

THE UPS AND DOWNS OF "DIRTY" WORDS

BY FALK JOHNSON

A PRIM old lady avoids all mention of it if she can, but if she has to mention it, she hesitates a moment and then calls it the *posterior*. A soldier, on the other hand, does not hesitate at all to call it *fanny*, and he may, as a matter of fact, use a word that is even "worse" than *fanny*.

Though words pertaining to sex are ranked one below the other on the conventional scale of propriety, they are not fixed on this scale. On the contrary, nice words like *posterior* often drop down to the level of not-too-nice words like *fanny*; and the not-too-nice words come climbing up the scale, some of them attaining complete respectability. They are as volatile and irrepressible as sex itself, and they refuse to stay put.

A well known word which has recently moved down the scale is *fraternize*. Before World War II, *fraternize* meant "to associate with upon a comradely basis," and it stood high on the scale. But after English-speaking soldiers entered Germany and

started using the word to designate associations more intimate than comradely, the word started moving down the scale. It had dropped part of the way by the time soldiers were saying, "It's all right to fraternize if you don't smile or take your helmet off." And it has dropped some more since it has been clipped down to four-letter size: *frat*.

Another well known word which has moved down the scale within the memory of most people now living is *neck*, used as a verb. Alfred E. Hart, editor of *Phrase Origins: A Study of Familiar Expressions*, declares that not until 1927 did *neck* mean "to play amorously." But now this meaning is so well established that it is given by most of the recent dictionaries. Furthermore, this new meaning of *neck* has led to the occasional use of *giraffe*, to indicate "a person who likes necking."

Like *neck* and *fraternize*, the word *assault* once had no sexual meaning. For a long time, *assault* meant "at-

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tack," but now it often means "rape" instead of "attack." It certainly did not mean "attack" in a newspaper story which H. L. Mencken quotes in one of his volumes on the American language. In this story, a man knocked down a girl, "dragged her down the cellar steps, beat her with an iron pipe, and *then* assaulted her."

When a sexual meaning gets attached to such a word as *assault*, the word does not always lose its non-sexual meaning. *Assault* is now used with both its meanings, "rape" and "attack." In such sentences as "the man assaulted the woman," it presumably means "rape"; but in such sentences as "the assault battalion took over the town," it presumably means "attack."

II

As time passes and as words move farther and farther down the scale, they tend to lose their non-sexual meanings, and they may eventually reach the point at which their only meaning is a sexual one. A word which has almost arrived there now is *intercourse*. Today, *intercourse* is rarely used with any meaning other than "sexual intercourse."

Though it is now used almost exclusively as a sex word, it once had nothing to do with sex. When it was first recorded in the language, back in the fifteenth century, it meant

"communication to and fro between countries." Indeed, the *Oxford English Dictionary* says that at first it was used "exclusively with reference to trade." Later, in the sixteenth century, it began to mean "social communication between individuals" — for example, "frequent and habitual contact in conversation." And it kept this basic meaning of "social communication" for more than two hundred years. About 1800, however, it began to be used to indicate "sexual connexion," and today it seldom means anything else.

Before *intercourse* underwent this drastic change of meaning, it was used in sentences in a way it would never be used today. For instance, an eighteenth-century historian declared that Sir Thomas More "wrote a full account of all the intercourse he had with the Nun and her complices." And a nineteenth-century writer declared that "My hours are now best spent in affectionate intercourses." Both these writers used *intercourse* to mean "social communication" or "conversation."

Although *intercourse* has become a sex word, it has not yet become a downright "bad" word. It has not been placed under taboo, and it has not been banned from public use. In fact, it still has a fairly high degree of propriety — it is one of the few acceptable synonyms for "copulation."

Even so, it is not as proper as it once was; it has obviously started down the scale of propriety.

A word which has gone even farther down the scale is *whore*. It is now such a bad word that it has been banned in some places. But *whore*, too, was once a good word. It was good enough to be used repeatedly in the King James Version of the Bible, which was published a little over three hundred years ago. At that time it had the same meaning which it has today, but it was regarded as an acceptable word. Comparative philologists say that *whore* had the same origin as the Latin word *carus*, which meant "dear" and from which the modern English word *caress* is derived. It seems likely, therefore, that *whore* and *dear* and *caress* had the same degree of respectability at one time. In fact, it seems likely that *whore* was once a term of outright endearment, just as *sweetheart* and *darling* now are.

