

FEMINIST CHRONICLES OF FORGOTTEN VOICES: EXPLORING FEMALE LEXICOGRAPHY, GENDERED LANGUAGE AND FRIENDSHIP IN PIP WILLIAMS' *THE DICTIONARY OF LOST WORDS*

IRINA RABINOVICH

Holon Institute of Technology, Israel

irener@hit.ac.il

ORCID: 0000-0003-4801-7365

DOI: 10.2478/saec-2026-0007

Title: Feminist Chronicles of Forgotten Voices: Exploring Female Lexicography, Gendered Language and Friendship in Pip Williams' *The Dictionary of Lost Words*

Abstract: This article examines Pip Williams' *The Dictionary of Lost Words* (2021) as both a literary narrative and a feminist intervention in the history of lexicography. By fictionalizing the creation of *The Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), the novel exposes how cultural norms, patriarchal authority, and editorial decisions shaped the inclusion and omission of words, particularly those tied to women's lives and experiences. Focusing on Esme Nicoll's journey to preserve "lost words," the analysis highlights the novel's engagement with questions of memory, marginalization, and the symbolic power of language.

Alongside literary interpretation, the article situates Williams' work within the overlooked contributions of real female lexicographers such as Hester Thrale Piozzi, Ann Fisher, and Edith Thompson. Their intellectual labor, often erased or overshadowed, provides crucial historical context for understanding the novel's feminist politics. The study argues that Williams' narrative functions as a form of linguistic activism: reclaiming silenced voices, foregrounding women's solidarity, and challenging the male-dominated historiography of language. By interweaving fiction, history, and feminist critique, the article demonstrates how literature can illuminate the political stakes of lexicography and the enduring struggle for gendered recognition in language.

Keywords: *Women's language; linguistic feminism; suffrage and language; literary historiography; Oxford English Dictionary;*

Introduction

This article examines Pip Williams' novel *The Dictionary of Lost Words* (2021) as both a literary narrative and a critical intervention in the history of lexicography. The novel reimagines the compilation of *The Oxford English Dictionary*, exposing how processes of word collection and definition were shaped not only by scholarly rigor but also by the cultural hierarchies of the Victorian period. Williams highlights the exclusion of terms associated with women's bodies, labor, and sexuality, demonstrating how lexicography could reinforce prevailing power structures by silencing or erasing the experiences of marginalized groups. Rather

than presenting language as a neutral record, the novel foregrounds the politics of word-making: what enters the dictionary, who decides, and whose voices are left out. These questions resonate beyond fiction, pointing to the often-overlooked contributions of real female lexicographers such as Hester Thrale Piozzi, Ann Fisher, and Edith Thompson. Their labor, frequently minimized or obscured, complicates the conventional narrative of the *OED* as a male-dominated scholarly enterprise and opens space for feminist reevaluations of linguistic history.

By combining close literary analysis with historical and theoretical perspectives, this article situates *The Dictionary of Lost Words* within the broader contexts of feminist criticism and sociolinguistics. It asks how literature can recover voices lost to institutional history, how dictionaries shape cultural memory, and how women's interventions in language both reflect and resist the gendered constraints of their time. In doing so, the article argues that Williams' work functions as a form of linguistic activism—one that challenges the supposed objectivity of lexicography and underscores the central role of women in shaping the cultural life of language.

Framing the Novel and Historical Context

This article uses Williams' novel as a critical lens to examine the intertwined narratives of the historical development of *The Oxford English Dictionary* and the pivotal yet often overlooked contributions of female lexicographers. By analyzing the fictionalized portrayal of word curation in the novel, the article highlights the real-life challenges and achievements of women like Hester Thrale Piozzi, whose work significantly influenced lexicography. Through this dual focus, the article aims to illuminate the broader historical context and underscore the importance of recognizing and preserving the linguistic heritage shaped by these pioneering women. This approach not only enriches our understanding of the *OED*'s history but also brings to light the vital role of feminine expression¹ in the evolution of the English language.

The novel also highlights women's friendships as sources of resilience against societal constraints. Intricately weaving together threads of linguistics, history, and feminism, the paper navigates the multi-layered narrative of *The Dictionary of Lost Words*, casting a spotlight on the resilience and influence of women throughout the ebb and flow of linguistic evolution.

The Dictionary of Lost Words delves into the ambitious project of creating *The Oxford English Dictionary*, aiming to comprehensively document the English language. This monumental endeavor began on February 1, 1884, marked by the publication of the first fascicle of the *OED* published in April 1928. The arduous process culminated in April 1928 with the release of the 125th and final fascicle, resulting in a comprehensive dictionary spanning twenty volumes and

¹ By "feminine expression", I refer to the linguistic contributions and stylistic choices historically associated with female lexicographers and their impact on the development of the English language.

encompassing over 400,000 words and phrases. Notably, the deliberate omission encompassed “feminine” terms tied to women’s sexual experiences, colloquial language, and everyday parlance. In a patriarchal society where discussions about female sexuality remained taboo, these words found themselves either ignored or relegated to the periphery. Stephen Turton cogently argues that “the historiography of dictionary-making has itself often been a “phallogological affair” (Turton 538), unveiling a perspective where works were predominantly authored and edited by men. Consequently, the *OED*, along with most dictionaries from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, failed to adequately capture the breadth of women’s experiences.

