

'THAT RELIANCE ON THE ORDINARY': JANE AUSTEN AND THE *OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY*

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Evidence on Austen's vocabulary in the *OED* can be used to illuminate the characteristic of her work remarked on by literary critics from Walter Scott onwards: at once the ordinariness and the distinctiveness of her writing. Unusually for a female author, Austen's works are quoted many times in the *OED*; unusually for any author, her works received special attention not only in the first edition of the dictionary (published 1884–1928), but also—despite their date of composition, ostensibly making them ineligible for inclusion—in the Supplement to the *OED* (1972–1986), which updated the dictionary with recent twentieth-century vocabulary. Now that the *OED*, for the first time in its history, is undergoing revision, Austen's novels and letters are once more being quoted in high numbers, and the rate of citation from her work has significantly increased. In all three editions (including today's *OED*), lexicographers have quoted a profusion of domestic, commonplace vocabulary from her works; in all three editions many of these quotations are identified as first recorded examples of use. Yet *OED*'s predilection for sourcing household and everyday (rather than conceptual and moral) vocabulary in Austen may reflect the prior cultural biases of the lexicographers and their volunteer readers as much as the linguistic qualities of her writing; these matters are explored and *OED*'s methodology and processes of revision are discussed. It is also shown that the recent changes to the *OED* website (*OED Online*, at www.oed.com) have made investigation of historical lexis much harder than before.

I. Introduction¹

George Saintsbury wrote of *Emma* in 1913 that it represented 'the absolute triumph of that reliance on the ordinary', but that at the same time 'every event, every circumstance, every detail, is put *sub specie eternitatis* by the sorcery of art'.² Critics back to Walter Scott, and forward to Bharat Tandon, have adumbrated or echoed Saintsbury's remarks. Scott identified her 'exquisite touch which renders ordinary commonplace things and characters interesting from the truth of the description and sentiment', while Tandon focussed on 'Austen's broader concerns with the meaning or meaninglessness of little objects and incidents', such as 'the quotidian loop that is so often the stuff of life in Highbury'.³

1 This article is based on evidence to be found in Appendixes available on the *Review of English Studies* website.

2 George Saintsbury, *The English Novel* (London, 1913), 198.

3 Bharat Tandon (ed.), *Emma. An Annotated Edition* (London, 2012), 5, 22; for comments by Scott and others see B. C. Southam, *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage* (London, 1968).

But how ordinary was Austen's ordinariness, and what precisely might that term mean, especially in relation to her vocabulary, the subject of this article? Studies of Austen's language have sought to delineate the way in which Austen's writing has a distinctive justness which relies on the artful combination of words used in their normal, that is conventional, sense. So her use of terms (or 'keywords', as David Lodge put it in 1966, in a discussion of the vocabulary of *Mansfield Park*) such as 'appropriate', 'becoming', 'decorum', 'improper' and 'regularity' on the one hand, or 'conscience', 'evil', 'good', and 'principle' on the other, allows the reader to identify satiric or ironic or humorous import, or Austen's own authorial approval or disapproval of characters and actions, by virtue of the alignment of these words with semantic and cultural norms of the day (or the previous century).⁴ Austen uses language to evoke instantly recognizable and acknowledged standards, and consequently, it would seem, eschews inventive linguistic eccentricity or playfulness: not for her the display of archaisms or neologisms or other lexical peculiarities that we characteristically associate with (male) masters of language, whether Shakespeare, with whom Austen was early compared, or Milton, Carlyle, Dickens and many others.

All the writers named above are extensively quoted in the *OED*, and this great dictionary is the first port of call for anyone trying to identify the degree to which a writer exemplifies or departs from the standard vocabulary of the day. (The *OED* focuses principally on the definition of words over the period 1150 to the present day, not the history and development of English syntax, so we cannot expect it to elucidate Austen's superb deployment of a range of different syntactical features.) Unusually for a female author, Austen's works are quoted many times in the *OED*. Unusually for any author, her works received special attention not only in the first edition of the dictionary (1884–1928), but also—despite their date of composition, ostensibly making them ineligible for inclusion—in the main Supplement to the *OED* (1972–86), which updated the dictionary with recent, twentieth-century vocabulary. Now that the *OED*, for the first time in its history, is undergoing revision, the rate of citation from Austen's work has significantly increased. All this raises further questions. Is Austen's vocabulary more important for the history and development of the language than has been recognized in the past? What quotations have been added to the dictionary at different stages, and why? How can one use the *OED* to discover the particular characteristics of Austen's vocabulary, and is that vocabulary as conventional (or 'ordinary') as commentators would have us believe?

This article discusses the treatment of Austen's writings in *OED* from 1884 to the present day. It is based on evidence no longer available, namely comparisons of Austen's record in the successive editions of *OED* preserved in electronic form on

Paula Byrne's recent biography also draws attention to Austen's concern with the everyday and apparently trivial: *The Real Jane Austen: A Life in Small Things* (London, 2013).

⁴ David Lodge, 'The Vocabulary of "Mansfield Park"', in *Language of Fiction* (London, 1966).

the *OED Online* website up to December 2010. Regrettably, this valuable resource has now been deleted, rendering comparative investigation of *OED* editions impossible. But throughout *OED*'s history, as these vanished search results show, Austen's texts have consistently furnished evidence for domestic and household-related vocabulary, notably for first recorded examples of such words. And in each consecutive editing of the dictionary, Oxford lexicographers have returned to the same well known and much read works to discover fresh examples of such use, as well as first recorded examples of other everyday and colloquial locutions. By contrast, Austen's works have never been used, to any significant degree, to illustrate first use (or indeed any use) of morally or socially evaluative vocabulary, or, in general, vocabulary that is conceptual, aesthetic or 'writerly'. In demonstrating and exploring these findings, I show how *OED*'s lexicographical witness sheds light both on Austen's choice of vocabulary and on the reception of her work from first publication onwards. At the same time, Austen's successive treatment in the *OED* reveals the editorial assumptions and practices of the lexicographers themselves, from the first Victorian editors up to those revising the dictionary today.⁵

II. Austen and the first edition of *OED* (*OED1*), 1884–1928

We should begin by reviewing the linguistic and lexicographical context in which Austen's writings were originally quoted in the *OED*. At the time this dictionary was conceived (the late 1850s), and during the course of compiling the first edition (completed 1928), it was entirely natural to assume that language was pervasively influenced by the works of its great writers. In 1873 J. H. Newman described how the 'sayings' of 'a great author [. . .] pass into proverbs among his people, and his phrases become household words and idioms of their daily speech, which is tessellated with the rich fragments of his language'.⁶ This view was held implicitly by many language specialists too: one of the seminal texts in linguistics, Jespersen's *Growth and Structure of the English Language* (1906), drew much of its evidence from the wealth of quotations already heaped up in *OED* from Shelley, Byron, Macaulay, Carlyle, Tennyson, Dickens, and Swinburne. It was also natural, as this list indicates, to think of great writers as male rather than female. In the same work, Jespersen famously stated his view that '[t]here is one expression that continually comes to mind when I think of the English language and compare it to others: it seems positively and expressly masculine, it is the language of a

5 Valuable studies of Austen's vocabulary include K. C. Phillipps, *Jane Austen's English* (London, 1970), Norman Page, *The Language of Jane Austen* (New York, 1972), R. W. McConchie, "'Her word had no weight": Jane Austen as a lexical test case for the *OED*', *Dictionaries*, 33 (2012), 113–36 (identifies words and senses missing from or insufficiently documented in *OED*), and Ingrid Tiekens-Boon van Ostade, *In search of Jane Austen: The Language of the Letters* (Oxford, 2014). These draw on *OED*'s evidence in the form available to them; none was in a position to compare successive editings of the dictionary as undertaken here.

