

Editing the Wiktionary Entry for “Female”

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Abstract

This is one in a series of “legal fictions” that I have been publishing in law journals. It concerns the roles that law, art, and language play in the manufacture and destruction of female identity.

Female

1. Belonging to the [sex](#) which typically produces [eggs](#) ([ova](#)) . . .

===Etymology===

Borrowed from `{{io|en|feminine}}`, `{{der|io|fr|féminin}}`, `{{der|io|it|femminile}}`, `{{der|io|es|femenino}}`, from `{{io|la|fēminīnus}}`, from `{{m|la|fēmina|woman}}`, from base word - `{{io|ine-pro|Proto-Indo-European *dheh1-mn-eh2||who sucks}}`. Related also to `{{fētus}}` and `{{felare|la|to suck}}`.

[edit]

Editing female (section)

In academic year 2007-2008, 22-year-old Yale art student and radical etymologist Aliza Shvarts deconstructed the alarming Proto-Indo-European base word of “female” by self-inducing many possible pregnancies and then aborting them. Shvarts offered her project to her professors as a senior thesis, announcing that it consisted of two elements: The first component involved a series of videos showing her cramping in various Connecticut motel bathtubs as a result of ingesting unnamed abortifacients. The second feature consisted of an *objet* Shvarts compiled out of Saran wrap, Vaseline, and blood that she collected from her procedures.

Shvarts's rebellion constituted an offense against international linguistics but it did not qualify as a crime under the Connecticut Penal Code: In 1971's [Abele v. Markele](#), federal judge Edward J. Lumbard liberated females from their jurisprudential if not etymological dilemma by striking down an 1860's state statute that penalized self-induction with a five year prison sentence. "The Connecticut anti-abortion laws take from women the power to determine whether or not to have a child," Lumbard proclaimed. "In 1860, when these statutes were enacted in their present form, women had few rights. Since then, however, their status in our society has changed dramatically."

Had it? While Shvarts could not be arrested, manacled, tried, and incarcerated for putting daylight between her body and its putative **d^heh₁-m̄n-eh₂//who sucks* derivation, she was punished: Her classmates swarmed the university's Beinecke Plaza and cheered while sophomore John Behan, the leader of Choose Life at Yale, [declared](#) that "CLAY and the entire Yale community, I think, are appalled at what was a serious lapse in taste on the part of the student and the Yale art department." Days later, Wanda Franz, President of the National Right to Life Committee, appeared on Fox News and [characterized](#) Shvarts as a depraved serial killer. Panicking Yale deans thereafter commanded that Shvarts appear before them, and swiftly issued a press release claiming that Shvarts had confessed to committing a fraud. "Had these acts been real, they would have violated basic ethical standards and raised serious mental and physical health concerns," spokeswoman Helaine S. Klasky [wrote](#) on April 17, 2008.

Shvarts responded by [composing](#) an essay in the *Yale Daily News*, where she explained that she only told the Yale administrators that she could not be sure if she became pregnant or not. She [continued her assault on lexical patriarchy](#) by describing the reality of her pregnancies as "a matter of reading." She [later](#) clarified that her endurances should be called "miscarriages" rather than abortions because miscarriages exist as woman-defined occasions that unfurl outside of hospitals. The term "miscarriages," she allowed, also proved the most apt name for her art practice, wherein she mis-carried her own body and culture as a matter of intent.

The repercussions continued apace: On April 18, the *Wall Street Journal's* [James Taratano](#) conjectured that Shvarts was actually a secret double-agent language preservationist: "Could it be that

Aliza Shvarts is an opponent of abortion who has staged a hoax aimed at embarrassing those who support or countenance abortion?” Taratano asked hopefully. On April 23, next to a front page article whose banner headline erroneously asserted *Hillary Comes Up Big*, the [New Haven Register](#) reported that Yale “banned” Shvarts’s art project unless and until she admitted in writing that her provocation embodied a “fiction.” In the end, Shvarts declined to sacrifice her baccalaureate on the sacred altar of feminist hermeneutics. She submitted another project in lieu of her videos and blood cube. Repeated web scourings, however, do not disclose what that enterprise might have been.