The novel revolves around the ambitious creation of the *OED*. The narrative weaves a rich mosaic of characters, with a notable focus on the lives of resolute and influential female figures. Central to the narrative is Esme, the primary protagonist, whose voyage shapes the storyline and propels the exploration of language, identity, and the untold narratives of women. Bereft of her mother at childbirth, Esme, the daughter of a lexicographer collaborating on the dictionary with Dr. James Murray, emerges as a compelling figure. While most characters in the narrative are factual figures connected to the *OED* project, including Dr. James A. H. Murray, his wife Ada, and their daughters, Esme Nicoll, her father Harry Nicoll, Esme’s friends Lizzie (a maid of the Murrays) and Tilda (an actress) are fictional creations. Esme’s formative years are shadowed by a tragic event when, at the age of five, she attempts to rescue the entry “lily” from the flames, resulting in severe hand injuries. Significantly, “Lily” was her mother’s name, and this poignant episode becomes emblematic of Esme’s yearning to uphold her mother’s memory and secure a tangible fragment of her identity. This act of safeguarding “lily” amidst the fire spotlights Esme’s deeply personal engagement to language and words. For her, the dictionary transcends a mere compilation of definitions; it holds an intimate resonance, embodying memories and sentiments intertwined with her mother’s legacy. Esme’s resolute response to the fire serves as a testament to her sustained capacity for resistance in the face of adversity.

This pivotal juncture further galvanizes her commitment to unearth “lost words” and grant voice to the stories and experiences of women akin to her mother, whose voices have endured neglect and marginalization. Subsequently, despite her youth, Esme begins to understand that “Some words are more important than others—I learned this, growing up in the Scriptorium. But it took me a long time to understand why” (Williams 3). This formative incident significantly shapes her perspective and fuels her quest to reclaim the “lost lexicon” representing the lives of women and those historically silenced and forgotten. Thus, her quest to preserve these “lost words,” particularly those that echo women’s experiences, emerges as a paramount impetus driving the novel’s exploration of gender, society, and identity. In her formative years, Esme’s existence is profoundly intertwined with the Scriptorium—a world enveloped by books, papers, and the very essence of language. Amidst its labyrinthine confines, she finds herself largely left to her own devices, wandering amidst the linguistic tapestry, absorbing the dialogues

of lexicographers, and immersing herself in the realm of words. The Scriptorium becomes both her sanctuary and her confinement, binding her to the words and the individuals fervently devoted to them. Her upbringing within these walls offers a unique vantage point, affording her the opportunity to witness the evolution of language and the intricate dynamics that influence it. Here, she perceives the nuanced terminology utilized to describe women and their roles, often detecting the disregard or dismissal of words and experiences tied to women and marginalized groups. Her formative years spent in the Scriptorium laid the foundation for her ardent dedication and fervor to unearth hidden narratives and amplify voices that have helped shape language. Esme's experiences within the Scriptorium propel her on a profound odyssey, an exploration into the intricate web of language and its profound influence on society—particularly on the lives of women and those whose experiences have remained relegated to the shadows by dominant historical narratives.

Against the backdrop of Esme's journey, Williams constructs a range of female figures whose lives foreground both resilience and constraint. From suffragists fervently advocating for women's rights to actresses, female laborers at the Scriptorium, and those at Oxford University Press, some of these women dare to challenge the established norms, exerting a lasting influence on both Esme's world and the realm of words. Through meticulous character development and thought-provoking plotlines, Williams intertwines the tales of these female figures, casting a revealing light on their trials, triumphs, and unwavering resilience in a world too often predisposed to silence their voices. As the narrative unfolds, readers are privy to the metamorphosis of Esme and some of her fellow female companions, witnessing their partial emancipation from societal constraints, their advocacy for transformation, and their instrumental role in charting the courses of their own fates. Together, their collective journey stands as an illustration of women's sustained intellectual and social agency, intellect, and determination.

Uncovering the Hidden Histories: Female Lexicographers and the *OED*

Williams' novel serves as a narrative tool to explore the historical development of *The Oxford English Dictionary* and the contributions of female lexicographers. *The Dictionary of Lost Words* fictionalizes the process of word curation for the *OED*, reflecting the real-life challenges faced by lexicographers. Through this lens, we can examine how prevailing norms of the time influenced the dictionary, inadvertently relegating certain words to obscurity while perpetuating the marginalization of voices that deserved representation.

The pioneer of female contributions to English lexicography emerged in the form of Hester Lynch Thrale Piozzi (1740-1821), who penned her own thesaurus – an achievement that saw publication in 1794 and earned her the distinction of being one of the earliest female lexicographers in the realm of English. A woman of notable intellect and independence, Piozzi defied the conventions of her era by immersing herself in intellectual and literary pursuits. Her engagement with

prominent intellectuals and involvement in literary circles were demonstrative of her intellectual prowess. Her close association with Samuel Johnson, renowned as the progenitor of English lexicography, further solidified her status. Johnson's much-admired *Dictionary of the English Language* had been published in 1755.

