

The French refer to us  
= when they can bear to =  
as 'LES FUCKINGS'  
BECAUSE THATS THE WORD  
they keep hearing us use  
when we're EN VACANCES.

## Mind Your Language

Swearing is a strange thing: it often expresses two contradictory conditions simultaneously. We swear to show fear, and also to show that we're not afraid. We take the name of God in vain at precisely the moment when we should be most circumspect ('Jesus, sorry I didn't recognize you, Vicar'). Swearing can help to release tension. We swear when we are angry, or to emphasize a point, or when we feel that we've lost control of a situation. We swear in order to shock, to impress or to flirt. We swear to show that we care, and to show that we couldn't give a toss.<sup>1</sup> Bad language is called 'transgressive'<sup>2</sup> because it goes beyond or steps over a line of general acceptability.

But the use of language as a weapon need not just be about four-letter words. As we shall see, many communities have been marginalized or discriminated against on account of their race, gender or sexuality by mainstream society, which uses language to keep them in an inferior position. When these groups seize back the initiative, it is often language that helps them to recover lost ground and status within society.

### \*\*\*\* words

Courtesy was introduced into Britain by the Norman invaders, who came over with William the Conqueror in 1066. Discourtesy had existed for centuries before, though not under that name. The idea of courtly behaviour overrode the much coarser ways and language

<sup>1</sup> Toss: 'In negative contexts: a jot, a whit, a very small amount.' The first written use comes, amazingly, in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876): 'I don't care a toss where you are.'

<sup>2</sup> Transgressive – from the French *transgresser*, ultimately from the Latin *trans* ('across') and *gradi* ('go').



that had held sway until then, which is why the vast majority of swear-words are Old English or Anglo-Saxon. There might not even have been a corresponding term in the French spoken by the barons; and Latin, which they introduced to this country (see Chapter 1), was likely to have been considerably more genteel. *Wank*, for example, is Old English, while the more upmarket 'masturbate' is Latin. 'Fuck' is Old English; 'coitus' and 'intercourse' are Latin. 'Fornication' has splendidly classical roots, arising from the Latin word *fornix*, meaning 'arch, vaulted chamber' but also 'brothel'.

Swearing can be shocking, but it has always been central to our behaviour as human beings. Even the Greeks and Romans let rip now and again. Essentially, swearing takes three forms:

- \* Words to do with excretion
- \* Sexual language or imagery
- \* Religious or blasphemous<sup>3</sup> vocabulary

Excretion-related swearing starts early because small children are naturally curious about it. They quickly learn the taboo nature of certain bodily functions, and they continue to experiment with that knowledge in conversation. In the case of sexual imagery, it is hardly surprising that our thoughts turn to swearing when hormones start us raging towards puberty. And we invoke the name of the divine either to call upon or challenge them: either to call upon their strength for our aid or, more commonly these days, to disdain their perceived omnipotence.

Who swears? Pretty much everyone, it seems, if the circumstances are appropriate. Each society has its own sign language for obscenity, such as the V-sign, the single finger, the finger inside the circled fingers, but this is extremely limited in comparison with the spoken language, which offers a vast number of options. We swear in public, in private, on our own, with friends, at work, and sometimes in front

<sup>3</sup> Blasphemous – from the Greek *blasphēmos*, meaning 'evil speaking'.

of our own family. But swearing is status-dependent. You would be more likely to swear at a fellow worker than at your employer, and you might not want to swear in front of an employee because swearing implies a sort of intimacy, and that exists only at certain social levels. You do it when you know you can get away with it. But how have attitudes to bad language changed over the centuries, and why have certain languages, such as English, developed such a multiplicity of ways in which to keep an uncivil tongue?

## Historical swearing

When people give evidence in court these days, they have the option of swearing on the Bible that the evidence they are about to give is the truth, 'so help me God'. This is the oldest sense of the verb to swear, to which we find references in the laws of King Alfred (c.900) and the Lindisfarne Gospels (c.950), as the *OED* defines it, 'To make a solemn declaration of statement with an appeal to God or a superhuman being, or to some sacred object, in confirmation of what is said; to take an oath'. The sense of 'to swear at', as in 'to imprecate evil up by an oath; to address with profane imprecation' dates from the seventeenth century. The implication is that one would never commit perjury if the result was a lifelong sentence of eternal damnation.

Among the earliest blasphemies on record are Middle English ones that refer to parts of God's body, such as 'slids (God's eyelids), 'sfoot (God's foot), 'steeth (God's teeth) and zounds (God's wounds). Referring to His bones, people were likely to exclaim God's bodskins, odsbodikins or gadsbudlikins. Another exclamation was gadzooks (God's hooks), which might refer to the nails that pierced Christ's flesh. As swearing has evolved, the body parts have remained, as in 'My arse!' In these days of secularization, with fewer and fewer



people attending conventional church services, expressions invoking the Godhead (Jesus, God, Christ) have lost some of their power to shock, but practising Christians are still likely to find them offensive.

The Church was all-powerful during the Middle Ages, but after the Reformation<sup>4</sup> its authority began to diminish. As people emerged from under its shadow, devil began to be used more as a term of abuse – proof that the very mention of Satan's name was no longer guaranteed to make everyone turn to stone. And as words such as damn and hell slowly lost their power to shock, there were always other words you could use if you had hit your thumb with a hammer, from shit to a handy new word that began with 'f'.

