

'OR'SON VISITS THE ESCORIAL

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I wended my way down the walk to The Wombat's winter wickiup overlooking the Wrapahammock River. It had stormed the night before and the landscape was covered with what Iranians (the whilom Persians) call *barf*, but which we English-speakers more sensibly refer to as snow. The Wombat's chatelaine, Pocahontas-like in a feather chaplet, purringly raised the weighty woolen blanket serving as a door to admit me. Gazing on her feline svelteness and chrysoberyl eyes I reflected that my friend must be a secret Encratite or Hieracite not to have married this direct descendant of the Marquis de Carabas' right bower.

Himself (The Wombat), togged out in a brown moleskin jumpsuit and matching fez, was lying on a pile of Hopi rugs and reading the latest issue of Woodshifters' Weekly, which he cast down at my approach. I noted that it bore the headline "Where Are You, Paul Morphy, Now that We Need You?" With a smile of welcome The Wombat offered me the bowl of chocolate-covered macadamia nuts from which he was munching. "What happy wind blows you hither?" was his greeting.

Leaping in *medias res* I replied, "I have a bone to pick with you."

"That would be difficult indeed," he answered, "for I abstain from mammalian and avian flesh and consume among water-dwellers only those that have no bones, or else I have them fileted."

"Specificially," I continued, "a friend of mine lost a bundle using a tip of yours to bet on the last presidential election. Eight years ago you pointed out that the distinguishing feature on the names of the monosyllabic presidents of the United States -- Polk, Pierce, Grant, Taft, Ford -- is that the name of each one shares only one letter with that of his predecessor. Quite naturally he assumed that, since Bush shares no letter at all with Ford, Dukakis would win the election. He has had to flee the country for cheaper climes as a result of his losses."

"By the great Fum that perches only on the woo-tung tree!" oathed the arctoid logothere in not too compassionate a tone. "Your friend should either have consulted me or withheld his offering to that fickle female, Fortuna. The logology of names does not stand still. My further analysis would have informed him that Ford's original name at birth was Leslie Lynch King, Jr. After his mother's divorce

from his father and remarriage young Leslie was adopted by his stepfather and renamed Gerald Rudolph Ford, Jr. Hence he was a double junior, and his real last name was Ford, Junior. Checking Bush against this name we find that it has only one letter, U, in common with it. Ergo, my rule still holds. Add to all this the fact that Ford was the only one of the first five monosyllabic presidents who was lefthanded and that Bush is also lefthanded, and you will be compelled to admit that Bush was eminently qualified for election."

I had no rejoinder to this cogent logic and merely told the sad story of how I had to drive my friend to the airport to begin his exile. "He was flying to Mexico City, Tegucigalpa, and Caracas," I explained.

The Wombat turned up his rhinarium in fine disdain. "Please, I am not really interested in his sordid activities, whom he intends to goose, or what he proposes to crack."

"Tegucigalpa is the capital of Honduras, and Caracas that of Venezuela," I further explained.

"Venezuela, Venezuela, Venezuela," murmured The Wombat, reflectively snapping his fingers. "Ah yes, that reminds me of something in that **Word Ways** you sent me. On page 46 of the February 1989 issue David Morice, the Bombyleumatic of the trimester, says, 'In Venezuelan Spanish, there's a curious slang metamorphosis involving the word PUTA, a shortening of the English-language español for "prostitute." If you say "¡Qué puta! to a little girl, it's a term of endearment meaning something like "What a darling!" (though it translates into English as "What a whore!").'" He paused.

"By the sacred Stercorarian Stool!" exclaimed I, serving the austral polymath with one of his favorite oaths. "First, you mention an etymology which I am sure you intend to question; second, you cite a puzzling word usage about which I intend to question you; and, third, you close your remarks with six punctuation marks!"