Despite the acclaim garnered by her works, they were regrettably overshadowed by a scandal stemming from her second marriage to an Italian music teacher in 1784. Additionally, some critics contend that British readers and reviewers were resistant to recognizing Piozzi's intent to forge a new brand of history. Her books, notably *British Synonymy* (1794) and her historical work *Retrospection* (1801), endured the most of this bias, with conventional standards of judgment being imposed upon them. Reviewers hesitated to acknowledge the potential for a successful world history to be authored by a female autodidact. This skepticism led to the faltering reception of *Retrospection*, as it exceeded perceived generic confines set for women writers, a point underscored by McCarthy's observation that the work "failed in part because it was perceived to have overstepped the generic limits allowed to women writers" (McCarthy 255). According to Rebecca Shapiro, "unlike many male lexicographers of her time—and despite her prodigious linguistic knowledge—Piozzi did not assert herself as an authority. Piozzi was both prescriptive and descriptive when writing about how most appropriately to converse in a natural or informal setting and her rationale for focusing on 'colloquial language'" (Shapiro 202).

Piozzi's diaries and letters reveal a keen awareness of societal expectations and gender roles, and she occasionally questioned the restrictions placed upon women in her society. However, it's important to remember that Piozzi was still a product of her time and lived within the confines of the prevailing social norms. As such, her views on women's rights and gender roles were limited by the context of the 18th century. Therefore, despite Piozzi's outwardly progressive vision, she ultimately upholds the notion that women's linguistic abilities should be channeled toward traditional objectives such as children's education and marital fulfillment. It appears that Piozzi strives to find a middle ground in advocating for gender-neutral language for certain words (like "silly," "ignorant," and "senseless") by citing examples from both genders. However, she refrains from overtly challenging the hierarchical structure that marginalizes feminine expressions. Within the prism of her era, some scholars and literary critics have dissected Piozzi's writings and unearthed elements that could be interpreted as proto-feminist or supportive of women's rights. Lubey, for instance, claims that though Piozzi "adhered to social hierarchies, and her writing does not articulate a coherent feminism" (Lubey 27), her works do exhibit a strategic employment of references that places her and her distinctively feminine encounters at the forefront. This approach highlights her intellectual prowess in a manner that distinguishes her from the established male authorities of her time.

Piozzi's successor, Ann Fisher, left an enduring mark through her authorship of several significant works, primarily focused on the English language. Among her notable publications are *A New Grammar* (1750), *The Pleasing In-*

structor (1750), *The New English Exercise Book* (1770), and *An Accurate New Spelling Dictionary* (1773), among others. Fisher's dictionary initially faced suppression due to allegations of her having pirated John Entick's *The New Spelling Dictionary* (1767). Nevertheless, the dispute was eventually resolved in her favor. Interestingly, such a bold accusation might not have been hurled at male lexicographers. Fisher's remarkable talents as a grammarian and linguist were already evident before the publication of her dictionary. Piozzi and Fisher were not solitary figures in their quest to enhance language and offer guidance to women, despite encountering recurring skepticism from male quarters. More favorably received were "Ladies" dictionaries or "dictionaries for women" that emerged during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These specialized reference works were crafted with the intention of furnishing definitions, explanations, and advice on subjects deemed pertinent to women's interests, pursuits, and societal roles. Attuned to women's specific needs, these dictionaries often concentrated on topics like etiquette, household management, fashion, needlework, and other facets of domestic life. In striving to educate and empower women, these lexicons facilitated knowledge and guidance, equipping them to navigate their roles as wives, mothers, and homemakers more adeptly.

In 1813, Anna Murphy authored *A First, Or Mother's Dictionary for Children*, intending to instruct "little boys and girls what it is proper for them to know". Maria Edgeworth's 1801 publication, *Early Lessons*, encompassed stories, essays, dialogues, and even a glossary (akin to a dictionary). According to Iversen, while most definitions of Murphy's *Mother's Dictionary* and *Edgeworth Glossary* "perpetuate such domestic ideologies, from its title to the definition of housewifery" they "allocated much more space to girls than other children's dictionaries" (Iversen 614), written by men, in which girls were almost invisible. Sophia Frances Anne Caulfeild and Blanche C. Seward's *The Dictionary of Needlework* (1882) offered exhaustive explanations related to various aspects of needlework, showcasing expertise and knowledge within a specific field. Although the count of dictionaries authored by women during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries might appear relatively modest, their efforts distinctly manifest engagement with language and an earnest desire to contribute to the comprehension and documentation of words and their meanings.

The Real and Imagined Contributions of Edith Thompson

Edith Thompson (1848-1929), a writer, historian, and lexicographer, plays a major role in the *Dictionary of Lost Words*. Within Williams' novel, the historical figure of Edith Thompson undergoes fictionalization, assuming the role of Esme's godmother, mentor, correspondent, and intimate friend. Edith, alongside her sister Elizabeth (also portrayed in the novel as Esme's friend), enthusiastically volunteered for the inception and refinement of the inaugural edition of *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Edith took charge of subediting the volume for entries under "C", while also meticulously proofreading fascicles spanning from "D" to "Z".

