
SWEARING

*A Social History of Foul Language,
Oaths and Profanity in English*



Geoffrey Hughes



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Preface

IN HIS *Worlde of Wordes*, published in 1598, John Florio defined Italian *fottere* as ‘to iape, to sard, to fucke, to swive, to occupy,’ running through the whole gamut of copulatory registers with typical Renaissance exuberance. A century and a half later, two society ladies brimming with propriety, ‘very much commended Dr Johnson for the omission of all naughty words’ from his *Dictionary*. ‘What! my dears!’ the doughty Doctor archly replied, ‘then you have been looking for them?’ In 1896, Dr J. S. Farmer became involved in a lawsuit when his publishers refused to publish certain obscene words in his dictionary of slang. Today an editor is more likely to incur censure for prissiness or cowardice through omitting words which are widely in use (outside the range of ears polite) but nevertheless regarded as not ‘fit to print’.

These anecdotes and observations bring out the perennial ambivalence of attitudes towards foul language. Similarly, although swearing obviously thrives in astonishing profusion in many quarters and is never heard in others, there is also hesitancy over accepting it as a proper topic for public display or serious discussion. There are sound academic reasons for this, for swearing exists in such variegated forms, from the deadliest curse and most serious asseveration down to the flippant ejaculation of annoyance, that often the exact meaning and intention of the form of words lie only with the speaker. The fields are hedged about with all manner of complex pressures, personal, societal, religious, sexual, and other forms of taboo which still seem only imperfectly understood. Origins and practices are alike elusive and imperfectly documented, as tends to happen when tacit understandings are at work. A researcher from a different period may thus easily misinterpret a meaning or a causation entirely. Why, for instance, should the word *donkey* make a curiously sudden appearance in the mid-eighteenth century? Why should *coney* make an equally odd disappearance from the vocabulary? The explanations are similar, involving shifts in the respective semantic fields. *Ass* was acquiring an uncomfortable phonetic

proximity to *arse*, just as *coney* was to *cunt*, requiring both terms to be dropped and replaced. An outsider to a culture may be equally non-plussed: what would a newly-arrived visitor to Australia make of the observation 'He's a good bastard'? How do rational explanations cope with the paradox Defoe commented on with exasperation: 'They call the dogs sons of whores, and the men sons of bitches'?

Not the least of the problems facing an historical study of swearing is that of organization. I am reminded of the memorable images used by Barbara Strang in her *History of English* twenty years ago, when she wrote in her Preface of the 'ceaselessly, oceanically, heaving, swelling, flowing, ungraspable mass that historians corset into manageable chunks on to which quasi-scientific labels can be stuck'. This awareness leads to the major question: is it more illuminating to focus on different segments of time and consider developments within each phase, or to trace themes across time? Each mode has its advantages and drawbacks. I have preferred the former approach, chiefly because modes and referents in swearing do not appear to be constant: a topic like 'Sexual Swearing from *Beowulf* to *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*' would have to pass over several of the earlier centuries in tantalized silence, while, conversely, the theme of 'Oaths of Heroic Undertaking' would run dismally dry in modern times. The fascinating convention of ritual insult known as *flyting* has a disjunctive history, flourishing in Viking times, dwindling away in Middle English, reviving as a Scots literary genre in the Renaissance, and then largely petering out in Modern English, although a continuation can be seen in the cognate practice of 'sounding' in black American English.

As Murray put it with his usual incontestable clarity in his Preface to the *OED*, 'No one man's English is *all* English.' This observation becomes highly pertinent to the demotic domain, where a person may have a huge general vocabulary but will usually have highly personal preferences in swearing, drawn from background factors of family, school, class and calling. My own decent bourgeois background meant that the most vehement personal denunciations and expletives heard from my elders and betters (as they were archaically styled) were 'that bloody fool!' or 'the bastard!' and the strongest exclamation of frustration or anger was 'For Christ's sake!' I do not recall hearing the unprintable 'four-letter words' used until I went into national service: at school the word which excited greatest erotic interest was *friction*, since it was defined in the dictionary as 'heat generated by two bodies rubbing together'. Those days are over. Today, in film and television dialogue, as well as in much family discourse, the old taboos are noisily

disintegrating, not without resistance or protest. The old censorship of *pas devant les enfants* has been reversed into *pas devant les parents*.

