

Gender, Grammar and Poetry: Early 17th-Century Miscellanies in the Light of Historical Sociolinguistics

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Professor Patricia Shaw *in memoriam*:

" Hwanon sculon cuman wise lareowas?"

The term "assigned gender" has been defined as the use of gender sensitive pronouns and collocations ("he/she, mother, king, who") with nouns other than those of human males and females (Guzmán 1989: 7). This is, at least, the very simplified rule you learn with your first steps in English. A little afterwards, depending on your tender age and/or the kind of method employed by your teacher, you are immediately provided with a list of exceptions. These, again, is more or less complete depending on your level: you start with just a few and the most frequent: a favourite pet, or ships. Then you read literary texts, and here you are introduced to "personification" as the reason for all the funny usages you encounter. You may be lucky and feel satisfied with this. Or you may not, and have the uncomfortable feeling that there are "too many exceptions" and "particular cases". Or, even worse, you may be a student of English philology from a queer University where History of the English Language is properly taught. You will then find out that things happened to be almost the other way round in Old English (henceforth OE). There was such thing as grammatical gender, being an overt concordance category, with word shape as the basic criteria for the grouping of nouns under three labels: "masculine" "femenine" and "neuter" - which did not need to coincide with the extra-linguistic distribution into "male", "female", "neither". According to received wisdom, grammatical gender disappeared almost completely by the end of the Middle English (henceforth ME) period, once the complexity of OE morphology had been drastically reduced. From then onwards, any usage as the one described above has been assumed to belong to the province of "elevated style" -poetry for instance.

More detailed and finer analyses have detected in assigned gender a wider variety of roles, apart from the above mentioned. Among these, its functioning as an attitudinal marker on the part of the speaker seems to me crucial in a right understanding of the whole subject, since its role as style indicator could be really subsumed under the first. And here what I have very loosely (and maybe too daringly) termed as "historical linguistic attitudes" come very much to the point. We need to go back to OE gender system to explain this.

The correlation between losses in inflection and the disappearance of grammatical gender as described above is, again, an over-simplified view of things. What disappeared was, for the most part, overt marking within the noun phrase (NP henceforth): but there was no reason for, say, a “stone” not to keep its original ascription to the group of “masculines” ... unless there was another possibility already in OE. This was really the case, since generally anaphoric reference outside the NP tended to correlate with extra-linguistic reality. That is, there was already another set of criteria for gender classification present in the language, ready to be used in the new morphosyntactic situation. This, however, does not necessarily imply, in my view, the complete abandonment of the old groupings; they were there, in the shape of “habits”, also ready to be employed in non-neutral texts, when assigned gender was required as style indicator, attitudinal marker or pure rhetorical trope. This paper will not be focused on these pragmatical functions or on textual typology. Rather, I will concentrate on a very small area of the whole scenario: the preservation (or non-preservation) of those “linguistic habits” regarding gender assignment in a very specific text type.

I intend to explore this usage in poetry, and more particularly, in the miscellanies circulating in the first decades of the 17th-c in England. The paper offers just a bite of a wider project, in which trends in gender assignment will be traced in an ampler and sufficiently representative corpus of the miscellanies written, copied, or published in England during the 17th and 18th centuries.

Here I report my first findings (and also the problems encountered) on just three miscellanies: *The Stoughton Manuscript* (1636); *The Harmony of the Muses* (1654) and *Witts Recreations* (from which the third part, devoted to proverbs has been excluded, for reasons of corpus consistence) (1640) (TSM, THOTM and WR, respectively, henceforth). They are very easily available through the facsimiles published by Scolar Press. I have chosen miscellanies for two intimately connected reasons. Firstly, because as Colin Gibson, the editor of the facsimile of WR, points out (xv) “minor poetry and occasional verse” (...) “constituted popular reading in the period”. We also know that many of the poems were song-lyrics; it is therefore likely that by contributing powerfully to the shaping of popular taste, they also helped to root literary traditions, among them, “linguistic habits regarding gender assignments”¹.

Secondly, because of the nature of their diffusion. As Mary Hobbs, the editor to TSM, points out in her introduction (ix):

Early 17th-c poets did not as a rule publish their poems, but they were circulated in mss, lent to friends & often by them lent to others, who copied all or some of the poems into their own verse miscellanies. They were commonly kept over many years by students, lawyers, and the more literate of courtiers and country gentlemen. They were frequently left to their descendants, who in turn sometimes added to the collections.