The collaborative effort of the two sisters led to a remarkable contribution of over 15,000 quotations to the dictionary. Dubbed “Ditte” by Esme, Edith emerges as a formidable role model who profoundly influences Esme’s intellectual sphere and provides guidance throughout the latter’s life journey.

Edith is notably recognized as the author of *A History of England* (1874), a work orchestrated and edited by Edward Freeman. This publication, which served as a pivotal historical resource for educational institutions in both England and America, aimed to provide an all-encompassing panorama of English history. However, akin to many historical works of its era, the book predominantly centers on political and male-centric viewpoints. It extensively highlighted the exploits of male sovereigns, leaders, and statesmen, reflecting the gender biases inherent to that period. The significant roles, contributions, and struggles of women in shaping society are either marginalized or disregarded altogether. Notably, even figures as influential as Mary Stuart, Queen Elizabeth, and Queen Victoria merit a mere two or three pages of coverage.

As Elize Garritzen stipulates, the process of publishing Thompson’s *History of England* underscores the expectation of subservience as a crucial trait for a female historian (2019: 95). Edward Freeman, Thompson’s editor and mentor, discouraged women writers from pursuing original research. Consequently, Thompson and her female contemporaries were constrained to conform to interpretations provided by men, devoid of any autonomy in thinking or research. Freeman habitually demeaned his female collaborators, employing terms like “sistren” and “hen-swans”, and denigrating them as part of the “hen flock” (Howsam 538). According to Shapiro, women striving to be scholars outside the realms of domesticity or devotion were often stigmatized as oddities or labelled unchaste (Shapiro 197). This translated into female historians and lexicographers occupying marginal positions within the professional sphere. They were consigned to assisting men in scholarly pursuits, much akin to Freeman’s wife and daughters, who engaged in tasks like indexing, proofreading, and citation correction (Garritzen 90). The marginalization of women extended beyond Freeman’s disparaging remarks and condescending attitudes toward his female associates. Similarly, in the novel, Esme becomes a target of mistreatment by a male colleague, the new sub-editor, Mr. Dankworth. Upon his arrival at the Scriptorium, he seizes Esme’s workspace, subsequently subjecting her work to intense scrutiny. His actions escalate to the point of incinerating her notes and openly censuring her for perceived syntactical deficiencies. This culminates in Esme experiencing feelings of physical threat and profound humiliation.

Despite the marginalization of female writers, the fictional character Ditte’s presence as a lexicographer and historian introduces a profound layer to her connection with Esme. Their correspondence extends beyond mere word definitions, delving into historical and societal implications these words carry within the English language. As fellow lexicographers, they share an ardent enthusiasm for language and an acute awareness of the significance of cataloguing and safeguarding the vast array of human experiences encapsulated by words. Through

their letters, they navigate the obstacles confronted by women throughout history and examine how language can both reinforce and challenge established societal norms.

In one of the letters addressed to Esme, Ditte employs a touch of humor while discussing the obsessive dedication of Ada Murray and her daughters, all integral figures in the Scriptorium, as they meticulously organize word slips for the dictionary. Ditte playfully suggests that Ada even humorously speculated that Dr. Murray's motivation for having a large family, eleven children to be exact, might have been connected to the dictionary's needs, stating, "I do believe the Dictionary might have faltered without it" (Williams 39). This implication underscores the invaluable role Murray's daughters played in the dictionary's creation. Ditte's perspective as a historian not only illuminates the evolution of language but also offers insights into the shifting perceptions of women's roles and contributions across eras. Remarkably, she does so while acknowledging her own acceptance of the modest role she occupied during her endeavors, whether in composing her historical work or making substantial contributions to the dictionary.

Esme's "Lost/Found Words"

Williams devotes particular attention to the moments when Esme discovers the absences within *The Oxford English Dictionary* and begins to collect what she calls "lost words". These episodes dramatize how omissions are never neutral accidents of scholarship but reflect the gendered and class-based hierarchies that govern cultural authority.

One of the earliest and most formative incidents occurs with the word *bondmaid*. While sitting beneath the sorting table in the Scriptorium, a slip falls into Esme's lap. Instead of handing it back, she keeps it, fascinated by its definition: "a slave girl ... or a bonded servant, or as someone who is bound to serve till death" (Williams 112). The definition resonates powerfully with her awareness of Lizzie, the Murray family's maid, who is effectively bound to a life of service. Lizzie herself explains that the term describes her condition, as someone "bound to serve the Murrays" until death (Williams 112). Believing she might change reality by removing the word from the dictionary, Esme conceals the slip — a childish act that nonetheless reveals her early conviction in the transformative power of language. Lizzie quickly reminds her that even without its entry in the *OED*, "bondmaids will always exist" (Williams 113). This small episode, however, becomes a pivotal turning point. It is not only about Esme's innocence, but also her dawning realization that omissions shape social perception: what is absent from authoritative texts may render whole lives invisible. As Mugglestone observes, "thousands of other words vanished for ever [sic] from the published fascicles" (Mugglestone 79), often not because they lacked meaning in everyday life but because they were judged too vulgar, colloquial, or lacking pedigree among "good writers".