It was the Carmelite friars of Cambridge who were the first targets of bad language in writing. In a document written some time before the fifteenth century we find a line in cod Latin that reads, *Non sunt in coeli, quia gxddbov xxxkxzt pg ifmk*. The first five words mean 'They are not in heaven because...' The next four words are written in a simple code: step back one letter in each case and you get *fuccant vivrys of heli*. The 'v' is pronounced 'u': take off the -ant third person plural ending and you are left staring at the word *fucc*, or fuck in modern parlance. The rest of this sentence is more or less English: 'they fuck the wives of Ely'. It's the sort of sentiment that you might expect to see scratched on a toilet door, and yet this disgraceful slur was made about the friars of Cambridge and the womenfolk of Ely.

The word 'fuck' is an ancient Germanic word. The Middle Dutch *fokken*, the Norwegian *fukka* and the Swedish *focka* mean roughly the same thing. However, it did not always occupy the hottest seat in the history of copulation. The apparently blameless noun 'swivel', which today is guilty of little more than helping an office chair to rotate, has something of a shady past, unconnected to its meaning as 'a simple fastening or coupling device made so that the object fastened to it can

<sup>4</sup> The Reformation – a Protestant movement that, emerging in the sixteenth century, attempted to reform the all-powerful Roman Catholic Church.

turn freely upon it'. 'Swivel' was derived from the Old English 'swifan', which also gave us swive, a word that, from our earliest (fourteenth-century) records onwards, meant 'to copulate'. The impolite associations were certainly not lost on English speakers around 800 years ago, and Geoffrey Chaucer, for one, never missed a chance to insert a 'swive' when the situation arose: 'Thus swived was this carpenter's wife' is one example from 'The Miller's Tale'. The word continued to perform indelicately for centuries, although with more appetite north of the border, until it dropped pretty much out of sight in the eighteenth century. The *OED*'s last sighting of it is from a publication called *Secreta Secret* (1898): 'Don't bathe on a full stomach: nor swive.'

## X-rated words

The shock value of 'fuck' has lessened a great deal over the years. If you still doubt it, ask a twelve-year-old wearing a French Connection UK T-shirt. Maybe this is because the British have found the word so fucking useful – excuse my French<sup>5</sup> – in normal conversation. Indeed, it has peppered so much of our speech that the French refer to us – when they can bear to – as 'Les Fuckings' because that's the word they keep hearing us use when we're *en vacances*.

'Fuck' is an incredibly hard-working word, with multiple grammatical uses. It is a noun: 'Frankly, my dear, I don't give a fuck.' A verb: 'Fuck me, I'm knackered' or 'I'm fucking off home now, OK?' An adjective, or a verbal adjective: 'It was just a fucking joke, right?' An adverb: 'That was fucking hard work.' A past participle: 'Fucked if I know.' And, of course, an interjection: 'Fuck off!' It's a strange thing to urge someone to do, since it's probably a fate that most people would gladly accept, but terms of abuse don't always obey the laws of logic. This taboo word may have lost some of its potency, but

<sup>5</sup> *Harper's Magazine* 1895: 'Palaces be durned! Excuse my French! Used as a euphemism for bad language ever since.'



there is another four-letter word that still has the power to shock.

Language scholars have been speculating for years about the etymological history of the 'c-word' – or 'the female external genital organs', to quote the *OED*. Francis Grose in his 1788 *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* defined 'c\*\*t' [*sic*] as 'a nasty name for a nasty thing'. Eric Partridge (1894–1979), the famous linguist and author of *The Dictionary of Slang*, found something of 'quintessential femineity' (i.e. femininity) in the opening two letters of the word *cunt*.

Some writers who have traced the word's classical routes may be following their hopes, or a political agenda, or a pure coincidence, more than strict linguistic practice, since it's much more likely to be Germanic than from Greek or Latin. But just to see where this curious trail leads, certain academics have taken the Latin *cognosco* (I know) and derived from it words such as 'connote', 'canny' and 'cunning'. Then they take a noun such as *cuneus*, which means 'a wedge', and the related *cunnus*, which does (finally) mean the 'female pudenda' or, in Horace's words, an 'unchaste woman'. A little bit of *cognosco* and a lot of *cunnus* imply, they say, that *cunt* combines quintessential femininity and some Earth Mother-know-it-all wisdom. These examples might help explain why Geoffrey Chaucer sidesteps the obvious in 'The Wife of Bath's Tale':

*For certeyn, olde dotard, by youre leve,  
Ye shul have queynte right y-nough at eve.*

The word 'queynte' was a familiar euphemism for 'cunt', though later on the bawdy wench alludes to her sexual prowess more fulsomely when she says:

*And trewely, as myne housbondes tolde me,  
I had the beste quoniam mighte be.*

'Quoniam' is the Latin word for 'whereas', so the euphemism here is 'whatever' or 'whatsit' or, as some might say, 'thingy'. There have been other variations right up to the modern day, from the nineteenth-century 'hootchie-cootchie' to a suggestion of sexual gratification in the Small Faces' psychedelia-soaked hit 'Itchycoo Park' (1967). Elsewhere, cunts have featured on the British landscape as far back as the year 1230, usually based near red-light areas. There was a Gropecuntelane in London and in Oxford (where it was later renamed Magpie Lane), a Grapcunt Lane in York (which became Grape Lane), a Cunte Street in Bristol (later renamed Host Street), and a *Rue Grattecon* (scratchcunt street) in Paris. London's Gropecuntelane was later shortened to Grope Lane, then Grub Street in the eighteenth century, then Milton Street in 1830. All this street renaming is probably just as well in purely commercial terms: it wouldn't look too good on a business card to have your office based in Gropecunt Lane.