The degeneration of *whore* from a term of endearment to a term of reproach, from a sweet word to an insulting word, is by no means a rarity. Other words which were once innocent have dropped farther down the scale than *whore* has. For example, the well-known four-letter word for "copulate" is probably the worst word in the language now. Almost everybody shies away from it in pub-

lic, as if it were leprous. And yet it, too, is only a degenerated word — a good word gone bad.

Professor Allen Walker Read of the Department of English at Columbia University has published a scholarly article about this word, and he has shown clearly that the word was once an honorable one. As recently as 1775, it was printed in a dictionary edited by a Baptist minister, John Ash; and a few centuries before that it did not have a "bad" meaning — not even a sexual meaning. It meant simply "to knock," and it was probably used as freely as the word *knock* is now used. The early propriety of this worst of words is further suggested by another fact — namely, that many words which are now considered eminently respectable (words such as *pugilist*, *puncture*, *appoint*, and even *punctuation*) are derived from the same prehistoric parent-word as this worst of words.

All these examples of good words gone bad show, as Professors Greenough and Kittredge of Harvard have said, that "Descent is easy, and words, like people, show a propensity to fall away from their better selves." Indeed, it is possible that all the words which are now regarded as bad were once regarded as good — that all the words which are now near the bottom of the scale of propriety were once near the top.

III

As words and expressions move down the scale of propriety, they leave gaps in the vocabulary at the top of the scale, and these gaps must be filled. If they were not filled, an intolerable situation would exist — a situation in which it would be impossible to talk about “bad” things with “good” words. To avoid this situation, people must improvise; they must contrive to get new and good words to convey the old and bad meanings.

Such an improvisation is illustrated by a story which H. L. Mencken tells. A few years ago, Georgia Sothern, a strip-tease artist, wrote him and explained that her profession was often criticized because “the unfortunate word *strip-teasing* . . . creates the wrong connotations in the mind of the public.” She requested him to “coin a new and more palatable word” to replace it.

From several words which he proposed, she selected *ecdysiast*, which is derived from a zoölogical term meaning “one who sheds an outer cuticular layer,” and her press agent ballyhooed this word in an attempt to make it a permanent part of the language. To some extent he succeeded, for Miss Sothern’s professional organization became known as the “Association of Ecdysiasts, Parade and

Specialty Dancers.” Furthermore, the word was picked up and used by several newspapers and magazines. Only a couple of years ago, *Time* magazine employed it in describing the variety of guests invited to appear on the campuses of American colleges at “after hours” gatherings. Among these guests, said *Time*, were “Republicans, Democrats, Communists, and ecdysiasts.” As a result of such widespread use in magazines and newspapers, *ecdysiast* has been admitted officially into the language; it now appears in at least one of the newer dictionaries.

Of course, such words as *ecdysiast* are euphemisms: excessively nice words used for describing something that is not nice. But these euphemisms do not always remain nice. On the contrary, they often start slipping down the scale of propriety. Though they start out as excessively nice words, they gradually become simply nice words . . . then not-nice words . . . then vulgar words . . . and, finally, even unprintable words.

An example of an excessively nice word which has become simply a nice word is *intercourse*. And an example of an excessively nice word which has become vulgar is *whore*. Though *whore* certainly does not seem euphemistic today, there can be little doubt that it was once euphemistic. Professor Leonard Bloomfield of Yale Uni-

versity says that it "must have been at one time a polite substitute for some word now lost to us."

As the history of *whore* suggests, the degenerative process involves more than a single word; it involves a whole series of words. Thus, when one euphemism degenerates, another is improvised to take its place. Then, when the second euphemism degenerates, a third is improvised . . . then a fourth . . . a fifth . . . a sixth — until a whole series of words, one after another, is pulled down the scale.

The sex words thus headed downhill sometimes take with them yet other words — words which are not concerned with sex but merely sound like a sex word. An example of this projected degeneration is the Biblical word for "donkey," which has become almost unmentionable except in the pulpit and in Sunday School.

Vance Randolph, an authority on the customs of the Ozarks, has found many examples of such projected degeneration. In a study made some years ago of "Verbal Modesty in the Ozarks," he tells of a "grown-up mountain woman, the mother of several children, who blushed scarlet when she heard *physics* mentioned as a part of the high-school curriculum." And he reports that the local experts with the shotgun do not "cock" it. Instead, they "pull back both roost-

ers." Randolph reports, too, that other people refer to "cock and bull" stories as "rooster and ox" stories.