Half a century ago, Robert Graves observed in the opening page of his *Lars Porsena: The Future of Swearing*: 'Of recent years in England there has been a noticeable decline of swearing and foul language' It is unlikely that he would now take the same view. Both the facts of the resurgence of swearing and the possible social explanations supply the matter for the last part of this study.

It may be asked why I have included the older term *oaths* in addition to *swearing*, which is obviously more current. The choice is not simply that of preference for a philological archaism. *Oaths* still resonates with the formality and seriousness which verbal undertakings have traditionally been regarded, while *swearing* is now common, personal and largely debased. Since this study was partly intended to explore some of the older, highly potent workings of words in society, the more venerable term seemed appropriate.

Clearly, this is a field which Eric Partridge made very much his own. In dedicating this work to him (*in absentia*), I also acknowledge copious assistance from his pioneering efforts in exploring the linguistic underworld. Ashley Montagu's fine study, *The Anatomy of Swearing*, issued some twenty years ago, has also proved a valuable source of historical documentation.

Finally, I owe a great debt of gratitude to Philip Carpenter of Basil Blackwell for his enthusiastic backing of this book right from the inchoate and muddled first draft, and to my Editor, David Crystal, who has always been forthcoming with sound advice and constructive assistance. Andrew McNeillie of Basil Blackwell was most competent and supportive in the final stages of production.

G. H.
Pineslopes, Transvaal

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Sources and Abbreviations

THIS study is, of necessity, heavily dependent on the master-work on semantic change in English, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED). For economy of reference, a raised 'O' is used (e.g. 1934^O) to refer to the main *Dictionary* (1884–1928), which was the collaboration of Murray (pre-eminently), Bradley, Craigie, Onions and Furnivall, 'with the assistance of many scholars and men of science'. A raised 'S' refers to the *OED Supplement* (1972–86), produced by Dr Robert Burchfield and his research team at Oxford. The fourth and last volume, published in 1986, completes what is clearly a worthy sequel to its predecessor, so aptly described by Otto Jespersen as 'that splendid monument of English scholarship'. Although the two sequences were consolidated in 1990 into the Second Edition, I have preferred to keep references to them separate, since apart they record changing policies and attitudes towards swearing, foul language and profanity. This acknowledgement of logophilia dependence is in no way intended to implicate any Oxford lexicographer in the inferences and conclusions which follow.

Other abbreviations used are:

OE	Old English	} used interchangeably
A-S	Anglo-Saxon	
ME	Middle English	
Mn.E	Modern English	
ON	Old Norse	
OF	Old French	
COD	<i>Concise Oxford Dictionary</i>	
DSAE	<i>Dictionary of South African English</i>	
EDD	<i>English Dialect Dictionary</i>	
EETS	<i>Early English Text Society</i>	
ODQ	<i>Oxford Dictionary of Quotations</i>	
THES	<i>Times Higher Education Supplement</i>	
TLS	<i>Times Literary Supplement</i>	

*To
Eric Partridge
intrepid explorer
of the lexical underworld*

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I

A Cursory Introduction

The air is full of our cries. But habit is a great deadener.

Samuel Beckett

Oaths are the fossils of piety.

George Santayana

Deceive boys with dice, but men with oaths.

Lysander

‘Our family like the word “Budgerigar!” You can really get your tongue round that one.’

informal informant

‘*Fuck* originated from a royal injunction at the time of the Plague, when it was very necessary to procreate; it was a code word in which the letters stood for “fornicate under command of the King”.’

informal informant

As soon as you deal with it [sex] explicitly, you are forced to choose between the language of the nursery, the gutter and the anatomy class.

