

# CANTING TERMS IN EARLY ENGLISH MONOLINGUAL DICTIONARIES

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## ABSTRACT

This paper takes into consideration the presence of canting terms in 17th-century English monolingual dictionaries. The scholars' attention has mostly concentrated on the earliest canting dictionaries and glossaries —particularly those appearing in the Elizabethan period—, while relatively little research has investigated the appearance of such terms in general dictionaries of the English tongue. The paper will provide a detailed analysis of some lexicographic works published in England in the 17th century in order to trace the insertion of elements of this jargon in publications not exclusively devoted to the language of the underworld. Two of these works, in particular —Coles (1676) and *The Ladies Dictionary* (1694)— have been found to include several canting terms and expressions. The specific features of these publications will be identified, as well as the method adopted by their authors in the compilation of their dictionaries and the most likely sources of their canting entries, in order to determine the degree of novelty and relevance that their contributions have brought to the field.

KEY WORDS: Canting, monolingual dictionaries, 17th century, Elisha Coles, *The Ladies Dictionary*.

## RESUMEN

En este trabajo se considera la presencia de términos del “cant” en diccionarios monolingües ingleses del siglo XVII. La atención de muchos estudios se ha centrado en los primeros diccionarios y glosarios del “cant”, particularmente aquellos que aparecen en el período isabelino, mientras que la investigación sobre la aparición de tales términos en diccionarios generales de la lengua inglesa ha sido relativamente escasa. Se presenta aquí, un análisis detallado sobre algunos trabajos lexicográficos publicados en Inglaterra en el siglo XVII con la intención de trazar la inserción de elementos de esta jerga en publicaciones no dedicadas en exclusiva al lenguaje de los bajos fondos. Dos de estos trabajos en particular —Coles (1676) y *The Ladies Dictionary*— presentan inclusiones de términos y expresiones en “cant.” Identificaremos las características específicas de estas publicaciones así como el método adoptado por sus autores en la compilación de sus diccionarios y las posibles fuentes para sus entradas del “cant” para con ello determinar el grado de novedad y relevancia que sus contribuciones han aportado a este campo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: “Canting,” diccionarios monolingües, siglo XVII, Elisha Coles, *The Ladies Dictionary*.



## 1. EARLY CANTING GLOSSARIES AND DICTIONARIES

Early canting literature presented the underworld as a criminal class separated from the rest of English society not only by the illicit practices of its members, but also by their own secret language. This secret jargon—which they called *canting* or *cant*—contained the terms commonly used by beggars and thieves to denote the essential elements connected with their mischievous way of living; it defined their tools, the main techniques they used, the different subgroups into which the underworld was organized, and provided the names by which the various individuals were to be called. Indeed, this differentiated social world—although united by a specific common argot—was divided into separate “orders,” each with its own criminal activities and specializations, and often controlling a particular territory of operation.

This secret language began to be described in the 16th century, not merely in its main lexical elements, but also in its principal constituent features. Authors of early canting literature immediately pointed out its anti-social characteristics, which allowed rogues to have a jargon by which they could not be understood by the rest of society. Moreover, this language acted as an identification code, which allowed its speakers to be admitted to particular criminal groups and practices. Canting expressions were considered extraneous to the English language by the early works on the underworld, which commonly attributed their origin to other tongues, such as Romany, the language spoken by gipsies (Cf. Gotti: 1999).

These early works on the underworld—such as Copland (1535-6), Walker (1552), Awdeley (1561), Harman (1566), Greene (1591a, 1591b, 1591c, 1592a, 1592b), Dekker (1608a, 1608b), S.R. (1610) and Head (1665, 1673)—often included specific glossaries listing the main expressions used by this social group. Although many of them contained plagiarisms from previous works, the information they provided was plentiful and at times innovative, often correcting details which had appeared before. Moreover, the authors’ comments on the canting language often took into consideration various metalinguistic aspects, such as the origin of this jargon, its main processes of word-formation and even the range of usage and the semantic evolution of its elements.

In the course of time these glossaries became bigger and bigger. This expansion, in turn, gave rise to the appearance of specific publications completely devoted to the presentation of the lexis used by the underworld; examples of these canting dictionaries are B.E. (1698) and *A New Canting Dictionary* (1725). The great merit of the authors of these publications is that they compiled their dictionaries not merely deriving their terms from previous works, but adopting all those expressions employed at the time by the English underworld and providing them with appropriate standard equivalents. Moreover, these dictionaries often contained detailed information about customs and objects pertaining to the life of a very large sector of the lower social class of 17th-century Britain.

The continuing popularity of the interest in the language and habits of the underworld led to a different perception of this phenomenon by British society, which favoured the acceptance of the lexicon as a variety of the English language.



This new perception is testified to by the inclusion of many canting terms in several dictionaries of general English, such as Coles (1676) and *The Ladies Dictionary* (1694).

## 2. THE CANTING TERMS OF COLES' DICTIONARY

Elisha Coles' *An English Dictionary*<sup>1</sup> is one of the first monolingual dictionaries published in Great Britain in the seventeenth century.<sup>2</sup> Besides increasing the number of entries commonly reported in previous publications,<sup>3</sup> this dictionary shows other important innovations compared to preceding works of the same kind, such as the inclusion of a list of words belonging to different geographical varieties of the English language (with the specification of the counties in which they are used) and the insertion of a number of canting terms.

As was seen above, in the 16th and 17th centuries canting terms had been reported in several publications specifically devoted to that subject, but they had never been included in English monolingual dictionaries, which were strictly limited to the presentation of the various lexical items of the standard tongue. The "vulgar words" included in Henry Cockeram's *The English Dictionary* (1623) did not correspond to canting terms, but merely represented common words of Anglo-Saxon origin, for each of which Cockeram provided a "hard word" or the corresponding lexeme of foreign (mainly Latinate) origin.<sup>4</sup> Coles therefore is to be considered the first compiler to have admitted canting terms into a general dictionary of the English language. To justify the inclusion of these lexemes, the author provides the following motivation:

'Tis no disparagement to understand the Canting Terms. It may chance to save your throat from being cut, or (at least) your Pocket from being pickt. (Coles 1676/1973: To the Reader)

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<sup>1</sup> *An English Dictionary* was first published in London in 1676, and soon became very popular, as its eleven reissues and new editions in the following fifty-six years testify; all the quotations in this paper are taken from the facsimile of a British Library copy printed by Georg Olms Verlag in 1973.

