as an authoritative instrument for documenting language, it exhibits inherent limitations and biases, particularly in its treatment of language related to homosexuality and female same-sex relationships. Despite these shortcomings, the essential role of dictionaries in elucidating the trajectory of sexual history should not be ignored. After all, through the analysis of the treatment of sexology in both OED1 and its Supplement, this chapter deepens our understanding of the development of sexual linguistics in lexicography.

The conclusion of this volume extends beyond queer perspectives and the present, examining the OED's lasting impact on lexicography. Its descriptivist principles have become foundational, shaping modern dictionary compilation. Besides, compilation process has evolved from individual editors to broader public participation, reducing personal biases while introducing collective ones. Furthermore, technological advancements, particularly the use of databases, have revolutionized language analysis, contributing to more objective semantic and grammatical documentation in both print and electronic formats. Additionally, social movements like the 1969 Stonewall Riots, alongside with legal reforms and shifting attitude, have promoted a reevaluation of language surrounding sexual identities. In modern times, online dictionaries tend to adopt more inclusive language regarding gender and sexuality. However, true linguistic democracy still remains elusive. Because descriptivist principles cannot fully eliminate social inequalities, volunteer compilers bring their own biases, and databases, while valuable, often amplify certain perspectives at the expense of others. Although OED3 (2000–) has made progress in refining sexual terminology, such as redefining *homosexuality* and *uranian*, some definitions of sex-related vocabulary still remain consistent with those from the 18th century, perpetuating the same dilemmas.

In summary, gender-related topics such as sodomy, buggery, sapphic relationships, and pederasty still remain sensitive and underexplored even today. Turton's *Before the Word was Queer* bridges dictionary compilation, queer theory, literary criticism, and linguistics, addressing a critical gap in the study of sexual language. This work demonstrates that dictionaries should not be viewed solely as scholarly tools but as texts requiring critical analysis. Linguistics analysis through dictionaries not only unlocked the evolution of queer history and the queerness within sexual narratives but also revealed how lexicographers and their audiences interpreted, neglected, or accepted human sexuality from the 16th to the 19th centuries. Today, lexicographers continue to grapple with challenges in addressing gender and sex-related entries. Turton's work underscores that historical dictionaries serve not only as keys to unlocking sexual history but also as frameworks for articulating historical contexts and refining definitions of sexual terminology in the future.

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