C. S. Lewis

‘THE English (it must be owned) are rather a foul-mouthed nation,’ opined William Hazlitt in 1821.¹ Though this view might be surprising to some, it was not new. Indeed, the nation’s time-honoured reputation for swearing reaches back at least to the time of Joan of Arc, when the French termed them ‘les Goddems [the goddams]’. Their modern descendants have maintained the tradition by acquiring (from the same quarter) the sobriquet of ‘les fuckoffs’ (Mort, 1986, p. 77). Between these two points of reference, one thinks of Harry Hotspur enjoining his wife to utter a ‘good mouth-filling oath’ (as would be befitting a noblewoman), of Queen Elizabeth upholding the practice, of Sir Charles

Sedley's witticism, upon being fined (three centuries ago) the formidable sum of £500, that 'he thought that he was the first man that paid for shitting', and of Robert Graves observing (about half a century ago), that 'Of recent years in England there has been a decline of swearing and foul language' (1936, p. 1).

These observations and notable practitioners remind us of the continuing currency of coarse speech which, though staple to many tongues, has generally been ignored in standard histories of the language, even some of the most recent. The conventional understanding that the levels of discourse should be separated has hardened into an academic practice whereby studies of the 'proper' language (the upper levels) are kept apart from the 'improper' (or lower levels). None of the standard histories of the language has accorded the lower registers or the idioms of obscenity much attention. This is true of both traditional studies, such as those of Jespersen (1905), Baugh (1951), Potter (1963) and Barber (1964), and, less justifiably, of the more recent studies offered under the banner of descriptive linguistics, such as those of Pyles and Algeo (1970), Bloomfield and Newmark (1963) and Leith (1983), which purport to deal with the language 'really' in use, namely the protean varieties of oral usage. The same reticence is found in several excellent linguistic studies of English as an international or world language. These ignore such basic lexical and semantic points of difference as the copious use of *bloody* and *bastard* in Australian English and the use of *mother-fucker* and *cocksucker* as a major feature in American English, particularly in black parlance.²

For centuries the division of usage into the decent bourgeois standard and the less acceptable lower varieties of slang has been *de rigueur*. The split is notable in the dictionary, where one finds a 'proper' tradition of Bailey (1728), Johnson (1755) and Murray et al. (1884–1928), and a 'canting', slang or underworld tradition (which is actually older) starting in Elizabethan times with works by Harman (1567), Greene (1591) and others, continued by Grose (1785), Farmer and Henley (1896–1904) and Partridge (1937), and is currently showing a resurgence with a variety of works appearing virtually on an annual basis. The title of Francis Grose's exuberantly witty thesaurus, *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, highlights for us the semantic shift undergone by *vulgar*. Did he intend the old meaning of the 'common, ordinary or vernacular language used by the majority', or the more class-bound sense of the language used by those 'not reckoned as belonging to good society' or 'lacking in refinement and good taste, uncultured, ill-bred', as the *OED* defines the various categories? The second sense is the more likely, but

the persistence of the older meaning reminds us of the robust prevalence of the majoritarian 'vulgar'.

It is a fascinating speculation to consider how far this public separation of registers accords with the facts of private linguistic life. While we can be fairly certain that, say, Jane Austen, George Eliot and Henry James would have maintained roughly the same level of discourse in private life and in their published works, we can be less certain about, say, Charles Dickens, Oscar Wilde and many modern authors. Such observations, though interesting biographically, can (of course) be of only limited general value, since one needs to focus more on conventional mores than on individual cases. At any rate, a convention of linguistic censorship has not always obtained. It seems ironic that a medieval poet, Chaucer, should, in fact, have been one of the few major literary artists who could fearlessly use the whole gamut of the vocabulary without evident reprisal. All the available coarse vocabulary and a stupendous variety of oaths appear in his work. In the North the traditions of flyting kept both strains flourishing until the mid-sixteenth century. But by the time of Shakespeare, thanks to the efforts of the ill-called Master of the Revels in curbing what was styled as Profanity on the Stage, most of the vituperative energies of the tongue had been driven underground. There they have remained until quite recently, emerging only occasionally in spectacularly outrageous flaunters of convention like Rochester, Urquhart and Motteux, Swift and Lawrence. The days when the dandelion could be called the *pissabed*, a heron could be called a *shiterow* and the windhover could be called the *windfucker* have passed away with the exuberant phallic advertisement of the codpiece.