The language used by the characters in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* was among the fruitiest<sup>6</sup> in early English literature, but elsewhere bad language was not necessarily bad. 'Svmmmer is icumen in' was written in approximately 1240. It was a Middle English chart-topper, and it runs as follows:

*Svmer is icumen in  
Lhude sing cuccu!  
Groweth sed and bloweth med  
And springth the wude nu.  
Sing cuccu!*

*Awe bleateth after lomb,  
lbouth after calue cu,  
Bulluc sterteth, bucke uerteth.  
Murie sing cuccu!*

Summer is a-coming in  
Loudly sing cuckoo  
Groweth seed and bloweth mead  
And springs the wood anew  
Sing cuckoo!

Ewe bleateth after lamb,  
Calf loweth after cow,  
Bullock starteth, buck farteth,  
Merry sing cuckoo!

<sup>6</sup> Fruity, 1. mid-seventeenth-century adjective, Of or pertaining to or resembling fruit. 2. 1844. Of wine: having the taste of the grape. 3. *colloq.* Full of rich or strong quality; highly interesting, attractive, or suggestive.



Bullocks start and bucks fart, and nobody seems to care. It wasn't obscene, of course: barely even bawdy. It was merely a frank expression of rustic life, close to the earth, the animals, the elements. If the Victorians objected to the odd word, that was in part because of the genteel horror of bodily parts – or farts – which was a reaction to the loucheness of the eighteenth century. Queen Victoria's prudery was not intrinsically religious, but muscular Christianity had never been as strong as in the nineteenth century. And of course, there are no rude words in the Bible, are there?

### Biblical bad language

The Bible, which has had so much effect on our turns of speech (see Chapter 4), also contains strong words and (as TV announcements occasionally warn us) scenes of a sexual nature. Take the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah: their destruction in approximately 2000 BC, graphically delineated in Genesis 18–19, was linked to their reputation for 'immorality'. 'Sodomy' has been a byword for homosexual sex since records began – 'vile sunne of sodomye' (according to Robert of Gloucester's *Metrical Chronicle* (1297), cited in the *OED*). Gomorrah, on the other hand, seems to have got off lightly. (Gonorrhoea? No, different story: that means 'flow of seed' in Greek.) A similar flow of seed connected the brothers Er and Onan (Genesis 38:9). Er was the first-born son of Judah, and when he died childless, Judah ordered Er's brother Onan to marry the widow Tamar. Onan, though, seems not to have fancied marriage to Tamar, so he 'spilled [his seed] on the ground'. He tossed himself off, in other words. This, we are told, 'displeased the Lord: wherefore he slew him also'. It was a German writer who first coined the term 'onanism' in 1649. Since then, the term, sometimes translated as

'self-pollution', has spread around the world, and Onan's name, if not his seed, lived on long after him.

Within the books of the Bible there is prostitution (Ezekiel 23:8, Hosea 1:2), rape (Genesis 39:7–23, 2 Samuel 13:1–14), incest (Genesis 19:30–38), testicle-squeezing (Genesis 24:2–9, 47:29), as well as flashing (by David, 2 Samuel 6:14 and 16:20–23) and mass foreskin-slashing (David again, Samuel 18:27). In the second book of Kings (18:27) and Isaiah (36:12) the Assyrian Rab-Shakeh asks if his men are expected to 'eat their own dung and drink their own piss'. A phrase uttered in wrath and that (politely) translates as 'every man-child' but actually means 'he that pisses', is sprayed across six places in the first book of Samuel (25:22, 25:34), the first book of Kings (14:10, 16:10–11, 21:21) and 2 Kings (9:8).

After the Reformation, literary censorship was undertaken by the Privy Council,<sup>7</sup> and theatrical censorship by the Master of the King's Revels. Writers such as William Shakespeare had to find subtle ways of inserting earthy words. An example of how he did this appears in *Measure for Measure*, when he used 'counsellors' as a pun on 'cunt-sellers': 'Good counsellors lack no clients' (I.ii). In *Twelfth Night* Malvolio spells it out: 'By my life, this is my lady's hand! These be her very C's, her U's, and her T's' (II.v). If the 'and' were pronounced distinctly enough as 'en' (N), the audience would have been left in no doubt as to the reference. The most famous Shakespeare 'cunt' pun is when Hamlet asks Ophelia: 'Do you think I meant country matters?' (III.iii), emphasizing the first syllable of 'country' in case the matter is at all ambivalent. He had tried this before, in *The Comedy of Errors* (1590): 'she is spherical, like a globe; I could find out countries in her' (III.ii), and in *Henry IV Part Two* (1597): 'The rest of thy low-countries have made a shift to eat up thy Holland' (II.ii).

