THE ETYMOLOGICON

A Circular Stroll Through the Hidden Connections of the English Language

MARK FORSYTH (The Inky Fool)
Contents

Preface xvii

A Turn-up for the Books 1
A Game of Chicken 3
Hydrogentlemanly 4
The Old and New Testicle 6
Parenthetical Codpieces 8
Suffering for my Underwear 10
Pans 11
Miltonic Meanders 13

Bloody Typical Semantic Shifts 16
The Proof of the Pudding 19
Sausage Poison in Your Face 20
Bows and Arrows and Cats 23
Black and White 25
Hat Cheque Point Charlie 27
Sex and Bread 30
Concealed Farts 33
Wool 35
Turkey 39
Insulting Foods 42
Folk Etymology 43
Butterflies of the World 45

Psychoanalysis and the Release of the Butterfly 47
## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Villains of the Language</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two Executioners and a Doctor</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas Crapper</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mythical Acronyms</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John the Baptist and <em>The Sound of Music</em></td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organic, Organised, Organs</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clipping</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buffalo</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antanaclasis</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coincidences and Patterns</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frankly, My Dear Frankfurter</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beastly Foreigners</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pejoratives</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ciao Slave-driver</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robots</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terminators and Prejudice</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terminators and Equators</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equality in Ecuador</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bogeys</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bugbears and Bedbugs</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Von Munchausen’s Computer</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPAM (not spam)</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heroin</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morphing De Quincey and Shelley</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Star-Spangled Drinking Songs</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Torpedoes and Turtles  102
From Mount Vernon to Portobello Road with a Hangover  105
A Punch of Drinks  106
The Scampering Champion of the Champagne Campaign  109
Insulting Names  111
Peter Pan  114
Herbaceous Communication  117
Papa Was a Saxum Volutum  119
Flying Peters  121
Venezuela and Venus and Venice  123
What News on the Rialto?  124
Magazines  126
Dick Snary  128
Autopeotomy  131
Water Closets for Russia  135
Fat Gunhilda  137
Queen Gunhilda and the Gadgets  139
Shell  140
In a Nutshell  141
The Iliad  143
The Human Body  145
The Five Fingers  146
Hoax Bodies  149
Bunking and Debunking  151
The Anglo-Saxon Mystery  
The Sedge-strewn Stream and Globalisation  
Coffee  
Cappuccino Monks  
 Called to the Bar  
Ignorami  
Fossil-less  
The Frequentative Suffix  
Pending  
Worms and their Turnings  
Mathematics  
Stellafied and Oily Beavers  
Beards  
Islands  
Sandwich Islands  
The French Revolution in English Words  
Romance Languages  
Peripatetic Peoples  
From Bohemia to California (via Primrose Hill)  
California  
The Hash Guys  
Drugs  
Pleasing Psalms  
Biblical Errors  
Salt  
Halcyon Days
CONTENTS

Dog Days  213
Cynical Dogs  215
Greek Education and Fastchild  216
Cybermen  218
Turning Trix  220
Amateur Lovers  221
Dirty Money  223
Death-pledges  224
Wagering War  226
Strapped for Cash  227
Fast Bucks and Dead Ones  228
The Buck Stops Here  230
Back to Howth Castle and Environs  232

Quizzes  235

The Cream of the Sources  251
About the author

Mark Forsyth is a writer, journalist, proofreader, ghostwriter and pedant. He was given a copy of the Oxford English Dictionary as a christening present and has never looked back.

In 2009 he started the Inky Fool blog, in order to share his heaps of useless information with a verbose world.
For John Goldsmith,
With thanks.

The author would like to thank everybody involved with the production of this book, but especially Jane Seeber and Andrea Coleman for their advice, suggestions, corrections, clarifications and other gentle upbraidings.
… they who are so exact for the letter shall be dealt with by the Lexicon, and the Etymologicon too if they please …

JOHN MILTON
This book is the papery child of the Inky Fool blog, which was started in 2009. Though most of the material is new some of it has been adapted from its computerised parent. The blog is available at http://blog.inkyfool.com/ which is a part of the grander whole www.inkyfool.com.
Occasionally people make the mistake of asking me where a word comes from. They never make this mistake twice. I am naturally a stern and silent fellow; even forbidding. But there’s something about etymology and where words come from that overcomes my inbuilt taciturnity. A chap once asked me where the word biscuit came from. He was eating one at the time and had been struck by curiosity.

I explained to him that a biscuit is cooked twice, or in French bi-cuit, and he thanked me for that. So I added that the bi in biscuit is the same bi that you get in bicycle and bisexual, to which he nodded. And then, just because it occurred to me, I told him that the word bisexual wasn’t invented until the 1890s and that it was coined by a psychiatrist called Richard von Krafft-Ebing and did he know that Ebing also invented the word masochism?