¹Work along this line of thought is being carried out by Laura Mandell and Rita Railey from the Universities of Miami and Santa Barbara, though their collection of miscellanies starts in the 18th century. Websites: <http://miavx1.muohio.edu/~mandellc> and <http://humanitas.ucsb.edu/users/raley>.

I am of the opinion that the peculiar features of this textual transmission make miscellanies, in principle, inviting to historical socio-linguistics². The applicability of sociolinguistic patterns of research to past stages of the language has often been questioned. However, if we are ready to accept that languages are cultural artifacts and that, consequently, language change cannot be properly explained without language variation, it seems plausible that historical sociolinguistics may have some answers to certain questions: at least, regarding paths of diffusion of novelties, preservation of old features, etc.

My work with these miscellanies focuses on language usage, and, more particularly, on one that, judging from the history of English language and literature, has been subject to certain changes. My concern here will be, just to highlight probably the best-known instance, the change or preservation of the assigned gender of nouns such as "sun, moon, death, love".

Received wisdom points at the historical and cultural circumstances of Western Europe as the explanation for many of these: the classical antiquity and its permanence in myths, rhetorical norms, etc, from very early in English, etc. For my research I wanted to concentrate on historiography in small case, as it were, and therefore, I selected the concept of "social networks". This is an application to linguistic research of a former concept by Barnes made by Lesley and James Milroy. It is based in the fact that people "interact meaningfully as individuals, in addition to forming parts of structured, functional institutions such as classes, castes or occupational groups" (Milroy 1992 [1987]: 45-46).

The assumption is that linguistic features "navigate" along the knots and ropes tying up these networks. Researchers like Ingrid Tieken deduce from this that linguistic change can be assumed to sail the same waters and, therefore, can be detected and mapped. She has applied this set of procedures especially to 18th-c English, rather successfully in my opinion, even with the caveat that many sources of evidence are absent for past stages of the language³. The first step in the research will be to investigate whether some kind of social network can be identified in connection with these miscellanies. And there are many clues pointing in this direction in the three works I have used for this paper.

The textual transmission has already been mentioned. If we turn our attention to the authors, we realise that they belong to what could be called the "Oxford circle". Most of them are associated to that University, Westminster School and the Inns of Court, and the books circulated mainly among these circles. We obviously lack the space to trace detailed connections, and surely many nouns from the list of contributors will ring bells to most "connaisseurs" of the period. I will highlight just some of them:

² Research in this area is relatively recent and many of its issues and findings have been the subject of much fruitful debate in publications, but above all, and most interestingly from my point of view, in sessions, workshops, lectures, etc in such important conferences as ESSE 1997 in Hungary and 10 ICEHL 1998 in Manchester. These were attended by leading specialists - both in sociolinguistics and historical linguistics, and, of course the combination of the two, such as Peter Trudgill, Norman Blake, the research team in Helsinki, Lesley and James Milroy or Ingrid Tieken.

³This, in principle, should not prevent us from applying the model: partial pictures are the only possibility for many language stages, no matter the theoretical model for research we employ. But see Tieken: 1996 for detailed discussion.

* Henry King, whose poems form the second part of TSM, and whose habits of commissioning scribes to get careful copies of these works leads us to think that he personally knew many of the poets in the manuscripts.

* TWR is dedicated to Francis Newport, future Earl of Bradford, educated at Christ Church, Oxford, where, and I quote from the editor's Preface "many of the known contributors to the miscellany had themselves received an education. Newport would have been well acquainted with the tradition of witty writing and might be expected to appreciate such a dedication".

* Robert Chamberlain, the possible compiler of THOTM, belonged to the Exeter College, Oxford, and is the author or compiler of various collections of witty epigrams, poems and jests, etc. His presence at Oxford would have given him access to the manuscript verse miscellanies circulating there.

These miscellanies are just three in a very popular tradition well rooted in this "Oxford circle", and clear connections can be established with many other manuscripts and printed books of similar characteristics circulating at the time. Mary Hobbs' preface to the SM is crucial in my view in order to consider this "circle" as a candidate for social network analysis:

Collation of the wide range of poems covered by SM -wherever they occur, even if in apparently corrupt versions- has, moreover, revealed an interesting pattern among contemporary mss of shared titles, errors and peculiar readings which makes it possible to group together, not only mss as a whole, but also sections of related poems within them (sometimes surprisingly late). The chief categories into which these fall are topical poems and elegies connected with school or university, poems associated with the Inns of Court, and song lyrics. These various groups reveal how relatively small and inter-related were the contemporary circles in which mss of this type were copied and circulated.