Likewise, when Professor J. M. Steadman, Jr., made a study of verbal modesty at Emory University in Georgia, one student wrote: "I avoid *circumscribe* because I am afraid that I will say *circumcise* by mistake." Other students indicated that they avoided such words as *butt*, *Butte*, *rumpus*, and *elicit*.

Projected degeneration, then, often accompanies actual degeneration, and each new wave of actual degeneration may be accompanied by a corresponding new wave of projected degeneration. As a result, hundreds or perhaps even thousands of words have moved down the scale of propriety, and some of them have dropped all the way to the bottom.

IV

The wholesale movement of words down the scale is partly counter-balanced by an opposite movement — a movement up the scale. Some words which were once considered unprintably bad are now considered good and are now printed everywhere.

One of these redeemed words is *pants*. In the 1880s, an American book on verbal etiquette declared that *pants* was an "inexcusable vulgarism." Further evidence that *pants* was once taboo in this country is to be found in

the large number of euphemisms which were invented as substitutes for it. Among them were *unmentionables*, *unwhisperables*, *unutterables*, *inexpressibles*, *indescribables*, *ineffables*, *inexplicables*, *indispensables*, *innominables*, *limb-shrouders*, *nether garments*, and even *nether continuations*.

At the time that it was unrefined to call pants pants, it was unthinkable to call a leg a leg, even if it were only a chicken leg. So people had to euphemize. Some of them are said to have called it a *second-wing*, and one lady is said to have told a waiter in a hotel "to bring her the *trotter* of a chicken." The euphemistic impulse is seen, too, in a regulation for a fashionable female academy of the time. This regulation read: "Young ladies are not allowed to cross their *benders* in school." And yet another nineteenth-century writer, commenting upon the taboo on *leg*, observed that the ankles of ladies extended all the way up to the waist.

Captain Frederick Marryat, an Englishman who visited this country in 1839, tells a story which shows how unspeakably bad the word *leg* was then. One day, a young American woman who was walking with him fell and hurt her leg. When he asked, "Did you hurt your leg much?" she acted as though he had committed a "heinous offence." Then, said the Captain, "I begged to know what was

the reason for her displeasure. After some hesitation, she said that as she knew me well, she would tell me that the word *leg* was never mentioned before ladies."

By the beginning of the 1900s, however, the taboo on *leg* was diminishing. But it was not gone. In a middle-sized Iowa town as recently as thirty years ago, the word *leg* was thought by some to be indecent. Professor Allen Walker Read recalls that "the wife of a prominent lawyer had broken her leg, and when my mother innocently asked the lawyer, 'How is your wife's leg?' he publicly reprimanded her before a large group: 'Limb, Mrs. Read! You mean limb!'"

But a little more than ten years ago, almost no one objected to the use of *leg*. At that time, two professors at Maryville College in Tennessee listed about sixty words, including *leg*, and submitted them to students and faculty members, requesting that each word be marked as used freely, as used with hesitancy, or as used not at all. When the questionnaires were checked, these professors learned that 95 per cent of the men and 92 per cent of the women used *leg* freely. In all likelihood, the percentages would run even higher today. At any rate, *leg* is now redeemed.

And so are many other everyday words, like *chair*, *breeches*, *petticoat*, *smock*, *shirt*, *dress*, *stockings*, and *corset*

— all of which have been reported as banned in the United States within the last hundred years or so.

Some of these words have been restored to respectability within the memory of people still living; but there are also many words which were redeemed so long ago that their redemption is not now remembered. For example, no one now living remembers when *occupy* was a bad word — so bad, in fact, that Shakespeare, who was no prude, called it an “odious” word. *Occupy* meant “to copulate,” and Ben Jonson commented that his contemporaries were avoiding its use. The *Oxford English Dictionary* says that it was avoided so carefully that it disappeared almost completely from print for more than a hundred years. When on very rare occasions it did appear in print, it appeared as often as not in bits of vulgar doggerel such as this:

All you that in your bed do lie,
Turn to your wives and occupy.

But *occupy*, like *leg* and *pants*, has been redeemed; and now, despite the activities of American occupation forces, it is a thoroughly respectable word.

Although the word *nature* may never have been banned, as *occupy* was, it once had a sexual meaning: it once meant “genitalia.” In partial proof of this, the *Oxford English*

Dictionary quotes the following clause, dated 1622: “If that great Lady had not made a vow of perpetual chastity and her nature . . . had not been stitched up . . .”