From this incident onward, Esme begins to view words as cultural markers of power. Her growing awareness is sharpened by her encounter with the omission of

knackered, a term used by servants to describe fatigue from hard labor. Although nearly synonymous with *listless*—a word granted inclusion in the *OED* due to its long literary history dating back to 1440—*knackered* was rejected as improper and low. This stark contrast exposes the lexicographical bias toward elite, male-authored, and literary sources. Williams thus illustrates the way language codification privileges the speech of the powerful while ignoring that of the marginalized.

Esme's private lexicon expands as she moves beyond the Scriptorium into Oxford's Covered Market. There she befriends Mabel O'Shaughnessy, a former prostitute and seller of trinkets, who introduces her to a world of colloquial and taboo vocabulary absent from official records. From Mabel, Esme learns words such as *cunt* ("vagina; insult"), *quim*, and *morbs* ("grief") (Williams 127). These terms, dismissed by lexicographers as vulgar, nevertheless preserve women's lived experiences, emotions, and humor. Mabel gifts Esme not only the words but also the narratives behind them, showing that language is inseparable from context and community. Through Mabel, Williams foregrounds the cultural value of so-called "low" or "vulgar" speech, which functioned as repositories of women's knowledge excluded from literary or scholarly recognition.

Other women in Esme's life contribute to her growing collection. Lizzie, her closest confidante, adds words like *bostin* ("marvelous") and *mairt* ("friend"), terms rooted in working-class dialect. Their inclusion highlights how everyday female speech was a rich source of cultural expression systematically ignored by academic lexicography. Tilda, Esme's friend and lover, contributes another register of words, many tied to sexuality and women's political struggle. From Tilda, Esme learns *dollymop* ("a woman paid for occasional sexual favors"), *clitoris*, *knapped* ("a pregnant woman"), and *sisterhood* (used to describe women united by the suffrage cause) (Williams 142, 161). These terms not only expand Esme's lexicon but also signal how women's private vocabularies connect with broader feminist activism.

As Esme records these words on slips, she is struck by their fragility. She realizes that her "dictionary of lost words" may itself repeat the *OED*'s failure: by confining women's voices to slips in a trunk, she risks creating what she calls "a coffin" (Williams 247). Yet, a sudden revelation strikes her like a bolt—her Dictionary, once a haven for forgotten expressions, has unwittingly become a metaphorical partition, much like the Ladies' Gallery grille,² obstructing the raw truths and stories it should have heralded. The dictionary, says Esme, "hid what should be seen and silenced what should be heard. When Mabel was gone and I was gone, the trunk would be no more than a coffin" (Williams 247). This self-awareness complicates the notion of preservation, suggesting that even acts of recovery can reproduce silencing if words are not integrated into mainstream discourse. The

² Esme here refers to the most famous protest in the Ladies' Gallery which took place on 28th October 1908. Suffragettes from the Women's Freedom League carried out a number of protests in and around Parliament while Muriel Matters and Helen Fox chained themselves to the grille in the Ladies' Gallery, shouting, "We have been behind this insulting grille too long!" <https://www.michellesalter.com/blog/why-suffragettes-targeted-the-ladies-gallery-of-the-house-of-commons>

tension between recovery and containment underscores Williams' broader feminist point: dictionaries do not simply preserve language but actively shape whose voices are remembered and whose are forgotten.

Through *bondmaid*, *knackered*, and the array of words offered by Mabel, Lizzie, and Tilda, Williams positions Esme as both archivist and critic of lexicographical authority. Her "lost words" embody the cultural knowledge of women and the working class, groups excluded from the official record. In doing so, the novel dramatizes what Cheris Kramarae has argued more broadly: that "language operates as a tool made by men", muting women's experiences by excluding their linguistic forms (Kramarae 3). Esme's trunk of slips, however precarious, becomes an act of resistance—an alternative archive that restores the voices erased by the *OED* and insists that women's words are part of the fabric of English itself.

Echoes of Change: the Suffrage Movement Explored in *The Dictionary of Lost Words*

In the narrative journey of *The Dictionary of Lost Words*, the emergence of suffragettes stands as a pivotal moment in the ongoing struggle for women's rights. Leading the charge were Mary Smith, Millicent Fawcett, Emmeline Pankhurst, and Annie Kenney. In 1832, Mary Smith presented Parliament with the first women's suffrage petition. Millicent Fawcett assumed the presidency of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies in 1890, and Emmeline Pankhurst founded the Women's Social and Political Union. The passage of the People Act (1918) marked the watershed moment when women finally gained the right to vote, seen as a form of recognition for their contributions during the war. Although the act's scope was narrow, first-wave feminism achieved partial success; educated and affluent women over thirty were enfranchised. In *The Dictionary of Lost Words*, the depiction of suffragettes offers a layered view of the struggle for women's rights, reflecting distinct perspectives across three generations. Edith Thompson embodies the skepticism entrenched in many older generations toward the suffragette movement. While she acknowledges women's entitlement to vote, she opposes the militant tactics of suffragettes, advocating for a quieter, more subdued campaign that she believes will ultimately secure women's rights. Her outlook stems from traditional values and societal norms, prompting her to question the audacity of women attempting to disrupt the established order. Edith's character underscores the persistent notion that women's roles should remain within the domestic sphere, untouched by political activism.