Whatever this Anglo-centric view might suggest, swearing is not universal. According to Montagu, several substantial speech communities, including the American Indians, the Japanese, the Malaysians and most Polynesians, do not swear (1973, p. 55). Never the less, in many cultures swearing is fascinating in its protean diversity and poetic creativity, while being simultaneously shocking in its ugliness and cruelty. Whereas Proteus merely changed shape, the same form of an oath or a curse yields many meanings. Swearing draws upon such powerful and incongruous resonators as religion, sex, madness, excretion and nationality, encompassing an extraordinary variety of attitudes, including the violent, the amusing, the shocking, the absurd, the casual and the impossible. Being manifestly not a simple matter, it seems to raise more questions than answers. Why, for example, is swearing not constant in its modes, styles and referents? Why is it that some forms of swearing appear to be universal, while others are more specific to a culture?

Within the English-speaking community, what variants emerge over time on the basis of nationality, class and sex? How is it that the categories of the sacred and the profane become so paradoxically intertwined in oaths? Why is swearing taken more seriously in some periods than others, even being raised at some stages of the culture to a verbal art form? What happens when swearing is driven underground? What is to be deduced from those changes which can be detected over time? These are some of the questions which this book will attempt to answer.

Swearing now encompasses so many disparate forms that some broad distinctions need to be made at the outset. We swear *by*, we swear *that* (something is so), we swear *to* (do something), we swear *at* (somebody or something), and sometimes we swear simply out of exasperation. These different modes might be re-termed by a variety of classical equivalents, asseveration, invocation, imprecation, malediction, blasphemy, profanity and ejaculation, with an admixture of that most complex and unstable category, obscenity. Although we are familiar with all these types now, they have not been constantly present in the past. They represent an agglomeration of various linguistic modes which have evolved over centuries. The crude history of swearing, however named, which this book will unfold in all its strange, violent and comic detail, is that people used mainly to swear *by* or *to*, but now swear mostly *at*.

Although the main framework of the argument will be historical, this introductory chapter will perforce be discursive, surveying various aspects which are integral to the topic. Subsequent chapters will pursue particular themes, tracing their development in given periods of time. Since the main ambit of the argument will be evolutionary, the early chapters will focus more on swearing *by*, while the later will be more concerned with swearing *at*.

As was mentioned previously, swearing shows a curious convergence of the high and the low, the sacred and the profane. From the 'high' dualistic perspective, it is language in its most highly charged state, infused with a religious force recognizable in the remote modes of the spell, the charm and the curse, forms seeking to invoke a higher power to change the world, or support the truthfulness of a claim. At base these varieties are profoundly serious. Although they may sound far-fetched (*drat*, for example, originally meaning 'God rot your bones!' – or any other part of the anatomy), there is always the alarming possibility of the words coming true. However, a major shift has occurred in comparatively recent times in that a quite different emphasis has become dominant. The 'lower' physical faculties of copulation, defecation and urination have come very much to the fore as referents in swearing.

Though they may be deeply wounding, many of these forms of words, such as *bugger off*, *son of a bitch* and so on deal with literal or practical impossibilities. In this respect they are different in literal potential from the 'high' variety. However, as we shall see, there is a recurring problem of analysis which concerns the degree to which any person (other than the utterer) can know how literally to interpret forms of swearing.