<sup>2</sup> For an analysis of the first monolingual dictionaries of the English language cf. Starnes and Noyes (1946/1991), Schäfer (1970), Riddell (1974), Hayashi (1978), Stein (1985) and Gotti (1997).

<sup>3</sup> In his preface Coles emphasizes the higher number of entries included in his dictionary compared with that of previous publications: "The addition that is made to the number of words in former Authors of this kind, is almost incredible (considering the bulk) being raised from seven in th' *Expositor* to almost thirty thousand here; which is some thousands more than are in Mr Blunts *Glossographia* or Mr Philips *World of Words*."

<sup>4</sup> While Starnes and Noyes (1946/1991:32-33) maintain that this list of "vulgar terms" accompanied by their refined equivalents is drawn from Rider's *Bibliotheca Scholastica* (1589) or from the later revisions (1606, 1612, 1617) of this book carried out by Francis Holyoke, Schäfer (1970:39) and Riddell (1974:133) have demonstrated that these words —included in the second part of the dictionary— are taken in their reversed form from the first part of the same work.



The identification of the nature of these terms is clearly provided by Coles, who devotes a specific entry to the word *canting* in his dictionary, defining it as “the Language of Rogues and Beggars.” From the quantitative point of view, Coles’ canting terms amount to 231 entries, not a large number if compared to that of about thirty thousand of the other lexemes presented in *An English Dictionary*, but very similar to the number of terms commonly found in previous canting dictionaries and glossaries.<sup>5</sup> Coles’ canting terms are not reported in a separate section of his book, but are listed in alphabetical order<sup>6</sup> together with the other lexemes belonging to the standard language or pertaining to specific geographical varieties of the English tongue; however, they are easily identifiable, as they are marked by the abbreviation *c* appearing between the entry and its gloss.

A comparison between these lexemes and those contained in previous canting publications has enabled us to come to the conclusion that the great majority of Coles’ entries have been taken from Head’s glossary. On closer examination, however, one also notices that Coles did not copy all of Head’s words verbatim, but made a series of modifications to several of them. First of all he corrected the misspellings found in his source, as in the cases of *Rarling Cove* corrected into *Ratling-Cove*, *Smudge* into *Snudge*, *Tour* into *Tout*, *Wicher-cully* into *Witcher-cully*.<sup>7</sup>

Since his canting terms were to be included in a wider dictionary of the English tongue, Coles had to limit the space devoted to them; he did so by reducing both the number of entries and the length of their definitions. In order to keep his borrowing to the minimum, Coles made use of various devices: in several cases he joined into a single entry two canting terms dealt with separately in *The Canting Academy*. This is the case of *Abram-Cove* (‘Naked or poor man’) which combines Head’s adjective *Abram* (‘Naked’) and noun phrase *Abram Cove* (‘A Poor Fellow’). Another case is *Bite* (‘to cheat, also to steal’) which is the combination of Head’s verb *Bite* (‘To cheat or cozen’) and the one appearing in the expression *Bite the Roger* (‘Steal the Portmanteau’). A third case is that of *Glaziers* (‘eyes, also Filchers by unripping or creeping into Windows’), which combines two of Head’s entries: *Glazyers* (‘Eyes’) and *Glazyer* (‘One that creeps in at casements, or unrips glass win-

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<sup>5</sup> For example, the terms appearing in the “Canting before the English” section of the dictionary included in Head’s *Canting Academy* amount to 266.

<sup>6</sup> In Head’s dictionary canting terms are grouped by initial letter only (with no account taken of subsequent letters for purposes of ordering). Coles, instead, rearranges them in alphabetical order as we understand it today, with occasional mistakes, as the following examples testify: *fambles* comes before *famble-cheats*, *gigger* before *gigg*, *glymmer* before *glyn jack*, *grunting-peck* before *grunting cheat*, *harmans* before *harman-beck*, *libben* before *libbedge*, *nab-girder* before *nab-cheat*, *prats* before *prating-cheat*, *cropping of the rotan* after *romboyld*, *snitch* before *snilches*, *stamps* before *stampers* and *stamp-flesh*, *touting-ken* before *tout*.

<sup>7</sup> In doing this, Coles proves to be consistent with the remark made in his Preface, where he criticises those dictionary compilers “that pretend to correction and exactness” and that instead “transcribe out of others (hand over head) their very faults and all.”

dows to filch and steal'). In joining various terms under the same entry, Coles sometimes mixed grammatical categories which had been kept separate by Head; for example, in *An English Dictionary* the entry *Autem* is glossed by both a noun and an adjective ('Church; also married'), while the two meanings are dealt with separately in *The Canting Academy*: *Autem* ('A Church') and *Autem Mort* ('A Married Woman'). Another device adopted by Coles to save space is the omission of those compounds whose components already appear individually in his dictionary. The terms thus ignored are the following (The words in brackets correspond to the entries included in Coles' dictionary):

- *Boosing-ken*, A Tippling-house (*Booz* = drink, *Ken* = house)
- *Been Darkmans*, Good night (*Been* can be deduced from *Beenship* = goodness, *Darkmans* = night, evening)
- *Deuseavile-Stampers*, Country Carriers (*Deuseaville* = the Country, *Stampers* = shoes or carriers)
- *Flicker-snapt*, A Glass broken (*Flicker* = a glass, *snapped* is not entered as it is a very common English word used with its standard meaning)
- *Floggin Cove*, The whipper of Bridewell, or any other that whips people commonly called at Dublin in Ireland *Bellores* (*Flog* = to whip, *Cove* already appearing in *Abram-Cove* = Naked or poor man)
- *Nazie Cove*, A Drunkard (*Nasie* = drunken, *Cove* cf. above)
- *Priggers of Prancers*, Horse-stealers (*Prigs* = Thieves, *Prancer* = a horse)
- *Queer Ken*, A Prison (*Queer* = base, roguish, *Ken* cf. above)
- *Queer Mort*, A pockie Baggage (*Queer* cf. above, *Mort* = a Woman)
- *Queer Cove*, A Rogue (*Queer* cf. above, *Cove* cf. above)
- *Rum glimmar*, King of the Link boys (*Rum* = gallant, *Glym Jack* = a link-boy).