6 J. H. Newman, *The Idea of a University Defined and Illustrated* (London, 1873), 293.

grown-up man and has very little childish or feminine about it.⁷ Correspondingly, the first edition of the *OED* had turned to ‘all the great English writers of all ages’ for its quotation sources, and in general preferred those written by men to those written by women.⁸ Over much of the period treated by the *OED*, 1150 to the late 1800s, female authors had published in tiny numbers (*OED* quoted only from printed sources), but the dictionary’s preference for male-authored quotation sources continued even when documenting the late eighteenth century onwards, by which time women were beginning to catch up with men. The degree of bias in both these respects—*OED*’s fondness for the giants of the Victorian literary canon, and for male rather than female sources (Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, Walter Scott, Tennyson, Dickens)—is still clearly evident in the *OED* we consult online today. While these partialities can hardly be said to vitiate, in any fundamental way, *OED*’s treatment of the English language, they must always be borne in mind when interpreting the information to be found in this dictionary, not least since quotations are the evidential basis for *OED*’s supreme authority in English lexicography.⁹

The first point of interest, therefore, where Austen is concerned, is that she was quoted (for a woman) in reasonably significant numbers in the first edition of *OED*: c. 700 in the first edition, of which around 640 come from her novels and 60 from her letters. This compares with c. 3300 quotations from George Eliot, who dominates the *OED* field among female quotation sources, followed by Burney (1950), Martineau (1650), Braddon (1500), Barrett Browning (1452), M. R. Mitford (the prolific writer on village life, 1106), and Charlotte Yonge (perhaps 700). Many female writers now considered outstanding were quoted even less frequently, for example, Christina Rossetti (133) and Emily Brontë (68). All are dwarfed by quotation figures not only for Shakespeare (c. 33,000), Walter Scott (c. 15,000), Chaucer (c. 11,000), and Milton (c. 12,000)—all given exceptional treatment in *OED*—but also for male sources roughly contemporary with the female writers mentioned above (around 5800 each for Pope and Cowper, 3500 for Burke, 6720 for Tennyson, 8200 for Dickens, 6250 for Carlyle). The difference in scale gives some idea of the disparity by gender that was routine in the *OED*.¹⁰

7 Otto Jespersen, *Growth and Structure of the English Language* (Leipzig, 1912), 2. See further Margaret Thomas, ‘Otto Jespersen and “The Woman”, then and now’, *Historiographia Linguistica*, 40 (2013), 377–408.

8 J. A. H. Murray (ed.), *The Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford, 1933), vol 1, 1.

9 See further Charlotte Brewer, ‘The Use of Literary Quotations in the *Oxford English Dictionary*’, *RES*, 61 (2010), 93–125 and ‘“Happy Copiousness”? *OED*’s Recording of Female Authors of the Eighteenth Century’, *RES*, 63 (2012), 86–117.

10 Quotation figures are from searches of the second edition of *OED* (*OED2*) at *OED Online* (www.oed.com), which was removed from the website in April 2011. In the case of some of the female authors (e.g. Burney and Yonge, though not Austen) they include a currently undiscoverable number of quotations added to the *OED* record in the 1972–1986 Supplement; see further below.

Setting on one side the question whether such disparity was just, and looking at Austen's rate of citation in relation to her own cohort, that of most-quoted female sources, it is notable that she is outstripped by one largely non-literary writer, Harriet Martineau, on the one hand, and by two far less distinguished literary writers (in the judgement of her day, as well as ours), Mary Braddon and M. R. Mitford, on the other. This may indicate that criteria for inclusion of female authors were different from those for male—that literary excellence was not so important a qualification for a group who were quoted in the dictionary in much smaller numbers anyway—and there is some evidence that this was so.¹¹ However, Austen occupied an unusually high position in the literary firmament then as now. Within decades of her death she was being compared (by Macaulay and Tennyson) to Shakespeare, while by 1870, according to Mrs Oliphant, 'her works have become classic, and it is now the duty of every student of recent English literature to be more or less acquainted with them'.¹² In 1894, by which time the first edition had reached the letter 'D', Saintsbury had coined the term 'Janeites' in his preface to *Pride and Prejudice*, while 'Austenish' was recorded in 1898, 'Austenian' in 1901 and 'Austenite' in 1903. Given the *OED*'s enthusiasm for literary sources, we might have expected Austen's novels therefore, if not her letters, to have been more intensively excerpted by the *OED* editors and volunteers.

Nevertheless, Austen's letters, in Brabourne's edition of 1884, were enthusiastically taken up by the *OED* editors, despite the apparent disadvantage of appearing the same year as the first instalment of the dictionary; they must have been assigned straightaway to a reader in order to garner useful material and feed it directly into the dictionary as it was being prepared for publication.¹³ No words beginning with 'A' were included from this work but one *B*-word got in (for the children's game 'bilbocatch', treated s.v. 'bilboquet'), and many more beginning with *C*: e.g. 'casino' (the card game), *caul* ('the hinder part of a woman's bonnet'), 'chair mare' (a horse), 'closet', 'coquelicot' ('Coquelicot is to be all the fashion this winter'). *OEDI*'s readiness to quote Austen's letters is additionally notable given the unfavourable judgement they received both on their earliest posthumous outing, in Austen-Leigh's *Memoir* of 1870 ('the reader must be warned not to make too much of them'), and subsequently ('a desert of trivialities punctuated by occasional oases of clever malice').¹⁴

Whatever the linguistic qualities of Austen's letters, they do not qualify as great literature in any usual sense of the term. Instead, as the examples above indicate, they are quoted in *OED* entries for everyday and domestic vocabulary, or for 'ordinary' vocabulary, whether or not in Saintsbury's sense of the word: 'manage' (as in 'manage matters'), 'manoeuvre' (verb), 'nasty' (of weather),

11 Brewer, "Happy Copiousness", 107.

12 All documented in Southam, *Critical Heritage*, vol 1.

13 E. H. K-H. Brabourne, *Letters of Jane Austen* (London, 1884), 2 vols.

14 See further Deirdre Le Faye, *Jane Austen's Letters* (London, 2003), xiii-xv.

'nice' (of food, and a letter), 'nice-looking' (of a woman), 'nice-sized' (of rooms) and so on.¹⁵ They turn up elsewhere in a few more singular instances—as first recorded example of 'raffish', and last of a special sense of 'deputation'. But in only one case are the letters cited for a more learned or specialized literary locution, 'epigrammatism', a word Austen uses to characterise her own style, to apparently ironic effect, in the famous description of *Pride and Prejudice*: 'The work is rather too light & bright & sparkling [...] it wants to be stretched out here & there with [...] an Essay on Writing, a critique on Walter Scott, or the history of Buonaparte—or anything that would form a contrast & bring the reader with increased delight to the playfulness & Epigrammatism of the general stile' (*Letters*, 4 Feb 1813).