He told me firmly that he didn’t.

Did he know about Mr Masoch, after whom masochism was named? He was a novelist and …

The fellow told me that he didn’t know about Mr Masoch, that he didn’t want to know about Mr Masoch, and that his one ambition in life was to eat his biscuit in peace.

But it was too late. The metaphorical floodgates had opened and the horse had bolted. You see there are a lot of other words named after novelists, like Kafkaesque and Retifism …

It was at this point that he made a dash for the door, but I was too quick for him. My blood was up and there was always
something more to say. There always is, you know. There’s always an extra connection, another link that joins two words that most of mankind quite blithely believe to be separate, which is why that fellow didn’t escape until a couple of hours later when he managed to climb out of the window while I was drawing a diagram to explain what the name Philip has to do with a hippopotamus.

It was after an incident such as this that my friends and family decided something must be done. They gathered for a confabulation and, having established that secure psychiatric care was beyond their means, they turned in despair to the publishing industry, which has a long history of picking up where social work leaves off.

So, a publisher was found somewhere near the Caledonian Road and a plan was hatched. I would start with a single word and then connect it to another word and then to another word and so on and so forth until I was exhausted and could do no more.

A book would therefore have a twofold benefit. First it would rid me of my demons and perhaps save some innocent conversationalist from my clutches. Second, unlike me, a book could be left snugly on the bedside table or beside the lavatory: opened at will and closed at will.

So a book it was, which set me thinking …
The Etymologicon

A Turn-up for the Books

This is a book. The glorious insanities of the English language mean that you can do all sorts of odd and demeaning things to a book. You can cook it. You can bring a criminal to it, or, if the criminal refuses to be brought, you can throw it at him. You may even take a leaf out of it, the price of lavatory paper being what it is. But there is one thing that you can never do to a book like this. Try as and how you might, you cannot turn up for it. Because *a turn-up for the books* has nothing, directly, to do with the ink-glue-and-paper affair that this is (that is, unless you’re terribly modern and using a Kindle or somesuch). It’s *a turn-up for the bookmakers*.

Any child who sees the bookmaker’s facing the bookshop across the High Street will draw the seemingly logical conclusion. And a bookmaker was, once, simply somebody who stuck books together. Indeed, the term *bookmaker* used to be used to describe the kind of writer who just pumps out one shelf-filler after another with no regard for the exhaustion of the reading public. Thomas More observed in 1533 that ‘of newe booke makers there are now moe then ynough’. Luckily for the book trade, More was beheaded a couple of years later.

The modern sense of the bookmaker as a man who takes bets originated on the racecourses of Victorian Britain. The bookmaker would accept bets from anyone who wanted to lay them, and note them all down in a big betting book. Meanwhile,
a turn-up was just a happy chance. A dictionary of slang from 1873 thoughtfully gives us this definition:

**Turn up** an unexpected slice of luck. Among sporting men bookmakers are said to have a turn up when an unbacked horse wins.

So, which horses are unbacked? Those with the best (i.e. longest) odds. Almost nobody backs a horse at 1,000/1.

This may seem a rather counterintuitive answer. Odds of a thousand to one are enough to tempt even a saint to stake his halo, but that’s because saints don’t know anything about gambling and horseflesh. Thousand to one shots never, ever come in. Every experienced gambler knows that a race is usually won by the favourite, which will of course have short odds. Indeed, punters want to back a horse that’s so far ahead of the field he merely needs to be shooed over the line. Such a horse is a *shoo-in*.

So you pick the favourite, and you back it. Nobody but a fool backs a horse that’s unlikely to win. So when such an unfancied nag romps over the finish line, it’s a turn-up for the books, because the bookies won’t have to pay out.

Not that the bookmakers need much luck. They always win. There will always be many more bankrupt gamblers than bookies. You’re much better off in a zero-sum game, where the players pool their money and the winner takes all. Pooling your money began in France, and has nothing whatsoever to do with swimming pools, and a lot to do with chickens and genetics.
A Game of Chicken

Gambling in medieval France was a simple business. All you needed were some friends, a pot, and a chicken. In fact, you didn’t need friends – you could do this with your enemies – but the pot and the chicken were essential.

First, each person puts an equal amount of money in the pot. Nobody should on any account make a joke about a *poultry sum*. Shoo the chicken away to a reasonable distance. What’s a reasonable distance? About a stone’s throw.

Next, pick up a stone.

Now, you all take turns hurling stones at that poor bird, which will squawk and flap and run about. The first person to hit the chicken wins all the money in the pot. You then agree never to mention any of this to an animal rights campaigner.