For the same reason of economy of space Coles did not adopt from Head those idiomatic phrases whose components had already been listed separately in his dictionary. Here are such cases:

- *Cut Been Whids*, To speak well (*Cut* = speak, *Been* cf. above, *Whids* = words)
- *Cut Quire Whids*, To Speak evilly (*Cut* cf. above, *Quire* = base, roguish, *Whids* cf. above)
- *Flick the Peeter*, Cut the Cloak-bag (*Flick* = to cut, *Peeter* = a portmantle)
- *Flog'd at the Tumbler*, Whipt at the Cartsarse (*Flog* = to whip, *Tumbler* = a Cart)
- *Tip the Mish*, Give the Shirt (*Tip* appears in Coles' entry *Tip the cole to Adam Tiler* = give the [stoln] money to your [running] Comrade, *Mish* = a shirt).

In order to keep the number of entries to the minimum, Coles often omitted those basic forms which already appeared in derived terms listed in his dictionary, as the following examples show:

- *Been*, Good or well (*Beenship* = goodness)
- *Cove*, A Man (*Abram-Cove* = Naked or poor man)
- *Prigg*, to Ride (*Prigging* = riding)
- *Rum pad*, The highway (*Rum-padders* = brave high-way men)

Another reason for neglecting some of Head's lexemes was the avoidance of those words which already appeared in the context of some idiomatic phrases reported as separate entries in Coles' dictionary. Here are such cases:

- *Bing*, To go (*Bing awast* = go away)
- *Couch*, To lie (*Couch a Hogshead* = Go to sleep)
- *Tip*, To give (*Tip the cole to Adam Tiler* cf. above)
- *Win*, A penny (*Deuswins* = Two pence, *Tres-wins* = Three pence)

In other cases Coles adopted only a part of Head's longest entries, especially when the phrases to be omitted contained lexemes appearing elsewhere in his dictionary. Here are the three cases found in *An English Dictionary*:

- *Blot the skrip*, enter into Bond<sup>8</sup> (from Head's *Blot the Skrip and jark it* = To be engaged or bound for any body)
- *Fam-grasp*, agree with (*Fam-grasp the Cove* = To agree with an Adversary)
- *Track*, to go (*Track up the dancers* = Go up the Stairs).

Moreover, Coles omitted all those examples reported by Head whose main entry had already appeared in his dictionary (such as *Bite the Cully*, *The Mort hath tipt the Bube to the Cully*, *Dup the Ken*, *Tip me my Earnest*, etc.). In some cases, however, Coles preferred to make use of the opposite technique, that is, to adopt the example as his main entry and avoid instead the separate listing of the basic form. This is what happened when he entered the expressions *Heave the Booth* ('rob the house') and *Pike on the Been* ('run for it')<sup>9</sup> instead of the simple forms *Heave* ('To Rob') and *Pike* ('To run'). Besides all these omissions—which can clearly be explained by reference to the criterion of repetition avoidance—there are four entries of Head's whose non-selection by Coles cannot be explained with such motivation:

- *Blow off on the Ground-sils*, O.Q.P. [i.e., to lie with a woman] on the Floor or Stairs
- *Redshank*, A Mallard
- *Skipper*, A Barnel
- *Shoulder sham*, Partner to a File

The second of these expressions did appear in *An English Dictionary*, but marked as Irish Scots rather than cant; as regards the third, the misprint *barnel* for

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<sup>8</sup> Coles took this gloss from the example provided by Head for his entry *Skip*: "*As the Cully did freely blot the Skrip, and so tipt me forty Hogs*; that is, One enter'd into bond with me for forty shillings."

<sup>9</sup> Coles shortened the definition provided by Head by cutting its last part ('as fast as you can'), thus giving an inexact standard equivalent of the canting expression.

*barne* may have puzzled Coles, especially because neither form appeared in the English-before-Canting section of Head's dictionary. The omission of the first, instead, may be due to its obscene nature. It should be remembered that in his Preface Coles had criticised some previous or contemporary dictionaries that were "too plain (stufft with obscenity not to be named)."

In borrowing Head's terms, Coles frequently modified the spelling of words, both in the entries and in their glosses. A frequent alteration regards the use of hyphens or the joining of lexemes in the case of compounds. There is no strict rule which can be deduced from Coles' modifications: at times he added hyphens and at other times he deleted them, sometimes he joined words and on other occasions he separated them. Many of these divergencies from the original may be considered unintentional and are probably due to misprints or arbitrary interventions of the printer. On the whole, however, one can notice a general tendency on Coles' part to join the various elements of a compound so as to clearly identify the result as a single term; moreover, some alterations may be explained with a uniformity criterion, as in the case of the insertion of the hyphen between the two elements of *treswins* to imitate the analogous term *deuswins*.

Some graphic alterations may be attributed to a possible desire to imitate the form of a standard word having a similar meaning, as in the case of *Bube* à *Bubo*, *Skrip* à *Scrip*.<sup>10</sup> Also letters not frequently used in the English language were sometimes substituted by their corresponding usual ones, such as the letter *s* (rather than *z*) to render the voiced alveolar fricative, as in the case of *Nazie* à *Nasie*.<sup>11</sup> In many instances one can notice the omission of single letters; in examining these cases, however, it is difficult to decide whether such alterations are the result of misprints or are attributable to the compiler's decision. Here are the examples of the differentiations found in the two dictionaries:

<i>Budge</i>	→	<i>Budg</i>
<i>Clincker</i>	→	<i>Clinker</i>
<i>Cobble-colter</i>	→	<i>Coble-colter</i>
<i>Ferme</i>	→	<i>Ferm</i>
<i>Slate</i>	→	<i>Slat</i>
<i>Grunting Peck</i> , Porke	→	Pork
<i>Mish Topper</i> , A Coate	→	Coat
<i>Stamps</i> , Leggs	→	Legs
<i>Trundlers</i> , Pease	→	Peas

A frequent case of orthographic simplification found in the above list concerns the apparently systematic omission of word-final *e* and the substitution of

<sup>10</sup> In the entry *Blot the Skrip*, however, Coles retained Head's spelling with the *k* instead of the *c*.