If we turn to the quotations from Austen's novels we find that the first-edition *OED* lexicographers picked out a roughly similar mix. Superficially unremarkable, everyday usages predominate, often relating to domestic or household matters or objects or social transactions: 'adjourn', 'butler', 'billiards', 'gruel', 'lady', 'riding', 'schoolroom', etc. More often than in quotations from the letters, some sort of moral compass is indicated, or reference or gesture to social niceties or (the values of) human intercourse and emotions one way or another, but the vocabulary, however precise, is unshowy: 'acquaintance', 'adieu', 'affected', 'genteel', 'guardianship', 'giggle', 'labour' (figurative sense of verb), 'untoward', etc. Few of the 36 keywords identified by Lodge as constructing *Mansfield Park*'s moral universe are quoted from Austen in the *OED*, and only one from *Mansfield Park* itself.¹⁶ Colloquial vocabulary is quoted less often from the novels than in the letters, correlating, presumably, with its relatively lower incidence in the novels: 'humph' (verb), 'scramble' ('A [...] boarding-school, [...] where girls might be sent to be out of the way, and scramble themselves into a little education').

What is most striking, however, is that almost none of the words for which Austen is quoted are themselves striking or unusual, and only three, other than 'epigrammatism', leap to the eye as one scans the list of results thrown up by electronic searches. These are: 'imaginist', 'An imaginative person': ('How much more must an imaginist, like herself, be on fire with speculation and foresight!'), 'excitor' ('All those fine feelings of which he had hoped to be the excitor, were already given'), and 'finesse' ('Till such time as Reginald de Courcy could be talked, flattered and finessed into an affection'). Four such eccentric-looking words, occurring in a list of 700, confirms Saintsbury's view on the ordinariness of Austen's vocabulary.

But singular use of language resides in other features than immediately evident morphological or semantic eccentricity. One fruitful course of action when using *OED* to establish a linguistic profile of an author is to push beyond the first stages

15 As often noted, Austen's letters contain expressions occasionally deprecated in her novels.

16 *Language of Fiction*, 100-1; *OED* includes Austen quotations for the relevant senses of these words s.v. 'agreeableness', 'decorum', 'discretion', 'eligible', 'conscience'.

of electronic searching and see where the individual quotations lie in the dictionary entries themselves. It seems especially significant to find that, as is the case with ‘epigrammatism’, ‘imaginist’, ‘excitor’, and ‘finesse’, Austen’s usage is the first recorded example of a particular word or sense. 128 of Austen’s *OEDI* quotations (just under one in five) fall into this category altogether. This looks a high ratio, unexpectedly innovative for such an ‘ordinary’ writer. In keeping with this apparent paradox, most of these ‘new’ terms are everyday or colloquial—often not in themselves remarkable, but which, once one knows Austen is the first to be recorded using them, appear notable. They can be broken down into more specific (albeit loosely constituted) categories, some much smaller than others, beginning with six relatively writerly words, including the four just noticed, and eight words to do with relationships between the sexes: ‘attach’ (as in ‘attaching a sensible man’), ‘chaperon’ (verb), ‘disengagement’, ‘intentions’ (of a man, in relation to marrying a woman), ‘out’ (of a young woman: formally introduced into society), step ‘forward’ (of a man, to champion a woman’s reputation in a duel), ‘uncoquetish’, and ‘unloverlike’. Far more numerous—34 in all—are the first quotations for words concerning domestic, social and family matters: e.g. ‘beaver’ (a kind of glove), ‘mull’, ‘spot’, ‘strip’ (all types of cloth), ‘galosh’ (verb), ‘breakfast set’, ‘butler’s pantry’, ‘dinner party’, ‘cousinly’, and ‘family-living’ (‘a benefice in the gift of the head of the family’). A similarly sized group (33) of colloquial or conversational words is found predominantly in Austen’s *Letters* and (perhaps surprisingly) *Mansfield Park*, e.g. ‘coze’, ‘deedily’, ‘do-nothingness’, ‘fors and againsts’ (i.e. pros and cons), ‘knowing-looking’, ‘sprawly’, etc. Finally there is a larger group of ‘general’ vocabulary, 47 examples including ‘baseball’ (‘It was not very wonderful that Catherine [...] should prefer cricket, base ball [...] to books’), along with ‘fore-plan’ (verb), ‘irrepressible’, ‘mercantile’, ‘stylish’ and ‘stylishness’, ‘sympathiser’, and others (a full list appears in Appendix 1).

Some of the first edition entries for these words have recently been antedated in the course of the current rewriting of *OED*: as of March 2015, 24 out of the 128 (including *baseball*)—but 20 others have been confirmed as first usages and the remaining 84, in as yet unrevised entries, remain untouched. So *OEDI* citations continue to provide an interesting layer of evidence substantiating the everyday ordinariness rooted in specific domestic and social activities that commentators have so often identified in Austen’s work. In further support of standard critical views, virtually none of *OEDI*’s first usages recorded from Austen are for eccentric or playful or allusive language: in Newman’s terms, they are indeed ‘household words and idioms of [...] daily speech’, but scarcely, at the same time, ‘rich fragments of [...] language’. In fact Austen’s vocabulary is quite different in character from that recorded as first used by other female writers of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries quoted in significant numbers in the *OED*. Mary Wortley Montagu is cited time and again for the first usage of foreign words in English (‘chez’, ‘cicisbeo’, ‘feridgi’, ‘fracas’, ‘mauvaise honte’, etc), while Maria Edgeworth, Frances Burney, Anna Seward, and the Brontë sisters are all quoted for first usages that leap to the eye as striking or unusual in one respect or another,

as may easily be seen by searching for their first cited uses in *OED Online* (for example ‘brimborion’, ‘catcall’ (v), ‘censoress’, ‘Cerberian’, ‘chatterly’ (n), ‘chay’, ‘chouse’, ‘clunch’ (a), ‘collationer’, ‘comicality’, ‘commoneress’, ‘contorno’, ‘conversazione’, all from Burney). The apparent preponderance of distinctive words in the diction of such writers may partly reflect the differences in the vocabulary that the *OED* chose to record from women writers, whose singular usages were more likely to be recorded in the dictionary than their more run-of-the-mill diction. But there is no doubt, as any reader of Austen can attest, that her work contains few examples of such pyrotechnic language, and in this respect she differs from many other literary writers both male and female.

At the same time, according to the *OED*’s own record, Austen’s use of vocabulary is singular: it is in her pages that the first evidence of many ‘ordinary’ words is found. So what do we make of such first citations, bearing in mind that one of the particular aims of *OED* was to identify the earliest recorded use of a word? Was Austen really the first to use these words in print? Or are they the result of the lexicographers’ special fondness for Austen as a quotation source, meaning that they found the first quotations in her works because they looked for such vocabulary there rather than in previously published texts? Before considering such questions, we should look at Austen’s treatment in the twentieth-century supplements to the dictionary—not least the words that the first edition had left out.

III. Supplementing *OEDI*’s record of Austen

It is no accident that the first person to bring some of Austen’s unrecorded vocabulary to light was R. W. Chapman. An accomplished textual scholar, Chapman had produced the first full edition of Austen’s works in 1923 and had other distinguished work still to come. His paid job, however, was running Oxford University Press and—throughout the 1920s—participating in almost day-to-day chivvy of the *OED* editors to speed up their production of successive instalments of the first edition.¹⁷ Chapman was clearly interested in Austen’s language and its occasionally defective record in *OED*: his edition contained an Appendix on ‘Miss Austen’s English’ listing ‘obsolete words and expressions’ in her novels, including *OED* absentees, many of them the same sort of domestic, colloquial or familiar vocabulary already quoted from her works (e.g. ‘hot closet’, ‘working candles’). Despite being uniquely placed to remedy this defect, however, Chapman chose not to: the one-volume Supplement to *OED* published in 1933, which contained a significant smattering of quotations from nineteenth-, eighteenth- and even seventeenth-century sources, printed (it seems) just one quotation from Austen (for the expression ‘A to Z’; Appendixes: note 1).