There is, of course, in my agenda, much work to be done, mainly in the tracing of historical data and relationships, as to field work, on the one hand. From there, reflection and subsequent refining as to the theoretical problems which may arise, most probably in what relates to the standard definition of "social network"; the size and structure of the groups mapped in the field work; and the kind of works (miscellanies) employed as our Ariadne's thread. But this does not belong here. I would like to go back to "subjects" in Hobbs' quotation, as turning point in order to deal with the third issue of this paper: assigned gender and "linguistic habits", taken as one of the linguistic features navigating the lines of the (possible) network.

What I have done here is gathering a number of data out of a first reading of the three miscellanies. It is obvious that they need refinement, and this will come once a vital part of the research project is performed: the computerization of the texts. This is a preliminary approach, though given the number of poems (846: 132 in TSM; 630 in WR & 84 in THOTM) and the variety of authors in these three miscellanies (90, approximately, though only a small part are well known poets) I suspect the main trends might not be too deviated. 136 instances of assigned gender (as defined at the beginning of this paper) are not too many especially if we compare it with the abundance of examples in the following century, (notorious for his favouring the trope of personification).

Before I go on with the analysis of the data, I feel I should mention something which may cause difficulties in the judging of some cases: the neuter possessive “its” is first recorded in 1598, and spread rapidly. However, “his” for neuter reference can be found (for instance in the *King James Bible*) as a minority usage until about 1670 (Barber 1981[1976]: 206). In my examples, I must admit I have come across certain cases which seemed arguable to me, or even clearly pointing out to neuter: for instance, quotation (1):

(1) *Upon a Discourtesie*
Head akes with casting fancies in *his* mold,
Hand shakes with setting of these fancies down
Hart quacks to think that love shud wax so cold
 And each part takes my wrong to be *his* own
 (THOTM, p. 95; vv.-10)

Though this is perhaps the most doubtful, there are a few more cases in which the sole sign is the possessive adjective or pronoun “his”. I have not counted capital letters for the noun, since this is a consistent pattern in the three miscellanies for every substantive, irrespective of their stylistic status, i.e. personified images. My choice was to keep them, at least as symptoms, and with all possible caveats, because they appear in a period of clear change towards the adoption of the new form “its”. This is clearly shown by its presence in a significant number of instances (some by the same author of a questionable example) and in the language of poetry, “intentionally divergent from the general usage” (Görlach 1991[1978]: 35).

These 136 examples refer to 68 different nouns of which 50 appear with just one example; 7 nouns appear twice, and 6 nouns appear three times. Only 5 nouns appear more than 6 times: “love, sun, death, nature, earth”. This should not be surprising, given the kind of subjects in our miscellanies: the main theme of TSM and THOTM is love, treated in a variety of ways. Other “topoi” include occupations, real characters, including historical characters and their passings-away (therefore death), friendship, music, “contemptus mundi”, and, not surprisingly, literature, language and books. Fig.1 shows detailed figures:

“Love” is, with 19 instances, the most frequent: with just a couple of exceptions, the assigned gender is masculine. “Sun” follows it, with 12 instances, all of them, masculine. Besides, these instances are in general the longest and contain the clearest personifications and the most clearly shaped images in this respect. And, (surprise, surprise), they are embodied by the classical divinities Cupid and Phoebus Apollo, whose names frequently appear in the poems; cf. quotations (2) & (3):

(2) I saw faire Flora take the aire,
 When *Phoebus* shn’d and it was faire;
 The heavens to allay the heat,
 Sent drops of raine, which gently beat
 The *sun* retires, asham’d to see
 That *he* was barr’d from killing thee
 Then *Boreas* took such high disdain,
 That soon *he* dri’d those drops again;
 A cunning plot and most divine!
 Thus to mix *his* breath with thine.
 (Humphrey Hyde, *On his Mrs.*, WR, 126)

1. love	2 F	17 M	19	37. greif (grief)	M
2. sun		M	12	38. ground	F
3. death	3	6 M	9	39. head	M
4. nature	M		8	40. heart	M
5. earth	F		6	41. history	F
6. fortune	F		3	42. hope	F
7. mind	F		3	43. hypocrisy	F
8. nightingale (philomel)	F		3	44. ice	F
9. phoenix	F		3	45. invention	F
10. soul	F		3	46. land (conquest)	F
11. world	F		3	47. March	M
12. horse (steed)		M	2	48. marigould	F
13. May	F	M	2	49. Mayne	M
14. moon	F		2	50. meteor	M
15. music	F		2	51. opus	M
16. reason	F		2	52. phantasy	F
17. rose	F		2	53. Rome	F
18. vertue	F		2	54. rumour	F
19. age	F			55. ship	M
20. appetite		M		56. sin	F
21. ape		M		57. snake	M
22. bay	F			58. spite	F
23. bee	F			59. spirit	M
24. beer	F			60. stone	M
25. Boreas		M		61. time	F
26. Brook		M		62. tongue	F
27. cedar		M		63. tree	F
28. crow	F			64. week	F
29. country	F			65. winter	F
30. eagle		M		66. worm	F
31. ermine		M		67. usus	M
31. ewe	F				
faith	F				
fame	F				
34. fly	F				
35. gander		M			
36. greatness	F				

