

THE VENEREAL GAME

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The adjective veneraal is defined in dictionaries as pertaining to sexual intercourse, but the associated noun, venery, relates either to coital activity or to the hunting of game. Although Venus pursued her prey indiscriminately in bower or bosky dell, in the veneraal game only the bosky dell is involved. James Lipton's An Exaltation of Larks lists scores of veneraal terms, relics of mediaeval times. Some -- a school of fish, a pride of lions -- are still in general use; others -- a skulk of foxes, a barren of mules -- are still used by specialists; still others have vanished from the general ken. Mr. Lipton goes on to conjure up his own collectives, such as an unktion of undertakers, a float of dancers, a dilation of pupils, and a wince of dentists. This is a game open to all. It is played with gusto on Mary Ann Madden's competition page in New York Magazine, with results like these:

a riot of students ... a peck of kisses (or bad boys) ... a Buckley of Bills ... a mine of egotists ... a host of parasites ... a complement of sycophants ... a range of ovens ... a furrow of brows ... a nun of your business ... a lot of realtors ... a whack of Portnoys ... a knot of Windsors ... a wagon of tee-totalers

Here assembled, unscanned, are a number of veneraal terms (how apt the collective!) applied to ladies of the night; these terms were first published in the November 1968 Word Ways.

He asked, as he had asked before,
How much is horror more than whore?
Do flautists set aside their flutes
And listen when a prostitutes?
He said, I saw a lively group
Of laughing ladies on a stoop.
I asked my friends, I asked my teachers
For names to call the pretty creatures;
And they, as is their wont to do,
Replied from varied points of view:

An orchestra conductor led:
'A flourish of strumpets, lad,' he said.
To which the butcher boy rejoins:
'I say ... a pride of loins.'

In ringing tones a campanilist knells:

'A peal ... of Jezebels.'

A teacher of domestic arts:

'A jam ... of tarts.'

A dietician diagnosed the bawds:

'An expanse of broads.'

A jeweler assayed the self-same maids:

'A ring of jades.'

'To me,' said a dancer, 'a wiggle of wenches.'

'To me,' said a chemist, 'a beaker of stenches.'

'A cargo of baggage' -- such was the guess

Of Henry, who drives for American Express.

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VOCABULARY CLEPT POETRY

In Word Ways articles in 1969 and 1970, several people tackled the job of reconstructing a poem from an alphabetical list of its words. For poems several hundred words long, the mood of the original poem was captured, but the story-line was often quite different. Word Ways readers are invited to participate in a reconstruction experiment using a much shorter poem -- one with only 30 words in 6 lines. How close to the original can your reconstruction come? What title would you select?

anyway, but, California's, cares, crazy, dry, everyone's,
 fell, go, hanging, if, into, it, it, living, matter, ocean,
 off, on, on, or, so, somehow, the, there, they'd,
 underwater, wet, who, wouldn't