That’s how the French played a game of chicken. The French, though, being French, called it a game of *poule*, which is French for chicken. And the chap who had won all the money had therefore won the *jeu de poule*.

The term got transferred to other things. At card games, the pot of money in the middle of the table came to be known as the *poule*. English gamblers picked the term up and brought it back with them in the seventeenth century. They changed the spelling to *pool*, but they still had a pool of money in the middle of the table.

It should be noted that this pool of money has absolutely nothing to do with a body of water. Swimming pools, rock pools and Liverpools are utterly different things.

Back to gambling. When billiards became a popular sport, people started to gamble on it, and this variation was known
as *pool*, hence shooting pool. Then, finally, that poor French chicken broke free from the world of gambling and soared majestically out into the clear air beyond.

On the basis that gamblers *pooled* their money, people started to pool their resources and even pool their cars in a *car pool*. Then they pooled their typists in a *typing pool*. Le chicken was free! And then he grew bigger than any of us, because, since the phrase was invented in 1941, we have all become part of the *gene pool*, which, etymologically, means that we are all little bits of chicken.

**Hydrogentlemanly**

The gene of *gene pool* comes all the way from the ancient Greek word *genos*, which means birth. It’s the root that you find in *generation*, *regeneration* and *degeneration*; and along with its Latin cousin *genus* it’s scattered generously throughout the English language, often in places where you wouldn’t expect it.

Take *generous*: the word originally meant *well-born*, and because it was obvious that well-bred people were magnanimous and peasants were stingy, it came to mean munificent. Indeed, the well-bred gentleman established such a reputation for himself that the word *gentle*, meaning *soft*, was named after him. In fact, some gentlemen became so refined that the *gin* in *gingerly* is probably just another *gen* lurking in our language. *Gingerly* certainly has nothing to do with ginger.

*Genos* is hidden away in the very air that you breathe. The chemists of the late eighteenth century had an awful lot of trouble with the gases that make up the air. Oxygen, carbon dioxide, nitrogen and the rest all look exactly alike; they are transparent,
they are effectively weightless. The only real difference anybody could find between them was their effects: what we now call oxygen makes things burn, while nitrogen puts them out.

Scientists spent a lot of time separating the different kinds of air and then had to decide what to call them all. Oxygen was called *flammable air* for a while, but it didn’t catch on. It just didn’t have the right scientific ring to it. We all know that scientific words need an obscure classical origin to make them sound impressive to those who wouldn’t know an idiopathic craniofacial erythema1 if it hit them in the face.

Eventually, a Frenchman named Lavoisier decided that the sort of air that produced water when it was burnt should be called the *water-producer*. Being a scientist, he of course dressed this up in Greek, and the Greek for water producer is *hydro-gen*. The bit of air that made things acidic he decided to call the *acid-maker* or *oxy-gen*, and the one that produced *nitre* then got called *nitro-gen*.

(Argon, the other major gas in air, wasn’t known about at the time, because it’s an inert gas and doesn’t produce anything at all. That’s why it’s called argon. *Argon* is Greek for *lazy*.)

Most of the productive and reproductive things in the world have *gen* hidden somewhere in their names. All words are not homogenous and sometimes they are engendered in odd ways. For example, a group of things that reproduce is a *genus* and if you’re talking about a whole *genus* then you’re speaking in *general* and if you’re in *general* command of the troops you’re a *general* and a *general* can order his troops to commit *genocide*, which, etymologically, would be suicide.

---

1 That’s a blush to you and me.
Of course, a general won’t commit genocide himself; he’ll probably assign the job to his privates, and *privates* is a euphemism for *gonads*, which comes from exactly the same root, for reasons that should be too obvious to need explaining.

**The Old and New Testicle**

*Gonads* are *testicles* and testicles shouldn’t really have anything to do with the Old and New Testaments, but they do.

The Testaments of the Bible *testify* to God’s truth. This is because the Latin for *witness* was *testis*. From that one root, *testis*, English has inherited *protest* (bear witness for), *detest* (bear witness against), *contest* (bear witness competitively), and *testicle*. What are testicles doing there? They are *testifying* to a man’s virility. Do you want to prove that you’re a real man? Well, your *testicles* will *testify* in your favour.

That’s the usual explanation, anyway. There’s another, more interesting theory that in bygone days witnesses used to swear to things with their hands on their balls, or even on other people’s balls. In the Book of Genesis, Abraham makes his servant swear not to marry a Canaanite girl. The King James Version has this translation:

I pray thee, thy hand under my thigh: And I will make thee swear by the LORD, the God of heaven, and the God of the earth

Now, that *may* be the correct translation, but the Hebrew doesn’t say thigh, it says *yarek*, which means, approximately, *soft*