The next major stage in editing *OED* came in the late 1950s, when the Press decided to tackle the flood of new vocabulary that had poured into the language

17 Charlotte Brewer, *Treasure-House of the Language: The Living OED* (New Haven, 2007); Kathryn Sutherland, *Jane Austen’s Textual Lives* (Oxford, 2005).

over the previous decades—reflecting changes and developments in every aspect of society, knowledge and culture—and appointed the medievalist R. W. Burchfield to produce a second Supplement. Notwithstanding his brief to keep to twentieth-century vocabulary, a sufficiently overwhelming task in itself, the new editor included a surprisingly amount of pre-1850 evidence. Some came from texts already liberally quoted in *OEDI*, including over 200 new quotations from Austen's novels, while others were sought out in letters and diaries only recently edited or re-edited. These included Dorothy Wordsworth's journals (published 1941), Maria Edgeworth's letters (1971), Frances Burney's diaries and letters (1971), Mary Wortley Montagu's letters (1965–1967), Swinburne's letters (1959–1962), and Jane Austen's letters and juvenilia. These last were newly available because Chapman had brought out both an edition of her letters in 1932 (updated in 1952), and the final volume of his edition, *Minor Works*, in 1954.

It is difficult to determine Burchfield's motivation and intentions here. Since it is now well established that both non-literary and female-authored sources were under-represented in the first edition of *OED* (see below), it is tempting to hypothesize that he was deliberately increasing the representation of such sources in the *OED* precisely to redress the imbalances of the parent dictionary, and was conscious that such works were full of vocabulary in which the first edition was characteristically deficient (colloquial, everyday, domestic, etc). But this explanation looks less likely in view of Burchfield's treatment of twentieth-century quotation sources: he quoted much more from male writers than he did from female ones, and he made it clear that he believed that citing canonical literary sources, usually male therefore, was vital to the function and purpose of the *OED*.¹⁸

It is also possible that the second Supplement's inclusion of these pre-1850 quotations was due to the particular appetites and enthusiasms of volunteer readers. One of Burchfield's first actions, on becoming editor, was to publish appeals for quotations, and one of his earliest respondents was the author and critic Marghanita Laski. Laski became the Supplement's single most prolific volunteer contributor, eventually submitting over a quarter of a million slips, and described her experiences in reading Jane Austen and a number of other pre-twentieth-century works for this purpose in articles for the *TLS*. Here she observed that 'Austen's letters are an exceptionally rich source' for the *OED*, and indeed they were: Burchfield added 110 new quotations from Austen's letters, many from letters already published by Brabourne in 1884.¹⁹ As Laski herself later commented, 'little as it becomes me to denigrate my predecessors, many of *OED*'s original readers were inept [. . .]. The amount that has been missed in even the most famous works never ceases to astound'.²⁰

Laski re-read Austen's novels too. In 1961, she published a short article on *Pride and Prejudice* in *Notes & Queries*, the Oxford-based journal then edited by

18 Brewer, *Treasure-House*, 184–97.

19 Marghanita Laski, 'Reading for OED', *TLS* (1968), 37–9.

20 Laski, 'Letter to the Editor', *TLS* (1972), 1228.

Burchfield, which had (and has) a tradition of publishing antedatings or omissions from *OED*'s entries.²¹ 'It is hardly to be expected, at this date,' she wrote, 'that *Pride and Prejudice* should provide other than comparatively trivial examples of words not in *O.E.D.* or of earlier date than hitherto recorded.' She then listed ten remarkable omissions, almost all relating to house, home, kitchen, and social relations: 'Boulanger' (the name of a dance), 'breakfast room', 'dress a salad', 'family party', 'live with' ('co-habit'), 'lottery tickets' (the card game), 'out' ('Are any of your younger sisters out, Miss Bennet?'—an antedating of *OEDI*'s existing first example, from *Mansfield Park*), 'overhearing' ('My overhearings were more to the purpose than yours'), 'shop-boy' and 'white soup'. Not all were subsequently included by Burchfield—and 'Boulanger' remains unrecorded to this day.²²

Two of her items are particularly interesting. The 'co-habiting' sense of 'live with', used of Lydia in *Pride and Prejudice* ('She was more alive to the disgrace, which the want of new clothes must reflect on her daughter's nuptials, than to any sense of shame at her eloping and living with Wickham'), was unidentified in *OEDI*'s original entry for the verb 'live' (published 1903), and was duly added to the dictionary by Burchfield, illustrated both by the Austen example and by an earlier quotation from John Cleland's *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1749). *OEDI*'s omission of this sense may, it is tempting to think, represent a reluctance to make explicit reference to a practice then regarded as socially unacceptable and immoral, especially since the meaning of the verb could be inferred from the context. Similarly, Laski's identification of this specific sense in 1961, along with Burchfield's inclusion of it in the published Supplement (in 1976), are part and parcel of changing social standards in the post-1950s; Burchfield was the first editor of the *OED* to aim for total inclusion of words and usages relating to sex and the body.²³ Both exclusion and inclusion tell us about the history of social and sexual mores on the one hand and the history of *OED* lexicography on the other.

Another of the terms omitted from *OEDI*, 'white soup', carries a different cultural and lexicographical message ('As for the ball [. . .] as soon as Nicholls has made white soup enough I shall send round my cards'). Laski pointed out that '*white stock*, probably the modern equivalent, is [also] not in *OED*'. Burchfield's increased hospitality to combinatorial forms was a marked feature of his editing, and both 'white soup' and 'white stock' were newly included in the *OED* when the relevant volume of the Supplement was published, in 1986, though by then an earlier example of 'white soup' had been found from John Nott's *Cook's and Confectioner's Dictionary* (another work neglected by *OEDI*), and good cookery book quotations (of 1853 and 1960) for 'white stock'.²⁴ It was these sorts of quotation sources that had been comparatively under-read by the first edition of *OED*, and from which Burchfield

21 Laski, 'Some Words from "'Pride and Prejudice"', *N&Q*, 205 (1960), 312.

22 On 'out' see further Appendix 2.

23 Brewer, *Treasure-House*, 203-5.

24 For some of the difficulties involved in *OED*'s treatment of compound forms see Brewer, *Treasure-House*, 182-4.

not infrequently included pre-nineteenth-century evidence. Laski herself, whose distinctive handwriting marks her responsibility for many of these quotations (on slips preserved in the *OED* archives), was an enthusiastic investigator of early domestic and household books. As she later observed, 'one tends to get the impression, when reading the *OED*, that it was the giants of literature who formed our language. Any reading in trivia shows this impression to be wrong, and due, no doubt, to the tastes of the earlier readers. But it is clear that extended reading in trivia could be as valuable to a revision of *OED* as the reading of contemporary trivia has been to the new Supplement.'²⁵

Both Austen's novels and her letters furnished just this sort of 'social' vocabulary, including many compound nouns, for the second Supplement as well as the first edition of *OED*. The most striking characteristic of the new Austen quotations added by Burchfield, however, is that just over half of them—178 out of 345—were first quotations, markedly exceeding the ratio in *OEDI*. These are listed in Appendix 2, where it can be seen that the words and senses concerned fall readily into the same groups as did *OEDI*'s first quotations from Austen, though this time it is domestic and household words which are most numerous (85 items; 'baker's bread', 'bath-bun', 'breakfast china', 'christening dinner', 'coffee urn', 'concert ticket', 'corner shelf', 'dame's school', 'dinner company', etc.), followed by general vocabulary (57; 'break bounds', 'conscience-stricken', 'mix' (in the sense 'to be sociable', 'Regency' (adj.), 'rhapsodizing', etc), rather than the other way round. Though as before some of these have now been antedated in the revision of *OED*, it is clear that Austen's total of first usages in *OED* is remarkable, both for the number of terms involved and for their 'ordinary' character.