<sup>11</sup> It is to be noted, however, that in the analogous case of *Nizie* the letter *z* remains unchanged.



plural-morpheme *s* for *es*; the plural-morpheme alteration, however, does not seem to have been applied in every case, as an example of insertion of *e* in the plural morpheme has also been found:

*Cackling-farts*, Eggs → Egges

Other instances of addition of single letters have also been noticed, as in the following entries:

*Deusevile* → *Deuseville*<sup>12</sup>  
*Margry Prater* → *Margery Prater*.<sup>13</sup>

In analyzing other alterations, we may hypothesize a preference of the author of *An English Dictionary* for certain spellings, as in the use of the suffix *-y* rather than *-ie* in his gloss “drowsy” for the entry *Peeping* to render Head’s “drowsie.” Apart from modifying the spelling of Head’s entries, Coles at times added an alternative graphic form to a headword. This, for example, happened in the case of the addition of the variant *Quire* to Head’s *Queer*, the former being the spelling more frequently used in previous cant dictionaries. Another case is represented by the addition of the form *Bener* to Head’s *Benar*, which may be interpreted as Coles’ wish to provide a form containing the familiar comparative morpheme.

Coles’ reformulation of Head’s entries was not limited to their graphic form, but often involved their definitions. A frequent alteration on Coles’ part is the shortening of the original glosses, which confirms the criterion of space economy pointed out above. The reduction of the original form is usually limited to the elimination of very few words, as can be seen in the following examples (The part of Head’s gloss omitted by Coles is in brackets):

- *Flog*, To whip (as in Bridewell)
- *Grunting cheat*, A (Sucking) pig
- *Nizie*, A Fool (or Coxcomb)
- *Palliard*, (One) whose father is a born Beggar<sup>14</sup>
- *Peak*, (Any) lace
- *Peck*, *-kidg*, (Any sort of) meat
- *Prigs*,<sup>15</sup> (Are all sorts of) thieves
- *Romboylde*, (Sought after) with a warrant

<sup>12</sup> The possibility of the influence of the French spelling of *ville* is put in doubt by the non-addition of the *l* in another borrowed term, that is, *rum-vile*.

<sup>13</sup> In this case Coles probably interprets Head’s spelling as a misprint, as in other parts of *The Canting Academy* (cf. pp. 4 and 20) the term is written with an *e*.

<sup>14</sup> As in a few other cases, Coles changes the spelling of the last word into *begger*.

<sup>15</sup> In analogy with all the compounds whose first lexeme is *prig*, Coles dropped one of the *g*’s found in Head’s entry.



- *Rumboyl*,<sup>16</sup> (A Ward or) Watch
- *Rum-gutlers*, Canary (wine)

In order to save space, in one case Coles combined two items of the gloss into a single one, including a part of it in square brackets:

*Light-mans*, Day, or Day-break → [break of] day.

On other occasions the parts omitted were much longer and corresponded to exemplifications or comments commonly added by Head to complete his definition of a specific canting term. Here are the quotations referring to such cases:

- *Gilt*, A Picklock(, Where note that some of them are so excellent at it, that they are furnished with all sorts of Giltts or Keys, from a Church door to the smallest Cabinet, and almost at first sight will dexterously open any door, trunk, chest, or any lock whatever.)
- *Mumpers*, Gentile Beggars(, Such as will not accept of Victuals, but money or cloaths, and these beg under the pretence of being decay'd Gentlemen, Tradesmen, or such who have been burn'd out or shipwrack'd).

Although Coles shows a tendency towards reducing the length of Head's glosses, he sometimes added one or more words to them so as to make them clearer or more exact, as the following cases show:

- *Beenship*, Worship → Worship, goodness
- *Bluffer*, An Host → an Host or Landlord
- *Stampers*, Shooes → shoes or carriers
- *Tout*, To look out → to look out or upon.

In the first of these examples the addition of the abstract noun 'goodness' may be due to the presence in Head's dictionary of the entry *Been* meaning 'good.' We may hypothesize here Coles' desire to present the language system as transparently systematic as possible. So, since *been* is glossed 'good' by Head, Coles defines *beenship* as 'goodness.' This standardizing attitude might also explain Coles' non-adoption of Head's entry *Beenshiply* ('Very well'), which might have looked to Coles as a strange adverb obtained from the combination of a noun and the suffix *-ly*. Since Coles was relying on Head, he was ignorant of the adjectival use of *beenship* 'very good,' attested elsewhere, which would make *beenshiply* an acceptable form. In one case the addition of elements took place in the entry itself, and was used to complete the reference of the premodifier both to a male and female noun:

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<sup>16</sup> In borrowing this term from *The Canting Academy*, Coles dropped the final *e* and started his gloss with the definite article.

*Gentry Mort*, A Gentlewoman → *Gentry Cove or Mort*, Gentleman or woman.