Fig. 1: Table of nouns with assigned gender in the miscellanies

(3) *Love* is a *boy*, and subject to the rod
 Some say, but lovers say *he* is a *god*;
 I think that *love* is neither *god* nor *boy*,
 but a mad-braines imaginary toy.
 (*On Cupid*, WR, 350)

(4) The **Sun** had run **his** race, and now began
His Steeds to water in the Western Seas
 (*To Her* again, THOTM, p.91; vv.1-2)

If we go back to the grammatical genders of “lufu” and “sunne” in OE (or, for all that matters, though it does not have many examples in our collection, “mona”) we find that they are exactly the opposite: feminine in the first two, masculine in the third. This should not be especially meaningful, if we just take into account the general lines of evolution of the grammatical category of gender and that those words are referred to by “it” in neutral styles. The trouble is, one, that they are not just words, but very frequent “topoi” in the literary tradition; two, that other “topoi” such as “earth”, “death” (to limit ourselves to the five most frequent in our corpus) did preserve that original gender, i.e. might be in accordance with those “linguistic habits” I have mentioned before. The examples themselves provide hints to explain this.

The English cultural world has been such that the influence of the classical world has prevailed over any other -with more strength in the Renaissance, but certainly coming from the Middle Ages, and not only via French literature. And the classical world has embodied Love”, “Sun”, “Moon” “Earth” in a mythology where they are gods and goddesses with clearcut features among which sexual roles and archetypes are not the minor feature; cf. quotations number (5) & (6):

(5) The *Lustfull Sun ingendereth* with the *earth*,
And *she*, as fruitfull, yeelds a happy birth
Of plants, of herbs, of flowers; [...❁]
...
The false *Moon* hath *her* changes; [...❁]
(*A sonnet*, THOTM, p. 5; vv. 5-7; v. 11)

(6) Mark how the bashfull *Morne* in *Vaine*,
Doth court the amorous *Marigould*;
With sighing blasts, and weeping raine;
Yet *shee* refuseth to vnfold.
But when the *Planett of the Day*
Approacheth with *his* powerfull ray;
Then *shee* spreads, then *shee* receaues
His warmer Beames into *her* *Virgin* Leaues.
(TSM, p.94; vv1-8)

These gods are, in my opinion, too powerful competitors in the English cultural scenario we are all familiar with for ancient images to prevail over them, when the genders were different. This is not the case with “Earth” where image shaping was probably easier; similarly, with abstract nouns of the type “virtue”, “reason”, “music”, “fame”, “phantasy”, “fortune”. We are not yet in the 18th-c, where personification is particularly abundant in the case of these abstract nouns, especially in what concerns vices, virtues, etc. This is evident from the fact that, though they constitute the most numerous group, with well-known exceptions we have just one quotation for each, at most two or three. The genders (the vast majority feminine, as we would expect from cultural importations), but the tendency is starting.

These cultural importations are probably behind the genders of other groups: “Rome”, obviously, and “country”; “Nature”, and names of flowers, such as “rose”; importations which, in some cases, coincide with original genders in English, as it is the case, besides the most outstanding mentioned above, of “soul”. Connected with this, the group of the names of animals is particularly interesting:

"nightingale" (F), a most popular poetical bird, and very consistent in its assigned gender from the very famous first instance in the medieval poem *The Owl and the Nightingale*; but also "gander", "horse", "ape", "bee", "crow", "eagle", "ermine", "ewe", "fly", "snake", "worm". "Eagle" and "ermine" have preserved the gender of their parent language (French, Latin); and our instances show the original genders of the OE words. I think that these usages instantiate what I referred to as "linguistic habits": I am of the opinion that "it" -reference with nouns of animals was not very frequent in OE: and certainly it is not in subsequent periods of the language. Leaving apart those nouns which refer specifically to males or females ("gander") whose pronominal reference makes them to a certain degree independent of pragmatic factors, "it" is really the exception with certain types of animals, generally also implying pragmatic choices; more frequent, on the other hand, in neutral language styles.