"Right you are. First, *puta* in Spanish has nothing whatever to do in derivatory form with the Spanish *prostituta*. That is, no one has consciously or unconsciously abstracted the letter sequence *rostit* from *prostituta* to get or to leave the abbreviation or derivative *puta*. Joan Corominas, the astoundingly learned etymologist, linguist, *littérateur*, and who knows what else, in his monumental and invaluable work *Critical Etymological Dictionary of the Castilian Language* (*Diccionario Crítico Etimológico de la Lengua Castellana*) summarizes his lengthy article thus: 'Putá, uncertain etymology, probably from the same origin as the Old Italian *putto*, *putta*, "boy, girl," that is, from Vulgar Latin **puttus*, -a, variant of *putus*, "boy child, girl child." First documentation, XIIIth century.' We have this word in the *putti* of art. It is related to Latin *puer* 'boy' and the diminutive *puella* 'girl, girl-friend, daughter, etc.'"

"I can extend your comments by pointing out how often 'girl' or 'daughter' is used to designate a harlot; French *fille*, for ex-

ample. Even in Farsi 'daughter' can mean 'whore,' and 'daughter-house' (*dukhtar-khana*) means 'brothel.'"

"Words," continued The Wombat, "especially, it seems, those for women, often go up or down on the majorative/pejorative scale. The Anglo-Saxon word for woman (*cwēn*) has gone both ways -- up to 'queen' and down to 'quean.' The Vulgar Latin **dominicillus* or **dominicellus* has given Spanish *doncella* 'virgin,' English *damsel*, and French *donzelle* 'loose woman.' Not only that, but the the words 'whoreson' (son of a whore), 'jade,' 'rogue,' and 'bugger' may be used in coarse jocularity, affection, or contempt. Falstaff often uses 'whoreson' so, as in Henry IV, Part 2 -- 'Thou whoreson mandrake etc.' Then, too, the Clown in Hamlet, telling why 'a tanner will last you nine year' in the grave, says, 'Why, sir, his hide is so tanned with his trade that 'a will keep out water a great while, and your water is a sore decayer of your whoreson dead body.' The word 'whore' itself stems from the same Indo-European root that has also given us Latin *carus* 'dear' and Welsh *car* 'friend.'

"I would also like to mention," added I, "that delightful thirteenth chapter of the second part of *Don Quixote* where Sancho Panza learns that *hideputa* (from *hijo de puta* = whoreson) is a term of praise. How right Dr. Johnson was when he said that *Don Quixote* was one of only three books that one would wish to be longer. Hm-m-m, I wonder if the name Orson comes from 'whoreson'?"

"*Mot de Cambronne*, no!" exclaimed my ursine friend in mock disgust. "It doesn't go quite so far. Orson comes from the French *ourson* 'little bear.'"

"Rather a sharp oath from you, my dear Wombat," I observed, "since I happen to know that that word is the five-letter French equivalent of 's---' which, rather than 'The Guards die, but never surrender,' was uttered by General Cambronne on the field of Waterloo."

"Well said, dear boy," replied my furry fere, "because the French *merde* gets its name from its sharp and biting smell, being related to the Latin *mordere* 'to bite.' It is semantically reminiscent of the word 'stink,' formed with an ancient n-infix from the root of the word 'stick,' to pierce. *Merde* is widely related: *mérdei* in Greek means 'robs, bereaves, hinders' and is attested by Hesychius; with an already Indo-European s-prefix we have the English descendant 'smart,' German *schmerz* 'pain,' and there are relatives in Balto-Slavic and even Armenian. I know of no Greek word meaning 'excrement' that is related to *merde*, but, I must say, I know of no language so rich in general words for excrement as Greek -- it has so many, in fact, that it is surprising that the ethnic Greek recently defeated for president did not think to throw more of it around to support his bid for the chief magistracy."

"The only one I know is *kópros*," I volunteered after some rumination. "But that word is interesting because, although it is masculine in form, it is feminine in gender, as though to suggest that the artifact that it denotes must be manufactured by both sexes."

"Only too true," concurred the sage, "and only too often forgotten; on any list of human and animal necessities it must be placed only after air, food, water. Now, take 'water,' for example. This exemplifies one of the most ancient and fascinating types of Indo-European words in that in many Indo-European languages the nominative case contains an R which changes to an N in the oblique cases, while the daughter languages have some using only R and others using only N. For example, 'water' becomes *vatten* in Swedish. Greek has *húdōr*, genitive *húdatos* 'water,' where the A has developed from a vocalic N. Well, sir, we have the same pattern in Greek *skōr*, *skatós* 'dung, excrement,' -- very ancient. This in turn gave *skoríā* 'dross, slag, scoria' which was later taken into Latin, becoming the origin of Spanish *escorial* 'slag heap, slag dump,' a name applied to a hamlet near some old iron mines and in turn to the palace Philip II built there, The Escorial. In English we have two dialect words for dung, 'scarn' from Old Norse and 'sharn' from Anglo-Saxon, both cognate with 'scoria,' while the word 'scorn,' if not related in form, is certainly related in meaning in the sense of dumping scorn or sharn on someone. Further, we have Greek *pélethos* 'ordure, dung,' which looks to me as though it were related to our word 'flat,' to which German *kuhfladen* 'cow-pat' is also connected."