Coles did not limit his intervention on Head's text to a mere reduction in length or, rarely, to the addition of a word or two, but often changed parts of the glosses. As the following cases show, there is no unifying principle that regulates such modifications: sometimes an indefinite article was turned into a definite one, other times the indefinite article was deleted, while on other occasions a singular gloss was turned into a plural one:

- |   |   |                             |
|---|---|-----------------------------|
| – <i>Batner</i> , An Oxe                      | → | Oxe                         |
| – <i>Betty</i> , An Instrument to open a door | → | An instrument to open doors |
| – <i>Harman-beck</i> , A Constable            | → | the Constable               |
| – <i>Panter</i> , An heart                    | → | the heart                   |

An interesting indication of difference in the grapho-phonological system of the two authors is Coles' dropping of the final *n* of the indefinite article when followed by a word beginning with an *h*:

- |                                       |   |                 |
|---------------------------------------|---|-----------------|
| – <i>Ferm</i> , <sup>17</sup> An hole | → | a hole          |
| – <i>Ken</i> , An house               | → | a house         |
| – <i>Margery Prater</i> , An Hen      | → | a hen           |
| – <i>Milken</i> , An house breaker    | → | a house-breaker |
| – <i>Nab</i> , An Head                | → | a head          |
| – <i>Nab-cheat</i> , An Hat           | → | a hat           |
| – <i>Prancer</i> , An horse           | → | a horse         |

In a few cases he made greater changes to the gloss reported in *The Canting Academy*, either to make it more concise or probably because he thought his was more appropriate than the one found in the original:

- Blower*, One mans particular Wench → a Quean  
*Brush*, To fly → run away  
*Budg*, One that steals Cloaks or ought else, slipping into an house in the dark → he that slips in to steal cloaks, &c  
*Filch*, A Staff with an hole in the end thereof, in which upon occasion, your Rogues will fasten an hook, to pull things cunningly from an Hedge, or through a Casement → a staff with a hole for a hook upon occasion  
*Kidnapper*, A fellow that walketh the streets, and takes all advantages to pick up the younger sort of people, whom with lies and many fair promises he inticeth on board a ship and transports them into forreign plantations → a stealer or enticer away of Children, &c  
*Nap*, To take, or cheat with the dice, that is, by certainly securing one chance → to cheat at Dice

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<sup>17</sup> As said above, this word has a final *e* in Head's dictionary, dropped by Coles.

*Naskin*, A Goal, or Bridewell → a jail or Bridewell  
*Ratling-mumpers*, Such who onely beg at Coaches → beggers at Coaches  
*Rum-cully*, A rich Coxcomb → a rich fool  
*Rum-padders*, The better sort of High-way men → brave high-way men  
*Stow your whids*, Be wary → speak warily<sup>18</sup>  
*Shoplift*, One that filcheth Commodities out of a Shop, under the pretence of cheapening or buying them of the Shop-keeper → one that pretends to cheapen, and steals wares  
*Snudge*, One that lies underneath a bed, to watch an opportunity to rob the house → one that hides himself in a house to do mischief  
*Stalling-ken*, A Brokers Shop, or an house that will recive stoln goods → a brokers, or any house that receives stolen goods  
*Tip the cole to Adam Tiler*, Give your pick-pocket money presently to your running Comrade → give the [stoln] money to your [running] Comrade.

In a couple of cases the reformulation of Head's glosses is due to Coles' wish to avoid the use of the word *arse*, probably considered too vulgar:

*Cracker*, An Arse → the breech  
*Cropping of the Rotan*, Carts-arse → the Carts tail.

Apart from altering the spelling and definition of several canting terms borrowed from Head's dictionary, Coles inserted a few new entries which did not appear as such in *The Canting Academy*; indeed, eight expressions were listed in *An English Dictionary* as separate new entries. On closer inspection, however, we find that seven of them were present in Head's dictionary or may have been derived from words appearing in it. This is the case of *Glimmer*, which was inserted in spite of the fact that the form *Glymmer* was already present with the same meaning ('fire'). The former had been created by analogy with the compounds listed in the same dictionary containing an *i* instead of a *y*, such as *glimfenders* and *glimflashy*.

The new verbal noun *Maunding* ('begging') replaced two entries of Head's, that is, the verb *Maund* ('To beg') and the deverbial agentive noun *Maunders* ('Beggars'), thus enabling Coles to economize on space. The same reason explains the listing of the noun *Mort* ('a Woman') as a separate entry instead of the mention of two compound forms containing that lexeme, that is, *Autem Mort* and *Queer Mort*. Also the new entry *Cropping of the Rotan* ('the Carts tail') can be found in Head's dictionary, not as a separate entry but as part of the example accompanying the lexeme *Flog*:

<sup>18</sup> This meaning is more appropriate than Head's, as is confirmed by the example provided in *The Canting Academy*: "*Stow your Whids and plant 'em, for the Cove of the Ken can cant 'em*, Have a care what you say, the Man of the House understands you." Moreover, Coles' new gloss is in line with his insertion of the entry *Whids* (meaning "words") in *An English Dictionary*.

*As the Prancer drew the Quire Cove at the Cropping of the Rotan through the Rum pads of the Rum vile, and was flog'd by the Nubbing-Cove. That is, The Rogue was drag'd at carts-arise, through the chief streets of London, and was soundly whipt by the Hangman.*

Similarly, the entry *Snitch*, *snitchel* ('a fillip') is extracted from the example provided by Head to clarify his presentation of the term *Gigg*:

*As give him a rum snitch, or snitchel the Gigg, that is, Fillip him on the Nose.*

On other occasions Coles extracted a new term from an entry of *The Canting Academy*; this is the case of *Snilches* ('sees or eyes you'), which is taken from Head's entry *The Cul Snilches*, meaning "The man eyes you." A similar type of borrowing takes place with Coles' new term *whids* ('words'), which appears in Head's entries *Cut been whids* ('To speak well') and *Cut Quire Whids* ('To speak evilly') as well as in the example for *Stow your whids* ('Have a care what you say').