Lizzie, a maid who fears the suffragette movement, adds further complexity to the narrative, spotlighting diverse reactions the movement provoked. Lizzie's fear arises from genuine concern for her stability within the existing social framework. Her character represents the apprehension felt by individuals, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, in response to the suffragettes' radical actions. Lizzie's perspective underscores the potential impact of social upheaval on those who lack the privilege to readily embrace change. As a working-class woman, she

worries about the movement's disruption jeopardizing her livelihood and tenuous equilibrium. Her hesitation to fully embrace the suffragette cause highlights the interplay of social status, economic factors, and personal fears. Lizzie's perspective exposes the real-world consequences of the suffragette movement, not just in the realm of politics, but in the everyday lives of often overlooked individuals. Her character emphasizes that not everyone could fully commit to the fight for women's rights, revealing the tension between the desire for change and the immediate consequences that change may entail.

In contrast to Edith and Lizzie, Esme occupies a middle position that balances traditional and progressive viewpoints. Her inner turmoil mirrors the conflict faced by some individuals as they grappled with the consequences of women's suffrage. Esme's uncertainties reflect broader societal ambivalence towards the movement, highlighting the intricate emotional journey undertaken by women like her, as they sought to harmonize tradition with the aspiration for equality. While she is dismayed by a statement in a slip referring to women as "suffragettes" defined by education yet childless and husbandless (Williams 287), Esme is also hesitant to engage in militant suffragette activities. Her character embodies the struggle between societal norms and the desire for change, a pivotal theme in the suffragette cause.

Tilda, a vibrant and assertive actress, epitomizes the bold and outspoken spirit of the suffragette movement. Her unwavering commitment and fierce determination spotlight the bravery and audacity of women leading the charge. Tilda's readiness to challenge conventions, both onstage and off, underscores the transformative impact of the suffragette campaign. She personifies the unyielding resolve of those who vehemently fought for their rights, her journey serving as a wellspring of motivation for characters within the novel and readers alike. Through the perspectives of different generations and attitudes towards suffragette pursuits—embodied by Lizzie, Edith, Esme, and Tilda—the novel sheds light on the multi-dimensional nature of the suffragette struggle. It portrays the internal battles, societal influences, and personal triumphs experienced by women as they navigated a shifting world and championed their right to a voice. The novel adeptly captures the evolution of attitudes and viewpoints surrounding women's suffrage, ultimately commemorating the resilience and steadfast commitment of trailblazers who paved the way for heightened gender equality.

Esme's quest for preserving often-underappreciated contributions of women to language is well in line with suffragettes' pursuit of proving that language is a powerful way to reshape perceptions and advocate for women's rights. Suffragettes often pointed out and criticized the gendered language used by men that excluded or marginalized women. They recognized that language played a significant role in reinforcing traditional gender roles and reinforcing the societal norms that limited women's rights and opportunities. Suffragettes maintained that the language used in laws, literature, and everyday communication perpetuated the idea that women were inferior or secondary to men. They believed that by challenging and reshaping language, they could contribute to broader social change and promote gender

equality. Their writings and speeches often emphasized the importance of inclusive language that recognized women as equal citizens and participants in society. In Emmeline Pankhurst's famous "Freedom or Death Speech" (1913), she refers to the long-standing patriarchal domination that repressed women for centuries, saying:

They have said to us [women], government rests upon force, the women haven't force, so they must submit. Well, we are showing them that government does not rest upon force at all: it rests upon consent. As long as women consent to be unjustly governed, they can be, but directly women say: "We withhold our consent, we will not be governed any longer so long as that government is unjust ... You can kill that woman, but she escapes you then; you cannot govern her. No power on earth can govern a human being, however feeble, who withholds his or her consent."³

Pankhurst's feminism emphasizes the significance of gender concerns over class issues and aimed to be inclusive of all women. Despite common misconceptions, she does not disregard the struggles faced by working-class women. Instead, she holds the perspective that addressing these issues through the lens of class struggle, as advocated by socialism and Marxism, primarily prioritizes men's interests and ultimately hinders the formation of shared connections among women, spanning across class boundaries. According to June Purvis, Pankhurst's "feminism, with its emphasis upon class cooperation between women, did not fit easily into any of the male political parties of the day nor into any of the broader political philosophies such as liberalism, socialism or conservatism" (Purvis 95). In a similar vein, *The Dictionary of Lost Words* delves into feminist themes by shedding light on the obstacles and constraints confronted by women during that era, challenges that could potentially be surmounted through unified female efforts. The character of Esme within the novel serves as a vehicle to explore the concept of female companionship as a foundation of support and assistance. This narrative underscores the profound bond that takes shape among the female protagonists, accentuating their mutual support and strength.