<sup>7</sup> Formerly the inner cabal of the sovereign consisting of princes, archbishops and specially chosen ministers, past and present.



The punning reference is to Holland, one of the Low Countries, and also to the position of the vagina, low down the body.

Despite the word's ubiquity in the past, 'cunt' is still the ultimate taboo utterance. When a Tony Harrison poem containing it was broadcast on Channel 4 in 1985, the *Daily Mail* splashed its front page with the banner headline 'FOUR-LETTER TV POEM FURY'. And two years later, amid the sometimes unendurable tension of one of the worst-tempered Test series in cricket history, Pakistani umpire Shakoor Rana went several steps further than lifting one finger in the air when he called Mike Gatting a 'fucking, cheating cunt'. The *Independent* was the only newspaper that printed his tirade uncensored.

'People who swear,' say disapproving parents, 'are just displaying their lack of vocabulary.' In fact, there is an absolute wealth of swearing vocabulary to choose from, some of it 'disguised' to conceal its roots. Few maiden aunts would be thrown into a flutter at the sound of the word *berk*, for example, surely an innocuous word for a 'fool'. In fact, it came into the language during the 1930s (first attestation 1936), and is cockney rhyming slang: 'Berkshire (or Berkeley) hunt' – 'cunt'.

### Thomas Bowdler and the Victorians

The Obscene Publications Act became law in 1857, in a bid to keep us all safe from unprotected (i.e. uncensored) literature. Someone who would have been among its most enthusiastic proponents, had he not died before it was passed, was the Edinburgh doctor Thomas Bowdler (1754–1825). Bowdler made it clear that he loved Shakespeare, but nevertheless believed that nothing 'can afford an excuse for profaneness or obscenity; and if these could be obliterated, the transcendent [*sic*] genius of the poet would

undoubtedly shine with more unclouded lustre'. He proved so zealous at expurgating texts that 'to bowdlerize' means just that. His ten-volume *Family Shakespeare*, 'in which nothing is added to the original text; but those words and expressions are omitted which cannot with propriety be read aloud in a family', went on sale in December 1818. Every reference to 'God' is replaced by 'Heaven'. Bowdler's main tool, however, was a pair of scissors – not the most agile editing device – so many speeches were simply hacked and ended up resembling a hedge that has been ruined by an incompetent gardener.

Having struggled with many of Shakespeare's passages, as it were, he gave up altogether on *Othello*, advising that as it was 'unfortunately little suited to family reading', it should be transferred 'from the parlour to the cabinet'. Bowdler's work was successful during his own lifetime, and went through five editions by the 1860s. He even attempted to work a similar magic with Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–88). Luckily, he never got his hands on John Cleland's *Fanny Hill*, or *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, which came out, to titillate literate adults, between 1748 and 1749.

As society grew ever more genteel during the nineteenth century, more and more effort went into ensuring social delicacy. This purification process lasted for some time, as indicated by a 1959 edition of Chambers's *Twentieth Century English Dictionary*. Its editor, William Geddie, MA, B.Sc., described his aim as 'to include all words in general use in literary and conversational English', but he acknowledged that he had cut out 'some dead slang'. The chances are, therefore, that Dr Geddie did not use the words 'fuck', 'cunt' or 'wank' in his conversational English, since they certainly appear nowhere in his dictionary. Nor do we find any mention of the lesser



horrors shit, crap or bollock. One of the chinks in his lexicon is the noun twat, which he had to admit came from a line of verse by Robert Browning in which it referred to nuns' head-gear. (The great poet seems to have misunderstood the 1660 poem *Vanity of the Vanities* by Sir Henry Vane the Younger: 'They talked of his having a Cardinall's hat, They'd send him as soon an Old Nun's Twat.') The coy entry in Chambers for 'twat' reads 'pudendum muliebre: (*Browning*, blunderingly) part of a nun's dress'. The Latin words mean 'female organ'. Browning's poem, *Pippa Passes* (1848): 'Then owls and bats / Cows and twats / Monks and nuns in a cloister's moods / Adjourn to the oak-stump pantry.'

Translators and editors went to great lengths to avoid causing offence to readers, some of whom might be ladies, and who would be genuinely scandalized by ripe language or indelicate scenes. Half of the nineteenth-century editions of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) were bowdlerized, writes Noel Perrin in his book on Thomas Bowdler (see Further Reading, page 294). Swift writes of the younger members of the tiny Lilliputian army looking up, as they marched through his legs, to catch a glimpse of his genitals – but not in the Victorian classroom editions. When the tables are turned and Gulliver is a homunculus amid the giants of Brobdingnag, Swift recounts visiting the boudoir of a lady, one of whose breasts 'stood prominent six Foot, and could not be less than sixteen in Circumference. The Nipple was about half the Bigness of my Head, and the Hew both of that and the Dug so varified with Spots, Pimples, and Freckles, that nothing could appear more nauseous.' Again, the description rarely remained to trouble Queen Victoria's schoolchildren.