The only canting word listed in *An English Dictionary* which appears not to have been taken from *The Canting Academy* is *Hictius doctius*. The hypothesis that this word may have been noticed and recorded in a dictionary for the first time by Coles himself may be confirmed by the observation that this is the only case in which the compiler specified the etymology of his entry, its function and the category of its users; indeed, in the gloss to this term Coles pointed out that this was a modification of the Latin expression *Hic est doctus*, and added that it was "a canting word among Juglers, to amuse the people." The reliability of the existence of this term is confirmed by the use of similar forms —although with different spellings— in previous and contemporary publications, as the following quotations show:

*Bonus Genius or Nuntius invisibilis, or Hiccius Doccius* as my senior calls it. (in Anon., *Hocus Pocus Junior* (1634, enlarged in 1635), quoted in Partridge 1961:329) I shall stand here till one of them has whipt away my Mistris about business, with a *Hixius Doxius*, with the force of repartee, and this, and that, and Everything in the world. (Shadwell, *Virtuoso*, ii, p. 19 (1676), quoted in Farmer and Henley 1890-1904/1965, III:306)

In spite of the fact that this expression had appeared elsewhere, Coles' innovative contribution consists in being the first compiler to have included this term in an English dictionary, and to have specified not only its function but also its probable origin.

### 3. THE CANTING COMPONENT OF *THE LADIES DICTIONARY*

*The Ladies Dictionary* is an interesting publication which appeared in 1694, and whose authorship has puzzled many a scholar. The only mention of the compiler of the work can be found in the dedicatory letter, signed "N.H." These initials had already been used by the publisher of *The Ladies Dictionary*, John Dunton, on



the title page of two other works printed by him, that is, *The Compleat Tradesman* and *The Pleasant Art of Money-catching*; as can be seen from the titles, these however concerned economic topics and were therefore very different in their subject from those dealt with in the new publication. Noyes (1941/1991:286), instead, ascribes the work to a group of compilers employed by John Dunton. Parks (1976:61) agrees with Noyes' opinion, convinced that "the initials N.H. which appear under the dedication of the work conceal the fact that *The Ladies Dictionary* was yet another project of Dunton's literary assembly-line."

Support to the hypothesis of a collective writing enterprise may derive from the work itself, as many of the entries of the dictionary are not inserted in the correct alphabetical order and many words are listed more than once in the text. Indeed each letter of the dictionary looks like a mere juxtaposition of blocks of entries taken from various sources, without any succeeding intervention to rearrange them in the right alphabetical order or combine the various definitions of the same entry into a unified and coherent single article. The letter A, for example, is composed of the following blocks of entries:<sup>19</sup> *Abigail* to *Azubah*, *Abdona* to *Armenias*, the long articles about *Apparel, or the Ladies Dressing-Room* and *Anger in Ladies*, the blocks from *Ability* to *Athenais*, from *Angela de Nugarolis* to *Aurea Behn*, from *Affinity* to *Aretaphila*, from *Abia* to *Autonoe*, from *Agetus* to *Aristoclea*, and finally from *Ada* to *Ausonius*, with the insertion of several interpolations within these blocks. Moreover, many entries recur in more than one block —such as *Agatha*, *Agnes*, *Agnodice*, *Anchoress*, *Atalanta*, *Aurora*— and are therefore explained twice or even three times. It is evident that the work is the result of a process of assembly of various pieces provided by different compilers; the absence of a final systematizing action is probably due to the haste with which the volume was produced and to the huge number of publications printed by Dunton in that period.<sup>20</sup> The principal aim of this dictionary is specified on its title page, where it is made clear that it has been compiled as "General Entertainment for the Fair Sex." In the dedicatory letter the author also extols the originality of his publication by adding that a similar enterprise had never been attempted before:

Indeed many Learned Writers there be, who have wrote excellent well of some Particular Subjects herein Treated of, but as there is not one of them hath written upon all of them, so there are some things Treated of in this Dictionary that I have not met with in any Language. (1694: Dedication)

The introductory part makes it clear that the work has been conceived for reference purposes, "as a Secret Oracle, to Consult in all difficult Cases" (1694: Dedication). Indeed, as the analysis of the contents of *The Ladies Dictionary* shows,

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<sup>19</sup> The copy examined here is the one held at the British Library in London.

<sup>20</sup> The advertisement published in *The Compleat Library* (July–November 1693) mentions sixty-two books as "lately printed for John Dunton," as well as nine more being printed.

rather than a dictionary this volume can be considered an encyclopaedia, because in it one can find not only definitions and etymologies, but also anecdotes, biographies, historical accounts, short poems, letters and commentaries of various kinds. In publishing a work of this nature, Dunton seems to have followed the increasing encyclopaedic tendency of his time,<sup>21</sup> which had started in 17th-century hard-word dictionaries with the inclusion of a wide range of lengthy and detailed articles as explanations for difficult words and specialized concepts or as an illustration of the lives and works of famous literary and historical figures. The adoption of the principle of universality in word-collection which lies at the basis of this lexicographical tradition also explains the great length of the explanatory passages accompanying various entries of *The Ladies Dictionary*, which in many cases take up several pages.

The reading public for which the volume has been written is very wide, and the work is meant as “a Compleat Directory to the Female-Sex in all Relations, Companies, Conditions and States of Life; even from Child-hood down to Old-Age, and from the Lady at the Court, to the Cook-maid in the Country” (1694: Dedication). The inclusion of all the representatives of the female sex —from all social classes and professional fields— is the great novelty of this work, as is the desire to address it exclusively to them. Indeed, several previous dictionaries had mentioned women as part of their possible addressees, but a female reading public had commonly been mentioned only in connection with other groups of semi-educated readers, such as young students and persons ignorant of the learned languages. An example of this attitude can be seen in Robert Cawdrey’s words, which testify to the writing of his *Table Alphabeticall* “for the benefit & helpe of Ladies, Gentlewomen, or any other vnskilfull persons” (1604/1966: title page).

An examination of the book confirms the author’s great indebtedness to previous publications, whose range and number is quite vast. Two of these sources have been clearly specified by N.H. himself in the surnames of Blancard and Blount. The former corresponds to Steven Blancard (or Blankaert), author of *Lexicon medicum graeco-latinum*, translated into English as *A Physical Dictionary* (1683), from which several medical entries have been transferred into *The Ladies Dictionary*. As regards Blount, entire blocks of entries have been taken from his *Glossographia* (1656) and inserted with no significant modification into the work published by Dunton. For example, in the letter A of *The Ladies Dictionary* the entries from *Affinity* to *Aretaphila* are taken almost verbatim from Blount, with the interpolation of only three entries (*Address*, *Abortion* and *Amnion*) taken from other works.