IV. First quotations and Austen's contribution to the history of the novel

What does one make of these first citations, and of their domestic and household nature? One possible inference is that Austen was genuinely the first to use these words or senses, and their subsequent adoption by others has caused them to appear natural and familiar to us now. However, the fact that *OED* cites Austen as first user does not necessarily mean she invented the word or sense. Her work is simply the source in which the lexicographers (in many cases reliant on the slips sent in by volunteer readers, perhaps devoted Austenians such as Laski) have found the word used earlier than elsewhere—and it may well be that when more sources have been read, or re-read, it will turn out that others used it before she did, indicating that *OED*'s (past) cultural preference for Austen has distorted the degree to which she appears a linguistic originator.

On occasion it does look as if Austen was cited simply because her work was easily to hand. *OEDI* quotes from *Northanger Abbey* twice for combinatorial forms of 'breakfast', for example: 'breakfast parlour' and 'breakfast set', while Burchfield

25 'Letter to the Editor', *TLS* (1972), 1228.

added a further three quotations: ‘breakfast china’ (*Sense and Sensibility*), ‘breakfast party’ (*Mansfield Park*), and ‘breakfast table’ (*Northanger Abbey*); yet cursory searches of *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* (ECCO)—not available to *OED* or Burchfield, naturally—turn up many earlier or alternative examples from both male- and female-authored sources. (Conversely, Burchfield missed ‘breakfast time’, found in *Sense and Sensibility*, *Northanger Abbey* and *Mansfield Park*; the only *OED* quotation—which he also inserted—for this form is dated 1599.)

On the other hand it is distinctly tempting, especially for admirers of Austen, to attribute these first citations to Austen’s instinct for unexceptionable but instantly useful language, interpreting them either as evidence of her talent for initiating, or speedily adopting, usages so natural-seeming that they were readily absorbed into the language, or as signs of her sensitive ear for new usages in oral circulation, which she was among the first to write down. Occasionally there is support for this theory in the pages of the *OED* itself, as when the first-edition editors puzzled over the origin of the word ‘jib’ (Appendix 1: 95), which they were sure was recent; in this case at any rate Austen was among the first to use it in print. The domestic and colloquial vocabulary for which she is first cited often stands out for pithiness, economical suggestiveness, and verve (e.g. ‘*beyond me*’, ‘*deedily*’, ‘*upon the gad*’, etc.). Evidently, however, the vast majority of these terms cannot have been invented by her: on the contrary, words like ‘netting-cotton’, or ‘shaving glass’, must have been in wide currency for Austen’s novels and letters to have been intelligible. Perhaps all these explanations apply, to varying extents. *OED* had cultural reasons to favour Austen as a quotation source (partly because she was a great writer, partly because female writers were associated with domestic terms); Austen was one of the first writers to put these sorts of words into the print sources that *OED* readers were reading; Austen had a good ear for ordinary day-to-day exchanges in reference to domestic environments—food, dress, furnishings, household affairs and so on.

As noted, there is a paradox here. Austen’s diction is singular, yet her distinctive vocabulary is ordinary. If we consider Austen’s place in literary history, this begins to make sense. As widely recognized, the novel was evolving, at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries, from Gothic sensationalism and wildly improbable plots—famously satirized in *Northanger Abbey*—to something more realistic, concerned with actual rather than fantastical dilemmas of ordinary life, rooted in specific and visualized household surroundings with a plethora of detail relating to individual objects. Austen’s role in this development was clear to contemporary readers: Annabella Milbanke, future wife of Byron, described *Pride and Prejudice* thus to her mother:

I think [it] a very superior work. It depends not on any of the common resources of novel writers, no drownings, no conflagrations, nor runaway horses, nor lapdogs and parrots, nor chambermaids and milliners, nor rencontres and disguises. I really think it the most probable fiction I have ever read.²⁶

26 Southam, vol. 1, 8.

Austen's ordinariness was at the same time extraordinary. Critic after critic tries to put their finger on her special genius; critic after critic comes up with a combination of ordinariness and singularity. In 1826, Walter Scott recorded in his journal,

Read again, and for the third time at least, Miss Austen's very finely written novel of 'Pride and Prejudice.' That young lady has a talent for describing the involvements and feelings and characters of ordinary life which is to me the most wonderful I ever met with. The big bow-wow strain I can do myself like any now going; but the exquisite touch, which renders ordinary commonplace things and characters interesting, from the truth of the description and the sentiment, is denied to me.

The same features of run-of-the-day domesticity, transformed into something aesthetically and humanly remarkable, are picked up at the start of the twentieth century by Saintsbury, in the comments from *The English Novel* quoted at the start of this essay. They are repeated using more Austenian vocabulary three pages on:

This Hampshire parson's daughter had found the philosopher's stone of the novel: and the very pots and pans, the tongs and pokers of the house, could be turned into novel-gold by it.²⁷

If its evidence is to be trusted, *OED* shows us that it was words for just these sorts of household objects—pots and pans, tongs and pokers—that Austen was truly unusual in introducing into the printed record. In this respect, as Tandon notes in his Introduction to *Emma*, she looked forward to what has been called the 'thinginess' of later nineteenth-century fiction, her vocabulary gesturing at the clutter of surfaces, the profusion of objects, and the enumeration of domestic minutiae to be found in the hyper-realist fiction of Balzac, Dickens, Flaubert and other writers of later nineteenth century.²⁸

V. The quill and the needle

The main question hanging over this attractive view of the relationship between Austen's use of vocabulary and the development of the novel is the methodology of *OED* itself. As this essay has shown, *OED*'s choice of Austen as a quotation source may have been for cultural rather than linguistic reasons, whether Austen's literary status, or the lexicographers' (and/or their readers') assumption, that it was appropriate to source household, family and domestic terms from texts written by women. And now that the third edition is officially re-visiting the *OED*'s treatment of pre-1850 vocabulary, in an electronically enabled programme of revision informed by more self-consciously articulated lexicographical criteria, the dictionary's picture of Austen and her contribution to the language may well change. Before considering the differences now being made in the representation of Austen's language by *OED3*, however, we can pause to review the rationale for

²⁷ Saintsbury, *The English Novel*, 201.

²⁸ *Emma. An Annotated Edition*, 11-14.

associating women's writing with certain areas of vocabulary rather than others. It is indisputably the case that in the past, as now, women more than men tend to have had charge of households and to have engaged in family and domestic activities such as cooking and (historically, if not today) needlework. But quoting such vocabulary from writers such as Hannah Woolley (c. 70 quotations), Hannah Glasse (c. 400), and Elizabeth Raffald (c. 270), who are cited almost entirely for domestic cooking terms taken from their books on cookery and housewifery, is rather different from citing them from an avowedly literary writer such as Austen.²⁹ As the Supplement's quotation of John Nott indicates, it was certainly possible to source such vocabulary in cookery books written by men. But might it be equally possible to source such vocabulary from novels written by men? Or was it really the case that female novelists were more likely than male to write about 'dish-washings' (the term reportedly used by Carlyle to dismiss Austen's work), and that, even when male novelists touched on the same subject matter (day-to-day household matters and housewifery generally), they did not use the same language?³⁰ More reading and research is required to answer these questions.