These days, the Lord Chamberlain's Office (LCO) attends to such matters as state visits, investitures, garden parties, royal weddings and

funerals. But the LCO used to be the official censor for all theatres in Britain. So long as theatre companies produced licensed plays, no problem arose. But increasingly during the 1960s, independently minded writers and directors were looking to put on more controversial work. It is not uncommon when looking at manuscripts of plays presented during that period to see the Lord Chamberlain's blue pencil striking out lines that were considered unsuitable. The Royal Court Theatre in London often fell foul of the LCO, one notable occasion being when it wanted to stage *Saved*, Edward Bond's 1965 play about urban violence, in which a baby is stoned in a pram. The theatre frequently resorted to declaring itself a private club so that it could perform works without fear of prosecution.

Curiously, it wasn't just groundbreaking new theatre to which the Lord Chamberlain objected. Classical works, such as *Lysistrata* by Aristophanes, *Mrs Warren's Profession* by George Bernard Shaw, and *Hedda Gabler* by Henrik Ibsen all fell foul of the LCO, until the institution was abolished under the Theatres Act of 1968. The fact that the Lord Chamberlain's Office was once considered necessary, however, is further evidence of the power of language.

#### What a load of bollocks

Has any other part of the body acquired so many alternative names? Here are just a few:

Apricots; Balls; Bollocks; Cobblers (Cobbler's Awls); Cods; Cojones; Conkers; Family jewels; Goolies (see Chapter 7, page 181); Henry Halls; Knackers; Love-apples; Lunchbox; Maracas (knackers); Meat and two veg; Nadgers; Nads; Niagaras (Niagara Falls); Orchestras (Orchestra Stalls); Nuts; Packet; Plums; Privates; Pills; Rocks; Stones; Taters; Town Halls; Unmentionables.



## Rude words and euphemisms

As well as hard-core, X-rated<sup>8</sup> words, there has never been a shortage of boorish<sup>9</sup> words with which to abuse others or oneself. The Middle English word 'pillicock' meant 'penis' around 1300–25. By 1598 it meant 'young boy'. The *OED* cites a sixteenth-century use of pillock in the sense of 'the penis', spelt 'pillok'. The 'pillock' spelling dates from the 1970. The child's term willie also appeared in the early twentieth century, but that was long preceded by dick, the shortened version of Richard, which began to appear in the mid-sixteenth century, and had hardened into a familiar term for the male private parts by the late eighteenth century.

The *OED* lists eight separate nouns all called cock, as well as one, almost certainly a mistake, in Dr Johnson's *Dictionary*, meaning 'the notch of an arrow'. But there is really only one which concerns us: the first. Its twenty-three definitions begin with King Alfred referring to the domestic fowl, around AD 897. Definition number twenty, in language redolent of the *OED*'s first edition, reads 'Penis', followed by: 'The current name among the people, but, *pudoris causa* [i.e. to spare our blushes] not admissible in polite speech or literature; in scientific language the Latin is used.' The first citation is from *Amends for Ladies* by Nathaniel Field (1597–1619): 'Oh man what art thou? When thy cock is up?' The most recent citation is from *Landfall* (1969) by A.S. Byatt: 'She had her hand on his cock.' 'There's no need to be crude.' Cocksucker is attested from 1891. The same work, a scrap book by one Edward Farmer, defines 'cock-teaser' or 'cockchafer' as 'a girl in the habit of permitting all familiarities but the last'.

<sup>8</sup> A government committee reported in 1950: 'We recommend that a new category of films be established (which might be called "X") from which children under 16 should be entirely excluded.'

<sup>9</sup> Boor, c.1430: 'Husband, peasant, countryman, a clown.' 1598: 'A peasant, a rustic, with lack of refinement implied; a country clown ... Any rude, ill-bred fellow.'

And then there's prick, which has only one entry for the noun. Around AD 1000 it meant 'an impression in a surface or body made by pricking or piercing; a puncture.' The fifth sub-heading, and by far the fullest, concerns 'Anything that pricks or pierces; an instrument or organ having a sharp point.' (We're getting closer.) There are five further definitions within this but the seventeenth definition, in the 1989 second edition of the *OED*, is more up-front: 'The penis. *coarse slang*,' it says simply. The first citation is from 1592: 'The pissing Boye lift up his pricke.' The late Ed McBain (1926–2005) gets the last citation, from his 1976 novel *Guns*: 'Jocko had ... a very small pecker ... Blood on the bulging pectorals, tiny contradictory prick.' The word 'prick' as 'vulgar term of abuse for a man' is wholly twentieth-century. Eric Partridge noted 'prick-teaser', akin to 'cock-teaser', in the supplement to his *Dictionary of Slang* (1961).

It is a curious fact that the rudest letter in the alphabet, measured in sheer numbers, may well be B. The word bastard entered the language via Old French from the medieval Latin *bastardus*, though, appropriately perhaps, we are not quite sure of that word's parentage. The Old French *filz de bast* meant 'packsaddler's son', and was used, incredibly, to describe 'the offspring of an amorous itinerant mule driver', who stopped for long enough to use a packsaddle for a pillow but was gone again by sunrise. Extraordinary if true.