In the introductory section N.H. mentions other dictionaries from which he has borrowed some lexicographic materials. One of these is certainly Coles’ *An English Dictionary*, from which whole lists of entries have been taken (cf., for example, the block from *Abia* to *Autonoe* in the letter A of *The Ladies Dictionary*). An-

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<sup>21</sup> For an analysis of the growth of the encyclopaedic features of late 17th-century and early 18th-century English dictionaries cf. Hayashi (1978: Ch.3).

other dictionary from which N.H. has drawn parts of his materials is *The Fop-Dictionary* appended to John Evelyn and his daughter Mary's *Mundus Muliebris: or, The Ladies Dressing-Room Unlock'd* (1690). *The Fop-Dictionary* contains various terms—mainly of French origin—referring to the field of cosmetics. In this case, however, N.H. does not insert the various entries of his source under the different letters of his own dictionary, but groups them all together under two common entries: *Apparel, or the Ladies Dressing-Room* and *Appurtenances in Dressing, &c.*

Other sources of *The Ladies Dictionary*—identified by Noyes (1942)—are: Charles Estienne's *Dictionarium Historicum, Geographicum, Poeticum* (in its 1686 edition, revised by Nicholas Lloyd), Louis Morery's *Grand Dictionnaire Historique* (in its 1691 edition, revised by Le Clerc), Thomas Heywood's *General History of Women* (1624, 1657), the anonymous *Mundus Foppensis* (1691), Thomas Fuller's *The Holy State and the Profane State* (1642), the anonymous *The Ladies Calling* (1667), George Savile's *A Lady's New Year's Gift* (1688), Robert Codrington's *The Second Part of Youth's Behaviour, Or Decency in Conversation amongst Women* (1672), the standard etiquette book *The Rules of Civility* (1671, English version of Antoine de Courtin's *Nouveau Traité de la Civilité*), Robert May's *Accomplished Cook* (1678), John Shirley's *The Accomplished Ladies Rich Closet of Rarities* (1691), Hannah Wooley's *The Gentlewoman's Companion* (1675), the anonymous *Marriage Promoted* (1690) and (for a few words only) *The English Gentlewoman* by Richard Brathwait (1631). Much of the material is also drawn from various issues of two periodicals published by John Dunton and strictly connected with the interests of a female public, that is, *The Athenian Mercury* and *The Ladies Mercury*.

The main topics dealt with in *The Ladies Dictionary* are anticipated in the Dedication prefixed to the work. One important category is represented by the lives of famous female figures. Another component of his work is identified in “the lively Ideas of all laudable Qualities whatsoever, suitable to [Ladies] in all Callings and Conditions.” A further element to be found in this dictionary consists in “the true Interpretation, and Etymology of Womens Names.” The wide range of fields covered by the various entries of *The Ladies Dictionary* can be perceived even by means of a brief analysis of the words listed under one of its letters. Under the letter A, for example, many articles are devoted to the presentation of famous female figures appearing in Biblical texts (such as *Abigail* and *Anne*), in mythological or classical works (such as *Alceste*, *Amazons*, *Andromache*, *Andromeda*), in historical contexts (*Agrippina*, *Adelais*) or in literary circles (*Anne Askew*, *Anne Broadstreet*, *Aurea Behn*). Another component concerns the etymology of a few women's names (such as *Agatha*, *Agnes* or *Anne*), or the meaning of some words of foreign origin: cf. *Areta* (“Virtue, Gr.”) and *Aimie* (“beloved, from *aimié*. Fr.”). Other terms refer to members of particular occupations or female nouns, e.g. *Anchorette* (“one that lives solitarily. Gr.”).

Many entries concern advice and moral judgements regarding *Artificial Beauty* as well as objects commonly used by women, especially in the fields of beauty and clothing, such as the entries for *Amulet* (“a ball about the neck to keep from Poison or Witchcraft”), *Annulet* (“a Ring, or any thing like a Ring”), *Apparel, or the Ladies Dressing-Room* (with a description of several ornaments used by seventeenth-





century ladies “for setting out the shape and proportion of the Body, and rendring the Fabrick of mortality more Airy and Charming”). Other articles deal with female passions and feelings (such as *Anger in Ladies, &c. discommendable and hurtful, and by what means to be avoided and remedied*), or characteristics of a woman’s body (e.g. *Age*), personality (e.g. *Ability, In some Women, why Extraordinary*) or behaviour (e.g. *Adultery and Uncleanness*), and provide examples from history or mythology. Some words are of the “hard word” type, as they belong to a learned register (such as *Affinity*) or to a specialized field, as is the case of legal terms (e.g. *Alimony*) or medical concepts (e.g. *Abortion, Amnion, Assestrix*). Another specific register represented in this dictionary is that of canting terms (cf. *Autem Morts*); the inclusion of canting terms may be explained by N.H.’s intention expressed in his Dedication to his female readers to “lay open the frailties of [their] Sex.” His justification for this choice is that even this component will not cause discredit on women, but on the contrary will highlight their virtues:

Because I can produce nothing out of History, to the Disgrace of the bad and vicious, which adds not to the Honour of the good and vertuous. (1694: Dedication)