The dearth of women's rights is also reflected in the realm of language, where women often find themselves relatively muted due to their engagement with a system predominantly shaped by dominant groups such as men. Cheris Kramarae underscores that language operates as "a tool made by men", inherently carrying more masculine perspectives than feminine ones. Consequently, this leads to the gradual attenuation or "muting" of women's voices. This dilemma paradoxically compels women to utilize the same (inadequate) linguistic constructs to address their predicament. Kramarae regards the muted group framework as a valuable lens for delineating the language-related predicament faced by women (Kramarae 3).

The language, predominantly shaped by men, has been tailored to suit their experiences and communication needs. In contrast, women often find themselves in the challenging position of having to translate their thoughts and experiences into a linguistic framework that inadequately captures their reality. This disconnection necessitates a kind of linguistic adjustment. The theory of the "muted

³ This speech was delivered in Hartford, Connecticut on November 13, 1913.

group” can be deconstructed into several foundational assumptions. Firstly, men and women perceive the world through distinct lenses, molded by their unique life experiences. Secondly, men wield their political power to suppress the propagation of women’s ideas, thereby hindering their quest for public acknowledgment. In response, women are compelled to reshape their voices into a language that aligns with prevailing male norms.

Betty Friedan’s concept of the “feminine mystique” propagates the notion that women derive the most satisfaction from their roles as wives, mothers, and homemakers. This “mystique”, as Friedan occasionally terms it, serves as a tactic to persuade women to revert to traditional domestic positions. The mystique asserts that women can define themselves by responding with “Tom’s wife ... Mary’s mother to the question ‘Who am I’? However, they lack a personal image that guides them in understanding who they truly are, could be, or aspire to be” (Friedan 95). Women are identified based on their relational roles. Within the novel, Esme’s words echo Friedan’s assertion regarding women’s erosion of individual identity. Esme sorrowfully asserts: “I realized that the words most often used to define us were words that described our function in relation to others. Even the most benign words—maiden, wife, mother—told the world whether we were virgins or not. ... Which words would define me? Which would be used to judge or contain? I was no maiden, yet I was no man’s wife. And I had no desire to be”? (Williams 266-267), she questions. Williams employs her words to restore women to the male-dominated history of the *OED*. Williams is using language, specifically the voices and contributions of women, to challenge and rectify this imbalance. By emphasizing and integrating women’s experiences, words, and viewpoints, she is attempting to correct the historical oversight that has led to the marginalization of women’s roles, identities, and significance in language and culture. The novel is essentially engaging in a process of linguistic activism and revision. It is highlighting the ways in which language has been used to reinforce traditional gender roles and stereotypes, particularly through words that define women primarily in relation to others (such as “wife” and “mother”). By bringing attention to these issues and amplifying the voices of women, Williams aims to reconfigure the narrative, making it more inclusive and reflective of the diversity of human experiences, regardless of gender.

This article contributes to scholarship on feminist literary criticism, sociolinguistics, and historiography by showing how fictional narratives can intervene in archival silence. It demonstrates how Williams’ novel not only restores women’s roles in the making of *The Oxford English Dictionary* but also models feminist linguistic activism. By bridging literary analysis, feminist theory, and lexicographical history, this study highlights the power of literature to reshape cultural memory and to reframe scholarly discourse about language, authority, and gender.

Conclusions

The Dictionary of Lost Words illuminates, with both literary imagination and historical sensitivity, the overlooked contributions of women to the realm

of language and scholarship. By weaving together the lives of real and fictional women—Hester Thrale Piozzi, Ann Fisher, Edith Thompson, Ada Murray and her daughters, as well as Esme, Lizzie, Tilda, and Mabel—Williams restores to visibility the silent labor that made lexicography possible. In doing so, she exposes the cultural, political, and gendered hierarchies that governed which words were included in *The Oxford English Dictionary* and which were deliberately left to vanish. As argued by Turton, dictionary-making has long been a “phallogological affair” (Turton 538), and Williams’ narrative demonstrates how the *OED*, like other monumental works of its time, was shaped by patriarchal assumptions that privileged male-authored texts while erasing words from women’s speech, sexuality, and everyday labor.

Esme’s lifelong project to preserve “lost words” embodies a form of feminist resistance. Her lexicon—containing words such as *bondmaid*, *knackered*, *cunt*, *quim*, *morbs*, *bostin*, *mairt*, *dollymop*, *clitoris*, *knapped*, and *sisterhood*—functions as an alternative archive that safeguards marginalized voices excluded from authoritative sources. Yet, as Williams shows through Esme’s ambivalence about her trunk of slips as a possible “coffin” (Williams 247), even the act of recovery is fraught. Preservation can replicate silencing if words remain confined to hidden archives rather than integrated into public discourse. Here Williams anticipates Cheris Kramarae’s insight that “language operates as a tool made by men” (Kramarae 3), muting women’s experiences by shaping their voices into a system designed to exclude them. The novel dramatizes this paradox: women’s words can be gathered and cherished, but unless they are allowed entry into the public sphere, their vitality risks fading once more.