Austen's apparently first use as a novelist of many examples of this vocabulary is especially interesting on account of the long-attested view, from both male and female sources, that woman's writing was in competition with women's proper sphere, namely sewing and household management in general. Initiating a correspondence with the philosopher John Norris in 1693, the philosopher Mary Astell asked him to take notice of her writing notwithstanding her departure from more appropriate female employment: 'Sir though some morose Gentlemen wou'd remit me to the Distaff or the Kitchin, or at least to the Glass and the Needle, the proper Employment as they fancy of a woman's Life; yet [...] I presume to beg [...] Attention a little to the Impertinencies of a Woman's Pen.'³¹ As is well known, the perceived opposition between proper female domestic employment and intellectual activity, particularly writing, continued strong throughout the eighteenth century.³² It turns up in specific application to Austen in verses composed shortly after her death in 1817, in which her brother James feels he has to justify his sister's accomplishments by defending her against any imagined implication that she had neglected the housework:

They [her family] saw her ready still to share
The labours of domestic care
As if their prejudice to shame;
Who, jealous of fair female fame
Maintain, that literary taste

29 Quotation figures from *OED2* (see note 10 above).

30 Francis Espinasse, *Literary Collections and Sketches* (London, 1893), 216.

31 Quoted from Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell: An Early English Feminist* (Chicago, 1986), 73.

32 The critical bibliography is substantial; see e.g. Cheryl Turner, *Living by the Pen, Women Writers in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1992), or, more recently, Jenny Batchelor, *Women's Work: Labour, Gender, Authorship, 1750–1830* (Manchester, 2010).

In women's mind is much displaced;
Inflames their vanity and pride,
And draws from useful works aside.

Readers are assured that Austen did not stint on the domestic labours proper to women, and it is these her brother sees as manifesting 'Her real & genuine worth'.³³ The sense that it was important to address such matters in Austen's case is still apparent at the time *OEDI* was being compiled: Austen aficionados will remember that Leslie Stephen noted the writer's domestic accomplishments in his *DNB* entry of 1885: 'Jane learned French, a little Italian, could sing a few simple old songs in a sweet voice, and was remarkably dexterous with her needle, and "especially great in satin-stitch"', though it is not clear whether he was seeking to mitigate the unfeminine aura which surrounds a female writer or to align these domestic talents with the special character of her writing, or as he put it, 'the unconscious charm of the domestic atmosphere of the stories'.³⁴ Austen herself may have felt differently. The updated *ODNB* entry on Austen, by Marilyn Butler, quotes a letter to her sister wondering how Jane West could 'have written such Books & collected so many hard words' because 'Composition seems to me Impossible, with a head full of Joints of Mutton & doses of rhubarb', indicating that domestic activity was an acknowledged impediment to her writing.

Nevertheless, the counterpointed relationship between the quill and the needle (the latter standing for women's work in general) was not always perceived, and experienced, as destructive to either or both activities. As Cecilia Macheski has noted, 'If the use of needlework imagery becomes increasingly sophisticated in the works of Jane Austen, the Brontës, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, Emily Dickinson, Amy Lowell, Virginia Woolf, Agnes Smedley, Dorothy Canfield, Ellen Glasgow, Alice Walker, and many, many others, it is because women ceased to perceive "the needle" as "that one-eyed demon of destruction," but instead recognized in needlework a uniquely female signature.'³⁵

Whether women writers in general loved or loathed the needle, it seems that the close correlation claimed, and—as Astell's letter shows—often resisted, between women and domesticity was not only unusually exemplified in Austen's vocabulary, but was central to her art as a novelist. So it is interesting to see that there are areas relating to household activities that the *OED* skimmed in her work. Sometimes such terms went altogether unrecorded, as in the term 'netting' (or 'knotting'), 'silk' (and indeed Chapman's example of 'working candles' and Laski's of the dance 'Boulanger'); alternatively, they were recorded, but Austen's prior use missed: e.g. the card game 'lottery', mentioned as Laski noted in *Pride and Prejudice* but dated from 1830 onwards in *OED*; occasionally what was missed

33 David Selwyn (ed.), *The Complete Poems of James Austen* (Chawton, 2003), 86–8.

34 Stephen takes his information from Austen-Leigh's *Memoir*, 71, 77.

35 Cecilia Macheski, 'Penelope's Daughters: Images of Needlework in Eighteenth-Century Literature', in Cecilia Macheski and Mary Anne Schofield (eds.), *Fetter'd or Free?: British Women Novelists, 1670–1815* (Athens, London, 1986), 85–100.

was an example of usage which supplied valuable additional evidence for a term under-represented in *OED*'s quotation record, as with 'satin-stitch', in which, so Stephen recorded, Austen excelled (Appendix 4).

And even if it is really the case that vocabulary related to sewing and household affairs is more justly (and practicably) sourced in female-authored novels, the same is less obviously the case for words to do with another area of vocabulary occasionally under-documented by *OED* in Austen's vocabulary and that of others, namely courtship and marriage. On the contrary the economic and transactional dimension of marriage was of particular concern to men, given that as heads of families, and owners of family wealth, men took considerable interest in and responsibility for arranging family alliances.

As the Appendixes show, Austen's vocabulary, as successfully recorded in the *OED*, furnishes an interesting assortment of such words, notably of both 'engagement' and 'disengagement' (suffered by Marianne in *Sense and Sensibility*) and the verb 'chaperon'. But some are missed out: 'attach' ('attract the attachment of for the purposes of marriage', a sense unidentified in *OED*, although the dictionary prints two Austen quotations illustrating it), or the similarly unrecorded 'distinguish' to mean 'show amorous interest in' (*Mansfield Park*: 'Sir Thomas [...] could not avoid perceiving in a grand and careless way that Mr. Crawford was somewhat distinguishing his niece' (Appendixes 1 and 4)). It seems likely that Austen was using these words in standard rather than innovative senses, as similar examples can be found in other sources too—such as the verb 'dispose', used several times in Penelope Aubin's novels to mean 'dispose in marriage', a sense of the word not recognized in *OED* but exemplified in *Mansfield Park* ('I shall only regret that you have not half-a-dozen daughters to dispose of'). Unsurprisingly this sense can easily be found in male-authored texts as well: a swift search of ECCO turns up a prior instance in a play by Thomas Southerne, and probably the sense was current, whether in male or female authors, earlier still. Another marital sense of a common verb, passed over by *OED1* and the Supplement, is now recorded in *OED3*: 'address' to mean 'pay one's addresses to (a woman); to woo, court'. Here Austen furnishes the third quoted example (after two male-authored ones): 'You may live eighteen years longer [...] without being addressed by a man of half Mr. Crawford's estate'.

All this suggests further questions to add to those already posed. To what extent are women's texts the best sources for domestic, household vocabulary, or vocabulary related to love and marriage? Are some genres (novels, household manuals and account books, family letters) more suitable sources than others, and how does this vary by gender of author? Were the *OED* lexicographers as sensitized to the existence of such vocabulary as they should have been, and were they more likely to (look for and therefore) find it in female- than in male-authored sources? Will this change as new lexical research is carried out in recently available databases such as ECCO and *Early English Books Online* (EEBO)? To clarify these questions requires more research into the *OED* itself as well as into the source texts available.