There is also bloody, of course, which these days hardly raises an eyebrow, but was once considered ruder than 'fuck'. It has been used to add emphasis since the mid-seventeenth century, and may have some sort of aristocratic connection, given the 'bloods' (a word for aristocratic rowdies) and their inability to hold their drink without serious consequences for lawns, windows, chambermaids and so on. Bloody drunk was another way of saying 'as drunk as a lord'. 'Bloody' was held in high esteem as a swear-word, and frequently went



unspelt when quoted until quite recently. Perhaps people believed that the blood in question was that of Christ; some thought the word was a truncated version of 'by Our Lady'.

A different type of b-word, **bugger**, was used originally to refer to heretics, especially the Albigensians, a small sect who flourished around southern France in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and who followed the ancient religion of Manichaeism, a creed which held that everything sprang from the two principles of light and darkness, or good (God) and evil (Satan). The Old French word for 'heretic' is *bougre*, via Dutch. This seems to have piggybacked upon the medieval Latin word *bulgarus*, meaning 'a Bulgarian'. At that time Bulgarians belonged to the Orthodox Church, which held views regarded as heretical by the Roman Church. During the sixteenth century, the term came to be equated with sodomy, on the grounds that forbidden sex was synonymous with heresy, and from the early eighteenth century onwards the word 'bugger' became a term of abuse directed at homosexuals. Casually, or 'In low language', says the *OED*, 'bugger' has since 1719 also been a term of affection: 'silly bugger', 'clever bugger', etc. **Bugger all**, first cited in 1937, means 'nothing'. The twentieth century transferred the meaning of the verb from sex to, simply, 'to mess up or spoil', or 'to be tired out'.

Those wanting to refer to sex in a vernacular way, but who dislike the words offered so far, have several less offensive terms at their disposal. **Bonk** is what people say when they can't bring themselves to say 'fuck'. A listlessly upper-class word, first attested in 1975, it probably comes from the sound made when two SUV vehicles have a minor collision in a Fulham side-street. 'Oh, sorry, did I bonk you?' says one driver, who then realizes, as the colour drains from his cheeks, that the comment could have been misinterpreted.

Earthier by far is the eighteenth-century use of the verb to **shag**.

Even if you weren't aware of its origins, this reeks of the farmyard: you can really imagine two shaggy-haired dogs getting down and having a good rut. Perhaps, for that reason, it wasn't the most romantic description ever coined for the act of union, though it may be why we forgive Mike Myers for naming his 'love interest' Heather Graham 'Felicity Shagwell' in the second Austin Powers film, *The Spy Who Shagged Me* (1999). 'Shag' is a word that demands not to be taken too seriously. In fact, it was hijacked for sexual purposes in the late eighteenth century: prior to that, the *OED* compared it to the Scots and Late Middle English 'shog', meaning 'to shake or roll from side to side'. **Screw** is another word that, since the early eighteenth century, has meant 'to have sex'. It also shares with 'fuck' the sub-meaning of implied clumsiness, as in 'I really fucked/screwed that up.' However, 'screw' turns in two directions at once, as it can also be used in approbatory expressions, such as 'He's got his head screwed on right, that boy.'

One other erotic 'b' is the everyday word for 'fellatio': the **blow-job**. Back in the 1970s, about the only place you could find language like that was in the controversial magazine *Oz*, which had started in Australia in 1963. 'Blow-job' is first noted in 1961 as the Anglo-Saxon term for 'fellatio' (from the Latin *fellare*, 'to suck'). So where does blowing come into it, and why isn't it called a 'suck-job'? Does 'suck-job' just sound wrong? The explanation is unclear, especially since the *OED* has not, so far, stepped into this particular fray. But given that slang terms for sexual activities can be highly figurative (compare the verb 'to eat' as US slang for 'to practice fellatio or cunnilingus...', cited first in 1927), if we look at some of the other meanings of the verb 'to blow', some ideas emerge. One is that the action of blowing is like the water and air ejected through a whale's blow-hole, to which ejaculation is compared. The action



of blowing bellows or the coals of a fire (both 1596) is figurative for stirring up passion or anger, which could be of a sexual nature. When something 'blows up' into an argument, it's clear that feelings are running high. When a soldier turns his 'blow-lamp' on to something, the object becomes extremely hot. Jazz musicians blow their horn, and the action of putting an instrument in the mouth could provoke comparisons. According to *Cassell's Dictionary of Slang*, 'blow-job' arrived from 'basket-job', which was a gay term in the 1940s, 'basket' being a slang word for the male genitals.

The journey of come towards sexual fulfilment has been eventful. The *OED* doesn't get round to it until the seventeenth definition, dating it as mid-seventeenth-century, by which time we have already met usages such as 'come to pass', 'come about' and 'come into being'. Be warned: the rules are different in other languages. If you're at the end of a meeting in Spain and you try to say, in Spanish, '*tengo que correr*', hoping it means 'I've got to run', you could be announcing that you're about to have an orgasm, or that you're, in hippy-speak, 'turned on', which would be unfortunate, whether you are or not.

Such simple words denote such energetic activities. 'Get', for example, had to wait until the twentieth century before to get off with meant 'to have sex with'. In *Iolanthe*, Gilbert and Sullivan wrote: 'I heard the minx remark / She'd meet him after dark / inside St James's Park / And give him one!' What was it that she was going to give him? We in the twenty-first century know, but did they? The draft material from the revision process for *OED3*, published June 2004, says that '...the mention of St James's Park (which at the time had a reputation for being frequented by prostitutes) may glancingly suggest the later sexual sense.' And as for the adjective 'hard', given its meaning, what chance did it stand, whether transmuted into a hard-on or hard porn? Perhaps we should leave it there and move on.