The canting terms included in *The Ladies Dictionary* are twenty-eight. However, two of these (*Blower* and *Shop-Lift*) appear twice, and one is even listed under three different entries (*Doxie, Doxy, Prostitute Doxies*). This confirms the method followed in the compilation of the whole work, which mainly consisted in the assembly of various materials taken from different sources, without any systematization carried out on the part of the author(s) or printer. Most of the terms are taken from Richard Head’s *The Canting Academy*; half of them are taken from the “Alphabetical Canting Vocabulary,” which consists of two parts: “Canting before the English” and “English before the Canting,” the second being a reversal of the first. The compiler(s) of *The Ladies Dictionary* clearly consulted both parts, as some entries (such as *Blower, Culsniches, Famble-Cheats, Gybe, Kinchin, Queer Mort, Stall Whimper*) are taken from the first, while others (such as *Cully, Kidknappers, Rum Mort, Shop-Lift*) are drawn in reversed form from the second. The other half of the terms borrowed from *The Canting Academy* are taken from the part headed “A Character or Description of the Roguish Professors of that mysterious and Diabolical Gibberish called Canting,” which presents the various figures belonging to the different “orders” of the underworld. Another important source of canting terms is Elisha Coles’ *An English Dictionary*, a work from which several other entries of *The Ladies Dictionary* have been borrowed. One term (*Doxy*) is taken from Thomas Blount’s *Glossographia*, as part of one of the many blocks of text transferred from that volume into Dunton’s publication. As regards the terms borrowed from Blount and Coles, the definitions found in them are very short and have been copied verbatim by the compiler(s) of *The Ladies Dictionary*. The definitions borrowed from *The Canting Academy*, instead, have sometimes been submitted to alterations or reductions. The most frequent case of modification coincides with a sort of censoring intervention, by means of which obscene or inconvenient words have been substituted by more acceptable ones. Here is an example:

*Blower*, One mans particular Wench. (*The Canting Academy*)

*Blower*, one Mans particular Lass. (*The Ladies Dictionary*)

In other cases, words considered inappropriate have been omitted. For instance, in the definition of *Autem Morts*, the following sentence has been deleted: “talk to him of a Certificate, and you were as good call him *Son of a Whore*.” The word “whore” is subjected to censure also on other occasions. For example, Head’s entry *Bawd, Pimp and Whore* becomes *Bawd, Pimp, &c.* in *The Ladies Dictionary*. Moreover, in the definition of these terms there are other instances of lexical modification: “Leachery” becomes “Folly” and “Snicking” is turned into “Money,” while the following sentence is totally omitted, due to its too explicit reference to the act of prostitution: “and that point by which she endeavors to set off her bad Commodity will in a little time totally ruine.” Another case of suppression of the reference to a morally condemnable practice can be seen in the reformulation of the definition of the word *Dells*:

*Dells* are young bucksome Wenches, ripe, and prone to Venery, but have not yet lost their Maiden-heads, which is commonly done first by the *Uprightman*, and then they are free for any of the Brotherhood. (*The Canting Academy*)

*Dells, are young bucksom Wenches, ripe, and prone to Venery, but have not yet been debauch’d.* (*The Ladies Dictionary*)<sup>22</sup>

As regards the semantic fields to which the canting terms inserted in *The Ladies Dictionary* belong, the vast majority refers to names denoting female figures of the underworld: *Autem Morts, Bawd, Blower, Dells, Doxie, Kynchin Morts, Night Walkers, Queer Mort, Rum Mort, Shop-Lift, Strowling Morts*. Some (*Kidknappers, Mumpers*) are terms referring both to women and men, while others (*Cully, Huff, Patrico’s*) only have a male referent, which may denote a certain degree of inaccuracy in selecting the entries. Indeed, *Huff* may have been taken into consideration because of its relation to the world of prostitution; *Patrico’s* instead may have been chosen due to its connection with marriage, a criterion which also explains the inclusion of the two terms *Kynchin* and *Stall Whimper* pertaining to children. Further canting terms refer to clothes, such as *Belly-Cheat, Famble-Cheats* and *Peeper*, although others referring to women’s clothes listed in *The Canting Academy* (such as *Calle, Drawers, Stampers, Stock-Drawers* and *Togeman*) have not been borrowed. The remaining canting terms appearing in *The Ladies Dictionary* denote objects or expressions used either for criminal or general purposes by the members of the underworld, and the random selection of these out of the many listed in Richard

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<sup>22</sup> The word “wench” has not been substituted here, probably due to the compilation of this entry by a different person or to the inconsistent policy to be found also in other parts of the work. Indeed, such inconsistency can also be seen in the adoption of the word “whore,” which—as seen above—has been deleted or substituted in some cases, but has remained unaltered in others.



Head's work cannot be explained by any clear and consistent criterion. Also the various female canting figures examined by Richard Head have not been taken into thorough consideration by the compiler(s) of *The Ladies Dictionary*, as some (such as *Glymmerers* and *Bawdy-Baskets*) have been ignored, although they are dealt with in a very detailed way in *The Canting Academy*.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The analysis of some lexicographic works published in England in the 17th century has thus confirmed the presence of canting elements also in publications which were not exclusively devoted to the language of the underworld. This highlights the great interest in this specific lexical branch felt not only by those strictly connected with groups of beggars and petty criminals, but by all the different social strata and economic classes in Britain at that time. Coles' decision to include these words —along with a few regional dialectal terms— in his general dictionary of the English tongue derived from a more general consideration of the different varieties of his language: not only of its standard forms, but also of those expressions commonly used by particular social and geographical groups in the British Isles, thus allowing his readers to have a more complex —but also more evenly balanced— view of linguistic reality. The analysis of the canting component of *The Ladies Dictionary* has highlighted the relevance that this aspect had acquired also for the “fair sex” and has thus confirmed the great interest in this specific lexical branch felt not only by the groups strictly connected with the underworld, but by all the different social strata and economic classes existing in Britain at that time.

The precedent set by these two dictionaries was to be followed by other lexicographic works on the English language —such as Nathan Bailey's very successful *Universal Etymological English Dictionary*— or at least in those concerning the “popular” variety of English.<sup>23</sup> The enlargement of the linguistic area covered by the dictionaries of the English tongue favoured the interaction between these two concepts: canting and the standard language, an interaction which has continued since then and has permitted the adoption of a number of canting expressions by the English-speaking community, with the result that some of the entries listed in those canting dictionaries —such as *beak*, *cove*, *fence*, *to flog*, *kidnapper*, *nipper* or *to snitch*— are commonly used nowadays, especially in informal contexts of usage.

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<sup>23</sup> Even Samuel Johnson, who approved only of respectable language and discouraged the use of “low words,” included a few canting expressions —such as *bit*, *bite*, *bub*, *bunter*, *doxy*, *prig*— in his famous dictionary (cf. Hughes 1985 and Siebert 1986).

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