VI. *OED3*

The existence of textual databases enables ordinary researchers to search far larger bodies of texts than available to *OEDI* or the Supplement. But as with the common words just instanced, which have many different senses and grammatical forms, the special expertise of lexicographers is indispensable: sifting through hundreds of search results to identify precise and specific senses and sub-senses is neither easy nor practicable for lexicographical amateurs, even academic ones. This makes the revision of *OED* currently underway in Oxford particularly timely: indeed, in digitalizing its second edition as early as the 1980s, OUP was at the forefront of the technological revolution of which electronic databases of texts were one of the earliest products.³⁶

The various stages of *OED* throughout the twentieth century, and hence the job of the third-edition revision, have often been misunderstood, many dictionary users wrongly assuming that the twenty-volume second edition, published in 1989, was the fruit of editorial revision of previously published versions of the work. But the second edition (*OED2*) added virtually no new material to the lexicographical record; it merely merged the original, unrevised first edition of *OED* with the twentieth-century Supplement, and in consequence—despite its modern appearance and its date of publication—was largely a work of Victorian and Edwardian scholarship (old wine in new bottles, as one reviewer observed).³⁷ By contrast, the third edition, currently underway in Oxford, is a thoroughly re-conceived undertaking. Every existing entry in the dictionary is being re-researched and re-written, while hundreds of new entries are being added; completion is due some decades hence and the dictionary is updated quarterly with new material, so that old and new scholarship sit side-by-side each other. *OED3*'s aims are threefold: to sift, distil and incorporate the scholarship on every aspect of historical lexis that has been published since the end of the nineteenth century; to update the dictionary with new words and senses entering the language in the last thirty-odd years; and to publish the gradually emerging results on a website exhibiting advanced and user-friendly features (the last of these aims has been less successfully achieved than the first two).³⁸

It follows that the third edition's treatment of Austen as a quotation source has been part and parcel of a much larger shift in its treatment of individual periods and authors in the English language. Its Preface makes it clear that certain areas of research are priorities:

In addition to the 'traditional' canon of literary works, today's Reading Programme covers women's writing and non-literary texts which have been published in recent times, such as

36 Brewer, *Treasure-House*, 213–32.

37 John Algeo, 'The Emperor's New Clothes: The Second Edition of the Society's Dictionary', *TPS*, 88 (1990), 131–50.

38 See Brewer, 'OED Online Re-launched: Distinguishing Old Scholarship from New', *Dictionaries*, 34 (2013), 101–26.

wills, probate inventories, account books, diaries, and letters. The programme also covers the eighteenth century, since studies have shown that the original *Oxford English Dictionary* reading in this period was less extensive than it was for the previous two centuries.³⁹

So far the new edition has revised entries for all words beginning ‘M’-‘R’, along with numerous other entries across the alphabet, amounting to around 40 per cent of the material in *OED2*. Until 2011 researchers could compare the new entries with the old in systematic ways to see that *OED3* was indeed increasing its coverage of female-authored sources—not just Austen, but also Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth, Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, and no doubt many others (though it has to be said that, puzzlingly, *OED3* was also adding to its large store of quotations from canonical male authors such as Dryden and Pope).⁴⁰ All these writers, not just Austen, deserve investigation along the lines carried out here; unhappily, this is no longer possible. The website re-launch of December 2010 did away with the electronic version of *OED2*, and with it the opportunity to make such searches and comparisons—whether of individual authors, or periods in the language, or any other aspect of the changes now being made by *OED3* in the dictionary’s account of the history of the language. As already explained the material presented in this article derives from searches of Austen’s vocabulary made in *OED Online* over the course of 2009–2010, in its earlier, now-disappeared form, which I have been able to compare against the current version of the website.

These reveal that *OED3*, by March 2015, had added another large tranche of Austen quotations: 629 altogether (a ‘net’ figure: while adding many new quotations, *OED3* also removed a few existing ones, e.g. for ‘raffish’). Combined with Austen’s 1043 existing quotations (698 in *OED1* and 345 in the Supplement) they bring her current total to 1,672. Given that these additional quotations are distributed over something like two fifths of existing entries, it is clear that *OED3*’s rate of quotation from Austen has stepped up considerably, prompting the question asked at the start of this article whether Austen’s vocabulary is more important for the history and development of the language than has been recognized in the past.

Browsing the list of quotations from Austen in *OED3*, and comparing them with those in *OED2* (as preserved in a hard copy printed out from *OED Online* before *OED2* was removed from the website) indicates that the majority of newly added quotations are for the same sort of largely unremarkable vocabulary as the old: ‘a’ (adj), ‘about’, ‘abroad’, ‘absence’, ‘acknowledge’, ‘and’, ‘bad’, ‘ball’ (‘a social gathering for dancing’), ‘make’ (nine new instances cited of the verb), ‘man’, ‘marriage’, ‘marry’ (three quotations for the verb), ‘master’, ‘maternal’, ‘matter’, ‘may’ (three quotations for the verb), two further senses of the adjective ‘nice’ (Appendix 3: 22, 23), and so on. Looking at a random selection, one can see that semantic re-analysis

39 <http://public.OED.com/history-of-the-OED/reading-programme>

40 See Brewer, ‘The *OED* as “literary instrument”: its Treatment Past and Present of the Vocabulary of Virginia Woolf’, *N&Q*, 56 (2009), 430–44; Brewer, “Happy Copiousness”, 115.

of a word has required additional quotation (as with ‘abrupt’, to illustrate a sense applied to persons: ‘Mr. Martin is now awkward and abrupt; what will he be at Mr. Weston’s time of life?’), or that the revisers have used her work to plug a gap in their predecessors’ documentation of the long eighteenth century (so *Northanger Abbey* supplies one of the quotations now documenting usage of the word ‘abridger’ between 1699 and 1858, for which *OEDI* had supplied no evidence at all). Such examples can be multiplied many times. But of course what we really want to know is whether *OED3*, as it revisits its predecessors’ record of Austen’s first usages under vastly enhanced scholarly conditions, is finding them as innovative now as they seemed to be when first recorded in the dictionary, whether that was according to lexical scholarship c. 1884–1928 (*OEDI*) or c. 1972–86 (Burchfield’s Supplement).

The two fifths of entries so far revised by *OED3* do not offer enough information to come to a clear view. 67 of the 306 first quotations originally identified by *OED* in Austen’s writings (either in *OEDI* or the Supplement) have been antedated, 38 have been confirmed, and 201—all in entries as yet unrevised—remain as they are.⁴¹ This looks like a clear trend to antedate more than confirm (see tables, Appendixes 1 and 2). It is not so simple, however. While some words or senses are disappearing from the record of Austen’s first usage, others (34 so far) are being added in *OED3*, bearing out Laski’s judgement that ‘[t]he amount that has been missed in even the most famous works never ceases to astound’. These newly identified items include ‘marry well’, ‘mothering’, ‘park paling’, ‘pedal’ (of a piano—the sustaining pedal was a relatively new innovation to English pianos), ‘or anything’ (‘I did not once put my foot out of doors [. . .] Not one party, or scheme, or any thing’), ‘if I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a hundred times’ (the head phrase for a new *OED* entry, for which Mrs Price’s ‘If I have spoke once to Rebecca about that carpet, I am sure I have spoke at least a dozen times’ furnishes the first quotation), the notable first example of ‘First Lord’, short for ‘First Lord of the Admiralty’ (found in William Price’s *sotto voce* on Mr Rushworth, ‘I would rather find him private secretary to the first Lord than any thing else’), ‘overhearing’ (as we saw, Laski’s find in *Pride and Prejudice*, now at last added to the *OED*), ‘sorry’ (‘You may accordingly prepare for my ringing the Changes of the Glads & Sorrys for the rest of the page), ‘thing’ (Wickham’s claim, of a clergy living, that ‘It would have been such a thing for me! The quiet, the retirement of such a life, would have answered all my ideas of happiness!’), ‘be’ (‘We have got a play [. . .] and I am to be Count Cassel, and am to come in first with a blue dress’), and so on (Appendix 3).