### Hot to frot

To the comedian Chris Morris we owe: 'I love to go frotting, with Louise Botting.' The blameless Ms Botting had the misfortune to present Radio 4's eminently worthy *Moneybox* programme at around the same time as the roguish Morris was on the up. 'Frotting' refers to the practice of rubbing oneself, clothed, against another person, also clothed, to achieve sexual arousal. (And cursed be he or she who tries to visualize Ms Botting in any other state.) Originating in the verb 'to frot', meaning 'to rub, polish, stroke', it was only a matter of time – albeit several centuries – before 'frottage' was stripped of its innocence and recast, fully clad.

## The language of hate

Racist words can still send a shiver down the spine. At the beginning of the nineteenth century in America, there was a little-used word that meant 'to divide logs into sections by burning them'. The word in question was *nigger*, whereas the word 'coloured' was not considered to be offensive to black people until the late twentieth century. By the middle of the nineteenth century, 'niggerdom' was in wide circulation (though it is marked by the *OED* as 'offensive'), and the word 'niggerize' could be used to mean 'to oppress or treat with contempt in a manner reminiscent of the oppression of black people'. A little later – either as a compliment or an insult – it meant 'to subject to the influence of black people; to assimilate to black culture'. When the respected black academic Cornel West said that the USA had been 'niggerized' after the attacks of 9/11, he was comparing its new national trauma with African-Americans' long history of coping with terror and death. In 1894 'niggering' seemed to have become an alternative for the term 'busking' (see Chapter 7, page 183), as performed by black and white minstrels. In the second half of the nineteenth century we find examples of the word meaning 'to behave



or live supposedly in the manner of a black slave; to work very hard, do menial work'. And all this from a process which goes back, via the 1568 French word *neger*, to the humble Latin adjective *niger* (black).

Between 1574 and 1833 the word 'niger' (or 'nigre' or 'nigor'<sup>10</sup>) is used frequently to refer to black people, 'possibly with no specifically hostile overtones', says the *OED* cagily. In 1932 the Harlem intelligentsia were known as the 'niggerati',<sup>11</sup> and 'nigger' went through many other derogatory changes of clothing, so it is with something approaching relief that, after a period in the 1980s when it was customarily referred to (from 1985) as the 'n-word', we find the rap and hip-hop community reinstating 'nigger' on its own terms as a political gesture. They appropriated the spelling too, so that it comes out as 'nigga' or 'nigguh', as in bands such as Niggaz with Attitude and the rap song 'Mnniiggaah'. In this, it resembles the soul/rap community's adoption of the word – and the spelling of – 'gangsta', 'sista', 'brutha' or 'mutha'. As the *OED* notes: 'The resurgence of the form *nigga* (plural often *niggaz*) and other forms without final *-r* in late 20th-century use (especially in representations of urban African-American speech) is probably due to its deliberate adoption by some speakers as a distinct word, associated with neutral or positive senses.'

Another racial group that has been the target of a large amount of denigratory<sup>12</sup> language is the Jews. European Jews have been speaking Yiddish since at least the thirteenth century – two-thirds of its vocabulary is German – as well as referring to themselves as

10 The range of spellings recorded by early explorers and other curious observers is awesome. A quick scan finds 'Neigers' (1568), 'neegers' (1587), 'Neagers' (1599), 'Negars' (1624), 'neger' (1686), 'Niegors' (1776), 'neegger' (1827), 'negre' (1866), 'naygars' (1913) and 'neegur' (1961).

11 The coinage of the term is usually attributed to Zora Neale Hurston, a member of the group.

12 Denigrate: 'To blacken (especially a reputation)' (*CED*). The word is derived, again, from the Latin *niger*.

'Yidden' in the plural, or a singular Yid. But among those hostile to the Jews – and there have been one or two over the years – variations on the word 'Yid' became a term of abuse in whichever European country they congregated. In Britain, large numbers of Jews entered the country in the late nineteenth century, and it wasn't long before 'Yid' became widely used, though not always with abusive intent. But, in a triumphant turnaround, modern, secular Jews have reappropriated the word, most notably in the case of the fans of Tottenham Hotspur Football Club, who have been referring to themselves proudly as the 'Yid Army' since the 1970s. It's now almost synonymous with 'Spurs fans' – certainly among rival supporters – even though Jews are not demographically dominant on the terraces.

## Pride and prejudice

When Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* opened in London on Valentine's Day, 1895, he was a national treasure. And yet within 100 days, Wilde, aged forty, was ruined and facing a court case. The reason was that for the previous two years Wilde had been having an affair with Lord Alfred 'Bosie' Douglas. When Bosie's father, the Marquess of Queensbury (originator of the rules of boxing), found out, he was apoplectic, and left a calling card at the Cadogan Club with the words: 'To Oscar Wilde, posing as a Somdomite' [*sic*]. Although he misspelt it, perhaps owing to his heightened emotions that day, we know what he meant.