By embedding Esme’s narrative within the wider suffrage struggle, Williams also underscores that linguistic exclusion was inseparable from political disenfranchisement. Edith Thompson’s cautious skepticism, Lizzie’s fear, Esme’s ambivalence, and Tilda’s militancy together reflect the diverse responses women held toward political change. Their disagreements remind us that feminism has never been monolithic but always refracted through class, status, and temperament. The suffrage context further demonstrates that language itself was a battleground: as Emmeline Pankhurst’s “Freedom or Death Speech” declared, the power of consent—and its withdrawal—lay in the capacity of words to resist domination. June Purvis has shown that Pankhurst’s feminism, emphasizing women’s solidarity across class, could not be contained within the political frameworks of liberalism, socialism, or conservatism (Purvis 95). Williams’ novel echoes this refusal of containment by insisting that the dictionary itself, like the law and the ballot, is a site where women’s equality must be fought for and written into history.

At the same time, the novel resonates with Betty Friedan’s later critique of the “feminine mystique”, which defined women through relational identities—maidens, wives, mothers—rather than autonomous selves (Friedan 95). Esme’s reflection that “the words most often used to define us were words that described our function in relation to others” (Williams 266–267) illustrates how even benign lexical categories encode patriarchal norms. By foregrounding terms that capture

women's sexuality, labor, grief, and solidarity, Williams destabilizes this mystique, creating space for women to define themselves outside male-centric relational roles. In this way, the novel participates in what Rebecca Shapiro calls "linguistic activism," a conscious effort to reframe lexicography as an inclusive, socially responsive practice (Shapiro 202).

The Dictionary of Lost Words thus performs two interlocking acts of historiography. On one level, it reconstructs the silenced contributions of real female lexicographers—women whose intellectual labor was dismissed as auxiliary, domestic, or secondary to male scholarship. On another, it imagines a fictional archive of "lost words" that symbolizes the vast linguistic heritage excluded from dictionaries and from cultural memory. Together, these two strands invite readers to consider the politics of linguistic authority: how words enter or disappear from records, how gender shapes the boundaries of knowledge, and how literature can serve as an intervention into historiography itself.

In reclaiming the forgotten lexicons of women and the marginalized, Williams' novel is more than a historical fiction—it is an act of feminist theory in narrative form. It demonstrates that words are not inert definitions but living symbols of power, identity, and solidarity. As Esme's story reminds us, to collect and preserve words is also to collect and preserve lives, and to erase words is to risk erasing the experiences they encode. By bringing these "lost words" to the surface, Williams challenges the supposedly neutral foundations of lexicography and reframes language as a contested site where gender, culture, and politics converge.

For scholars of feminist criticism, sociolinguistics, and literary historiography, *The Dictionary of Lost Words* offers a compelling case study in how literature can function as feminist historiography of language. By interweaving fiction and fact, Williams creates a narrative that not only revisits the making of the *OED* but also redefines lexicography as an inherently political practice. Her novel reminds us that the ongoing struggle for gender equality is not only waged in parliaments and public squares but also in the words we choose to remember, define, and record.

Bibliography:

- Friedan, Betty, *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997.
- Garritzen, Elize, "Pasha and his Historic Harem: Edward A. Freeman, Edith Thompson and the Gendered Personae of late-Victorian Historians." In *How to be a Historian. Scholarly Personae in Historical Studies, 1800-2000*. Ed. Herman Paul. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019, pp. 89–106.
- Howsam, Leslie. "Academic Discipline or Literary Genre? The Establishment of Boundaries in Historical Writing." *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2024, 525–545.
- Iversen, Sarah Home, "To Teach Little Boys and Girls What It Is Proper for Them To Know: Gendered Education and the Nineteenth-Century Children's Dictionary." *Proceedings of the 15th EURALEX International Congress*, Oslo, Norway, 2012, 613-18.

Kramarae, Cheris, *Women and Men Speaking. Women and Men Speaking: Frameworks for Analysis*, Rowley, Massachusetts: Newbury House, 1981.

Lubey, Kathleen, "Marginalia as Feminist Use of the Book: Hester Piozzi's Spectator Annotations." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2020, 11-44.

McCarthy, William, *Hester Thrale Piozzi: Portrait of a Literary Woman*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1985.

Mugglestone, Lynda, *Lost for Words: The Hidden History of the Oxford English Dictionary*, New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2005.

Purvis, June, "Emmeline Pankhurst: a Biographical Interpretation." *Women's History Review*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2003, 73-102.

Shapiro, Rebecca, "The 'Wants' of Women: Lexicography and pedagogy in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Dictionaries". In *Historical Dictionaries in their Paratextual Context*, Eds. Roderick McConchie and Jukka Tyrkkö. De Gruyter, 2018, 187-210.

Turton, Stephen, "The Lexicographical Lesbian: Remaking the Body in Anne Lister's Erotic Glossary." *The Review of English Studies*, vol. 73, 2022, pp. 537-51.

Williams, Pip, *The Dictionary of Lost Words: a Novel*, New York: Ballantine Books, 2021.