41 Currently (March 2015), *OED3* search results for first cited word or sense in Austen’s works list a total of 257 instances. The disparity between this figure and my total of 273 (made up of 38 confirmed first quotations + 201 in unrevised entries + 34 newly identified in *OED3*) seems to be due to software flaws: e.g. ‘breakfast set’, ‘dinner party’, ‘grown up’, etc, all manifestly attested as first quotations in dictionary entries, do not appear in search results.

As this selection suggests, a handful of the newly identified locutions are domestic or related to household or property matters, but more are usages of common words such as ‘thing’ or ‘be’ which are interestingly tricky—and which match some of the expressions identified as first usages in the earlier versions of the dictionary too: *OED1*’s ‘do with’ (as in *Emma*, ‘A mind lively and at ease can do with seeing nothing’), ‘donothingness’ (*Mansfield Park*’s ‘A situation of similar affluence and do-nothing-ness’, or ‘get away’ (*Pride and Prejudice*’s ‘Take whatever you like, and get away’). Such locutions embedded in everyday language can be hard for lexicographers to identify because they are knitted into their context in syntactically unexpected ways which belie their ease of expression. As the *OED3* revision progresses it may be not only Austen’s domestic vocabulary that will appear striking but also her first citation, in this authoritative dictionary of the history of the language, for familiar-sounding, every-day expressions which now seem to us to capture the rhythms and tones of ordinary conversational exchange. The reproduction in a novel of the pith and character of everyday speech may plausibly be a truly innovative aspect of Austen’s novelistic art, and one can exactly see why it should have repulsed some readers as vulgar and ordinary—Mme de Staël, for example, who reportedly dismissed her work as ‘vulgaire’—while enchanting others.⁴² One can also see why Austen’s talent in this respect, a lexical embodiment of the domestic realism of her novels, should make her, as Virginia Woolf describes, ‘of all great writers [...] the most difficult to catch in the act of greatness’. Quoting this aperçu in 1968, B. C. Southam explained (echoing the successive critical judgements recorded in his anthology) that ‘[t]he secret of Jane Austen’s art lies in her treatment of materials intrinsically slight’.⁴³

Her greatness must surely extend beyond such a talent, however. As Lodge showed in his ‘keywords’ study of 1966, quoted at the start of this article, Austen conjures up a moral universe distinctive to the novel, putting ‘every generation of readers to school [...], [so that] in learning her own subtle and exact vocabulary of discrimination and evaluation, we submit to the authority of her vision’.⁴⁴ If *OED* can confirm that Austen’s knack for the commonplace is outstanding, what do we infer from its much sparser citation of her morally inflected lexis? The answer may lie in the quotation preferences of its editors. Two factors seem relevant here: first, female authors were quoted far less than male in the first edition, and second, Austen’s use of moral vocabulary seems to have been normative rather than innovative (another form of her much noted ordinariness). Thus she would have been eligible for citation in *OED*’s entries for these words not as ‘first’ user but as ‘typical’ user: her prose exemplifies the standard usage of such vocabulary (which does not mean to say that she does not probe and explore those standards, of course). But for *OED1* lexicographers, on the look-out for choice quotations to

42 R. J. Mackintosh (ed.), *Memoirs of the life of the Right Honourable Sir James Mackintosh* (London, 1835), vol. 2, 471.

43 Southam, *Critical Heritage*, vol. 1, 3.

44 Lodge, ‘The Vocabulary of “Mansfield Park”’, 113.

illustrate the life of a word from first occurrence onwards, Austen's examples would have been competing with those of a host of male writers, whose literary or cultural status would have trumped hers by virtue of gender alone. Here we may remember Jespersen's approving citation of a study that found that women used a smaller range of vocabulary than men, in particular favouring words for 'apparel', 'fabrics', and food, and that '[i]n general the feminine traits revealed by this study [of men and women's vocabularies] are an attention to the immediate surroundings, to the finished product, to the ornamental, the individual, and the concrete, while the masculine preference is for the remote, the constructive, the useful, the general and the abstract'.⁴⁵

That works of female writers were not obvious repositories of moral vocabulary looks a plausible explanation for *OED*'s possible under-quotation of her works in this respect—though such a hypothesis needs to be explored and tested in further research, however difficult to conduct given OUP's removal of earlier electronic versions of the dictionary from public consultation. For example, might George Eliot, the most quoted female author in *OEDI*, have been an exception to the suggested rule that one should not look to female authors for good quotations for vocabulary relating to ethics, morality and other abstract matters? Jespersen's remarks also shed some light on the lexicographers' propensity for citing domestic vocabulary from female authors, though as already observed this too needs further research.

The flood of additional quotations from Austen's texts in *OED3* might seem to have been a good opportunity to redress this citational imbalance. But as described they are, largely speaking, for the same sort of 'ordinary' vocabulary as *OED* lexicographers have favoured in the past. When work on the *OED* revision began in the 1990s, digitalisation of historical textual sources was in its infancy and canonical literary texts were among the first to be included, so that Austen may have been quoted in relatively high numbers on account of her comparative availability as much as anything else. Certainly, once *OED3* revisers began to have access to ECCO and EEBO in the mid-2000s, the rate of quotation from her work declined—from around 52 quotations a year between 2000 and 2009, tailing off to 11 between March 2013 and March 2015.

While Austen's quotations have increased in number overall, those from female authors in general are still extraordinarily low. The front page of the current *OED* website advertises its 'top thousand sources', at the head of which (in accordance with *OED3*'s revision policy) non-literary texts such as newspapers and journals now figure notably. But so, still, do canonical literary male authors: Shakespeare, Walter Scott, Chaucer and Milton are in the top ten; Dryden, Dickens, Carlyle, Lydgate, Tennyson, Spenser, Cowper, Langland, Pope, Defoe, Johnson, Thackeray, Jonson, Swift are in the top 50. It is not till slot 88 on the list that we encounter a female name—George Eliot, followed after long gaps by Frances Burney at 144, Jane Austen at 248 and Hannah Martineau at 254. If one rearranges

45 Jespersen, *Growth and Structure of the English language*, 248–9.

the table to list sources according to their provision of ‘first quotation for word or sense’, we have to wait even longer for a female name—slot 263, Frances Burney, followed by George Eliot at 272, Elizabeth Barret Browning (303), Maria Edgeworth (351), Mary Russell Mitford (431), and Jane Austen (468).

Can it really be the case that women have contributed so much less to the language than men, whether in creating new words and senses or furnishing representative examples of language over its history? When I have raised this question in informal conversations with *OED* lexicographers, I am always assured that quotations are chosen ‘on their merits’, without regard for provenance. This is not what the ‘top thousand’ list suggests. Two fifths of the way into its revision, *OED* has yet to shake off its literary bias and yet to bring up its quotation rate from female sources, whether literary or not, in a way that plausibly reflects their input (as 50 per cent of language users at any time) into the development of the language. That makes it dangerous to draw conclusions from its evidence—including its revised evidence—even when it looks as persuasive as it does in Austen’s case. Are the lexicographers still exercising Jespersen-type prejudices about women’s language, and if so, how can dictionary-users possibly tell? As a dictionary based on its quotations, *OED* needs to think carefully about how it searches for and chooses those quotations, and about the biases unconsciously reproduced by its choices, whether those relate to gender or to anything else. Of course, the *OED* remains an unparalleled source of information on the history and development of the English lexicon; its own website proclaims it ‘the definitive record of the language’. All literary and lexical researchers, however—while making grateful use of its magnificent resources (so far as the present website allows)—should be aware of its limitations as well as its strengths.

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