"You're very dung-ho about all this."

"Alas, no cognate of 'dung' in Greek, but there is in Slavic; compare Russian *dugá* 'bow' (originally 'rainbow') from the meaning 'arch over, cover,' which itself derives from the Indo-European meaning 'press, bend, cover.' Dung was used not only to cover fields, but underground chambers.

"From what you have said so far," I interjected, "English is just as tobeshitten a language as Greek, nay even more so, because I myself, who am no authority, can think of numerous words, say, for the droppings of animals: the croteys, crottels or crottoyes of hares; the fiants of badgers and foxes; the fewmets, fumets, or fumishings of deer; the leases or lesses of boars, wolves, and bears; and the spraints of otters. Then, of course, puer or pure is the specific for dog dung."

The Wombat was not slow to object, "But those are all words of French origin, pertain to the language of hunters, and no longer occur in literature, with the exception of 'pure' which is still used in tanning. In Greek we have such words, too: *muskéleन्द्रa* 'mouse dung,' *huspélethos* 'swine dung,' *oispōtē* and *oispē*, the droppings of sheep and goats, *apopátēma*, those of the fox, *hippōtīflos* 'equine diarrhoea,' *kunefa* 'dog dung,' and the simple *onís* 'the droppings of the ass,' or, to be more specific, 'of the donkey.'" He stopped to draw a breath and munch more macadamias, after which he continued.

"Then there is *ónthos* 'excrement of animals,' as well as *mínthos* 'human excrement.' The latter looks suspiciously like *mínthē* 'mint,' a plant with a sharp odor. I will forgo comment on the pre-Greek or Pelasgic word ending *-nth-* or *-inth-*. Then there is *tīlos* 'stercus liquidum' and *khésma*, *ekpatós*, *apópatos* 'stercus solidum'..."

"Stop!" I cried. "We are up to our knees in it!"

"There's more!"

"I don't want to hear it! Ordure may be heaven's first law, but enough is enough."

"All right, dear boy, but what would you do if you could not produce any? I'll tell you. You would consult your friendly neighborhood leech and he would recommend a higry pigry." The Wombat smiled; he felt he was getting the last word anyway.

"Higry pigry indeed, dear Wombat -- these are mere nonsense syllables!"

"A hobson-jobson, yes; but nonsense, no. Look up higry pigry in the OED and you will find its origin in the Greek hierá pikrá 'sacred bitters,' -- a cathartic made of aloes and canella bark, according to Webster II. So we see that the ancient Greeks not only had a plethora of words for excrement, but the remedy for the lack of that plethora. Ah, here we are!"

The Pocahontas pussy had brought in a frail of figs and fruits of various kinds, cheeses both hard and soft, and foaming mugs of some sorbible sarsaparilla decoction. We spent the rest of the afternoon and evening supping, singing, and playing ombre while discussing the miscellanea that fill our lives.

LANDERS SLANDER

In January 1989, columnist Ann Landers published a reader's query asking for the two words in addition to HUNGRY and ANGRY that end in -GRY. Directed to George Scheetz of Sioux City, Iowa, she quickly learned more about -GRY words than she wanted to know. Rejecting most of Scheetz's 48 words she allowed only MEAGRY, AGGRY, and PUGGRY. "I'm sure [the rest of Scheetz's words] appeared in some musty old English dictionary, but if I can't find them, I don't count 'em...I decided that William Safire, one of the premier word-smiths of our time, was right when he described word games as 'a hoax designed to provoke hours of useless brain-rack-ing'. I am ashamed to tell you how many hours I spent chasing down words in seven dictionaries...I don't know about you, folks, but I have had enough of word games for awhile."