Sodom, as discussed earlier (see page 226), was a man's town that loved to party. But homosexuals have had almost every term of abuse thrown at them over the years. The word poof<sup>13</sup> was just starting to be used in Oscar Wilde's time, and faggot came into widespread use in the USA after the First World War. In 1966 the *New Statesman*

13 Probably a corruption of 'puff': 'An effeminate man; a male homosexual.'



wrote that 'The American word "faggot" is making advances here over our own more humane "queer".'

Several others are used in Frederic Raphael's 1960 novel *The Limits of Love*: 'Great thing about gay people...' 'Gay?' Tessa said. 'Bent, queer, you know. Homosexual.' The word 'gay' was obviously unfamiliar at the time, but had been prison slang for 'homosexual' since the 1930s. Christopher Isherwood (1904–86) used 'queer' in his classic 1939 novel *Goodbye to Berlin*: 'Men dressed as women? ... Do you mean they're queer?'

The first person to try to return control to the hands of the host community may have been the radical writer Paul Goodman with his 1969 essay 'The Politics of Being Queer'. Lesbians, meanwhile, were reassessing terms such as dyke, and these days that word can be a term of abuse or a simple declaration of identity, depending on the motivation of the speaker. After the shock of Aids, a greater sense of solidarity entered the gay community, and cheaply derisory terms, such as carpet-muncher and pillow-chewer, began to lose their capacity to hurt.

'Queer' has come into its own as Channel 4 proved with its screening of *Queer as Folk* (2002) and the US series *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2004). At the time of writing the Amazon website has fifty-four books with 'queer' and 'politics' in the title. Not so bent.<sup>14</sup> Coming out used to describe the ritual of a young woman being launched into society and thus on to the marriage market. 'Miss Price had not been brought up to the trade of coming out,' wrote Jane Austen in *Mansfield Park* (1814). Towards the end of the 1960s, 'coming out' began to mean 'stating publicly' that one was homosexual.

In 1990 the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Guardian* newspapers were reporting that some gay activists in both the USA and the UK had instigated a campaign of outing prominent homosexuals who might

<sup>14</sup> First cited in the *OED* in c.1374, by Geoffrey Chaucer. With homosexual meaning in 1959.

not want their sexual preferences to be made public. But a year later, 'outing' had spread to, for example, the Bald Urban Liberation Brigade of New York City, whose shock tactics (posting flyers) threatened to expose celebrities with toupées that they refused to acknowledge. Marketing and advertising companies are keen to catch some of the pink pound, a term first used in connection with the economic clout of the gay community in 1984.

### Sticks and stones...

The words in this chapter represent language at its sharpest. Even typing some of them feels strange. Many have been created deliberately to cause maximum offence. And yet, as the last section shows, words, unlike missiles, can be sent back to their place of origin with their meaning completely rewritten. This represents the final act of revenge by the supposedly injured party, and it happens when the word is embraced and defused by the whole community. The world of abuse is one of the most dynamic and changeable in linguistics: new formations are coming and going with amazing speed because they depend on novelty to achieve their effect. Once we have got used to them, they lose their sting.

We haven't dealt at length with the cadre of words that has been turned on society's handicapped people, but one example is spaz, a shortened form of 'spastic', which was hurled at unfortunate victims, able-bodied or not. The word has, of course, been reappropriated by disabled people. A few years ago, society decided that the word 'spastic' was too hurtful, though, and we were encouraged to use alternatives, such as 'differently skilled' and 'mentally or physically challenged'. At the same time, the British Spastics Society lent its authority to the campaign by changing its name to Scope. It was a



brave effort, but it didn't take some playground wag long to come up with a new term of abuse: *scope*.

Some of our favourite terms of abuse have a more matey lyricism about them that reduces the force of their invective. Take the word *wazzock*. No one is going to take someone to court for calling them a 'wazzock': it's not a high-octane term of abuse. It just means someone who is a little bit silly or annoying, or both. Its northern bluntness is appealing, and it achieves its effect through its combination of familiar sounds. The 'wazz' contrasts ironically with the swiftness of 'whizz', and the ending '-ock' reminds us of other words like *pillock*. You might think they were equally ancient terms of abuse, but whereas 'pillock', as we have seen, is first attested from 1535, 'wazzock' is first attributed to the comedian Mike Harding ('you cloth-eared wazzock') in his 1984 book *When the Martians Land in Huddersfield*.

Subsequently, the word has spawned the verb *to wazz*, rhyming with 'has', i.e. 'to piss'. The *OED* writes 'Origin unknown' against 'wazzock', but this author's private theory is that if you scrunched up the word *wiseacre* – first noted in 1595, meaning, among other things, 'a foolish person with an air or affectation of wisdom' – and then straightened it out again, it might make a sound very like 'wazzock'.

'Wazzock' is one of those words whose sound defines – or limits – itself. It's a silly-sounding word (you wouldn't want your plane flown by a wazzock, even if you didn't know exactly what it was). F-words and C-words sound shocking: that's their job. Daft words sound silly. Occasionally one gets away, such as *wrangler*, which might not immediately suggest its eighteenth-century meaning of an undergraduate with a first-class honours degree in Mathematics from Cambridge University, but that's one of the exceptions. Most words do a pretty good job of meaning exactly what they sound like. The next chapter tests that statement, to an even more extreme degree.

## chapter ten

IT OVER  
IS HUMAN