Today, Shvarts pursues her Ph.D. in performance studies at N.Y.U. Avid youtube searches reveal that in the winter of 2009 she submitted a seminar [final](#). The enterprise saw her sitting on the floor splay-legged while wrapping a gift and airing simultaneously a blurry vaginal video with a creepy voice over. And in March of 2017, she [gave](#) a 40-minute speech about capitalism, Ad Reinhardt, the Rothko chapel, and “difficult art” in New York’s blue chip Dominique Lévy gallery. These flights of fancy were both cerebral and extremely boring. They certainly cannot match Shvarts’s early efforts to extirpate the root meanings of “female.” But then, what can?

Aliza Shvarts’s abortion art demonstrated that federal judge Edward J. Lumbard was a nice person and an adorable airhead who believed mistakenly that he could give women “power:” More than thirty years after *Abele v. Markele*, a female Yale senior trying to swap out the Proto-Indo-European base word “she who sucks” for a “she who seeks extreme freedom” neologism would find herself proscribed as a mentally ill mass murderer.

The struggle, moreover, persists today: Contemporary liberationist word-workers who find themselves staring Shvartslike at their Accuhome Pregnancy Urine Midstream Testing Kit wand will similarly face a cabal of grammars that conspire to drag them back to their identity’s putative origins. Such woefully inseminated bluestockings who sit in their beds shivering at the prospect of facing down yet another abortion and attempt to self-soothe with a brief interlude of feminist web paleographical research will find their hopes disappointed. Indeed, these haggard critical-lexicographers will discover that the basal origins of “feminism” themselves link that term irreparably to “fetus.” For “fetus” is born

out of not only the dreadful “*d^heh₁(y)-” but is also the Sanskrit suck-phrase “धयति.” Moreover, धयति is cognate with the Latin *fellō*, which then skids into *felare*, thus offering the extra word-origin whammy of “fellatio.”

What is the sucking one to do? If said anarcho-philologist happens to be eleven weeks pregnant, she may just want to pause her enquiries for a moment to soak her e-O.E.D. in her tears. As the confused linguist collapses, she will sense within the region of her belly button an entity that is as strange as the language she studies, as it may be erased (with a couple of doses of RU-486) and yet not really disappear. The gravid if harmless wretch (*qua* Johnson) will weep undecodable morphemes for a while, until she draws strength from the crazily brave life example of Aliza Shvarts. Then, she will duly remind herself that she is not only pregnant, and reputedly female, but also a proud bisexual Chicax pescatarian who counts herself a great fan of *felare* as long as it is consensual and mutually affirming.

The pregnant Wiktionary editor’s reassertion of her existential nonsuckingness does not mean that she will stop crying immediately. About an hour of sobbingly paging through W.W. Skeat’s *The Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* may yet still pass. Yet Aliza Shvarts’s rebellious philology continues to offer its heart-lifting promise: Black people, Latinx people, trans people, queer people, and/or women people have been terminating and adopting words for a long time, the desperate etymologist will recall. How all of this may help out with the abortion decision remains unclear, but she hereby resolves that she *may change her social status dramatically* by inventing her own name, even if John Behan brands her transgression a sin of lapsed taste or Wanda Franz and Helaine S. Klasky call her intervention a sign of mass-murdering lunacy. In honor of Aliza Shvarts and Judge Edward J. Lumbard, the uppity jabberwock may elect not a noun but rather a verb -- *secliber*, say, which is a portmanteau of *secan*, the Old English term for “search for; pursue; long for, wish for” and *liber*, Latin for both “book” and “free.” *Secliber* thus means one who Shvartsishly searches for freedom.

And then finally, after a little bit more research, this *secliber* will discover that mis-carrying Wiktionary’s etymological explanation for “female” turns out to be absurdly easy. For we must always

remember, and never forget, that the galactically vast [majority](#) of Wikipedia editors are rich white college-educated men.

Perhaps this is why sister *seclibers* who click on Wiktionary's entry for [*d^heh₁-m̥n-eh₂](#) will discover no real proof that women have been linguistically fated since Neolithic times to provide mouth and breast for men and children.

Instead, Wiktionary very helpfully [says](#): “Wiktionary does not yet have a reconstruction page for Proto-Indo-European/d^heh₁-m̥n-eh₂.” And a tireless ransacking of Google only turns up references back to the original non-citation, in the endless loops of mob rule and false confirmation that in today's world qualify as knowledge.

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