What I find important here, however, is that, since we are situated within the domain of the literary poetic language, "non-it" co-reference can be expected, as in many other very common pragmatic situations: and that there, the original OE genders tend to be preserved⁴ as can be clearly shown in other poetical corpora.⁵

Intentionally, I have left for the end "death", the third more frequent (not surprising either; assiduous visitor in poetry, especially in a collection of epithaphs, as the second part of one of the miscellanies). Here, the original Germanic gender has been preserved for the impersonation, with very few exceptions. But the case is different, very different from the case of "Earth". As a matter of fact, "mors" is feminine in Latin and "Thanatos" is masculine in Classical Greek. What there seems to be lacking here is a "god" or a "goddess": a figure clearly identified as a man or a woman, easily available for prosopopoeia in which features relevant for sexual differences are important. Such a figure did not exist, so the Germanic archetype survived, reinforced by its continuous use as a literary "topos", very often sharing the screen with the Graeco-Roman gods, as it is shown in quotation number (7):

(7) As *Love* and *Death* once travel'd on the way,
 They met together, and together lay
 Both in a bed; when *Love* for all *his* heath,
 Found in the night *Death's* coldness was so great,
 That all *his* flames could hardly keep *him* warm,
 Betimes **he** rose, and speedily did arm,
His naked body, but through too much haste,
 Som of *Death's* shafts he took neer *his* being placed
 Leaving behind *him* many of *his* own,
 Which change to *him*, being blind, is still unknown
 Through which mistaking, and *his* want of eyes,
 A double wrong to Nature did arise;
 For when *Love* thinks to inflame a youthful heart

⁴Of course, I'm being a bit of a cheater here: I know, from other corpora and research, that this is the case.

⁵ I will not enter here in discussions about popular vs erudite poetry though a recurrent image in my mind when dealing with this kind of subjects, I must admit, is "Mr. Stork" in the Dumbo film by Disney.

With *his* own shafts, *he* kills with *deaths* cold dart;
(Walton Poole, *On Love and Death*, THOTM, p.16; vv. 1-15)

My point is that the history of the grammatical category of gender, very probably is, from its very origin, the result of a combination of linguistic features and cultural images. These have been interacting and reinforcing one another, and the perception and production on the part of the speakers may not be necessarily coincident, thus contributing to a multi-faced image. Whereas is an oversimplification to say that “sunne is feminine in the north countries and masculine in the sun on account of the difference in vigour” (Pei: 1967), the reality under this statement is that culture specific-metaphors and images are continuously being built and re-built around certain features (and changing, of course alongside the trails the different cultures happen to take in time). And shifts like those detected in my examples are probably symptoms of cultural histories, mutual influences, changes; in a word, of the shaping of our common European cultural world.

In spite of the highly emotional statement, or perhaps, because of it, I’m basically a linguist, and therefore I cannot avoid the temptation of connecting the things above described with what some consider “pure linguistic facts”. I’ve always wondered if all this poetic topoi and genders can be, in a way, related to a notion like Schleicher’s “Sprachbund” regarding the Western Europe linguistic area (why not if we are ready to accept the use of Latin as the lingua franca of knowledge as a plausible explanation for this?)

And turning again to sociolinguistics, if sound change diffusion is explained taking into account social factors (and social network analysis is being effectively employed as a tool in this) assigned gender seems particularly prone to exploration by this same approach. I suspect that in this respect, and employing Labov’s terms⁶, we should be speaking of “change from above” in the sense that these images have been imported into the culture from those people in a privileged position: simply because they could read and write and could get familiar with them. I am not speaking here, I’m afraid, only of Henry King and the rest of the Oxford circle -but also of Alfred the Great, or Aelfric, or the Beowulf poet, or Chaucer, or Gower... The classical world is not so “new” as many would want it as far as English is concerned. Perhaps the notion of “linguistic habits” should be refined and kept separate from “cultural archtypes”, at least, in the epistemological level. What, to me, happened as far as gender assignment in English is concerned in the literary language is that certain linguistic habits pervived where there was no specially powerful reason to be otherwise -whether stylistic, cultural, linguistic... in one word, pragmatic.

These miscellanies are interesting in all I have said so far, because they show an important stage in the whole story, because of the historical period in which they appeared, and because of the possibility of exploring them from a sociolinguistic approach. They are also tempting from many other points of view, of which spelling practices, evidence testing for historical morphophonology, editing issues, ec are not minor ones. But this, definitely, belongs to wider projects.

⁶ For characterization and discussion of both this and “change from below” see MacMahon, 1994: 244-245.

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