Yard, the same word now used to designate 36 inches, also had a sexual meaning. Three or four hundred years ago it was used to designate the male organ. The *Oxford English Dictionary* prints several quotations to show that the word once had this meaning. Perhaps the most remarkable of these is the one dated 1693: “A monstrous child . . . It hath three yards and makes use of them all at once.”

Likewise, most people who are now living do not realize that *converse*, *conversation*, and even *conversant*, are redeemed words, too. For a period of well over two hundred years, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the verb *converse* meant “to have sexual intercourse”; the noun *conversation* meant “sexual intercourse or intimacy”; and the adjective *conversant*, according to Dr. Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary* of 1755, meant “cohabiting.” These dictionaries provide several examples of these words used in this way. For instance, Dr. Johnson defined *whore* as “A woman who converses unlawfully with men; a fornicatress . . .” And the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives quotations

with such expressions as “conjugal conversation” and “criminal conversation.” This last phrase, meaning “adultery,” was used so often that it developed an abbreviated form, *crim con*.

And at one time *correspond*, *correspondence*, and *correspondent* had sexual meanings similar to those of *converse*, *conversation*, and *conversant*. The *Oxford English Dictionary* records “sexual intercourse” as an obsolete meaning of *correspondence*, and gives similar obsolete meanings for several of the other “correspond” words. But of course most of the “correspond” words are now used without any awareness of their earlier sexual meanings. If there were a general awareness of these meanings, the International Correspondence School would certainly have to change its name.

Just as *correspondence*, *conversation*, *occupy*, *leg*, and *pants* have been redeemed and have moved up the scale of propriety, so have many other words. The British scholar Eric Partridge lists hundreds of them in his recent book, *Shakespeare's Bawdy*. Partridge shows that hundreds of Shakespeare's bawdy words have lost their bawdiness during the intervening centuries. As a result, many of the passages which were originally intended to be risqué are now considered harmless or even tedious. For ex-

ample, consider these two lines from *Hamlet*:

HAMLET: Lady, shall I lie in your lap?

OPHELIA: No, my lord.

The modern reader supposes that *lap* means, as a recent dictionary defines it, “the part of the clothing that lies on the front portion of the body from the waist to the knees when one sits.” As a result, the modern reader does not realize that Hamlet is making what the newspapers would call “a lewd proposal.” But Partridge points out that in Shakespeare's day *lap* often meant the *mons Oeneris*, and that *lie*, too, had a bawdy meaning in this line.

Scholarly investigations of the histories of hundreds of words make it clear, then, that sex words are not fixed unalterably upon a scale of propriety. On the contrary, these words are often on the move, dropping down the scale and climbing up it, becoming bad words at one time and good words at another.

The same, too, may be said about the standards of verbal propriety — the standards by which these words are adjudged as good or bad. These standards, too, are not fixed and unalterable. They are not absolute. They are not eternal. Instead, they are relative and temporary, and they need not be given any more weight than other temporary standards.

WHAT KEEPS BUILDING COSTS HIGH

BY HOLMAN HARVEY

TWIN houses recently were built, one on each side of the line that divides two Long Island towns. In one house the room partitions were built of panels or pre-hardened plaster board, fire-resistant, mass-produced and erected at the cost of a few hours of labor. The other house, a stone's throw away, had partitions of lath and plaster, built the slow way by highly skilled labor. Two building codes were in conflict. One village code permits dry-wall construction, the other demands wet-wall construction.

Dry-wall construction is permitted by most nationally established safety standards for one- and two-family houses, yet many building codes still insist on lath and plaster. The difference in cost in a five-room house on Long Island, for example, is something like \$250 or more, largely for labor.

This is just one illustration, selected at random from thousands, of the senseless tangle of building codes enforced by more than two thousand American towns and cities. The codes

strangle progress in the building industry. Manufacturers of materials and supplies cannot standardize their products and get the economy of mass production, because they have to make a score of sizes, designs and models to obey the varying regulations of different localities. This is one reason that homes cost too much. Another reason is that hundreds of codes are out of date and thus prevent or delay the use of anything new — and there are scores of new things in the building industry, most of them designed to save the home builder money.

The situation has been a scandal and a source of despair to progressive builders and manufacturers for years. So many of the regulations seem based on pure whim. One county in New York State — Nassau county on Long Island — has 65 different building codes; three of them, covering about 50 per cent of current building, differ in 200 particulars. It would be impossible to draw plans and specifications for a home that would be legal every-

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