Because 'sacral' notions of language tend to be very powerful at primitive stages of society, taboos have traditionally grown up around offensive usages. Swearing is, in one sense, a violation of these taboos: the 'high' varieties violate the taboo of invoking the name of the deity, while the 'low' are often violations of sexual taboos, especially those concerning incest. Some of the major problems frustrating an attempt at an historical study are consequently the obstacles of suppressed or garbled evidence, found in uncertain etymologies and incomplete semantic histories. Suppression, discussed more fully in subsequent chapters, is a perennial feature. Garbled, mangled or 'minced' oaths are also more common than is generally realized. (*Gorblimey!* is similar to *drat* cited above, being a corruption of *God blind me!*, mainly Cockney in use, dating from c.1870⁰.)

To modern ears, most oaths are now usually 'demystified' into mere forms of words. Statements are now made under oath only in formal, for instance, legal proceedings, or in such necessary rituals of social and political continuity as taking an oath of allegiance. They form the basic structure of trust on which all society is based, so that every culture has some form of binding oath, as it has some form of verbal taboo. One of the many forms of ritualized reinforcement of an oath is this practice recorded a century ago:

Among the Nagas of Assam two men will lay hold of a dog or a fowl by head and feet, which is then chopped in two with a single blow of the dao [a tool, half chopper and half sword], this being emblematic of the fate expected to fall the perjurer. Or a man will take hold of the barrel of a gun, a spearhead or a tiger's tooth, and solemnly declare, 'If I do not faithfully perform this my promise, may I fall by this!'³

In elucidating the ancient sense of *by* in forms of swearing, the *OED* observes that the word originally 'must have had a local sense "in the presence of", or perhaps "in touch of" some sacred object' though 'to modern apprehension there is apparently no notion of place, but one approaching that of instrumentality or medium'. Invocations of the Almighty, previously so feared and respected, are now generally regarded as 'taking the Lord's name in vain', a phrase which has changed

revealingly over the past centuries: its original sense essentially criticized the abuse of the mystical power of the Lord's name; now the kernel of the phrase *in vain* is more suggestive of scepticism about the validity of that power. Corroborating this point are the great numbers of 'self-immolating' oaths and curses, such as *strike me dead! blow me down! shiver me timbers! Gor blimey!* (cited above) and those clearly derived from judicial oaths, such as *so help me!* On this point, the brilliant insight of Vico is pertinent: in his analysis, language evolves through three stages, being originally sacred, then poetic and finally conventional (1948, pp. 306–7). His evolutionary framework of ideas is particularly germane to our theme. It also points up the difficulty of knowing exactly what degree of literalism is being invoked in a particular form of words, without an intimate knowledge of the cultural period concerned.

In the past, when honour and language were more closely interlinked, oaths (or their abrogation) changed the fates of nations. For instance, William of Normandy's claim to the English throne depended initially on no more than his word that Edward the Confessor had formally named him as his successor. When his rival, Harold Godwinson, was shipwrecked and captured on the Normandy coast, William granted him his freedom only upon the exaction of an oath supporting this claim (against Harold's own). However, Harold was subsequently named by Edward the Confessor as his successor, was elected by the English *witenagemot* (Privy Council) and crowned, so that William had to assert his claim by conquest.

Duels have been fought over words carrying only the faintest implication of dishonour. The intensely personal commitment which an oath requires was vividly apparent when Francis I of France abrogated a treaty and declared war on Spain in 1528. Charles V of Spain accused Francis of ungentlemanly behaviour and challenged him to a duel. (It did not take place.) We cannot imagine a similar consequence arising from, for example, Chamberlain challenging Hitler to a duel on the parallel grounds of the Führer's abrogation of their agreement signed at Munich in 1938.

Personal insults can likewise have devastating consequences, belying the naive, childish chant: 'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me'. One of the more spectacular social instances arose from the visiting card delivered by the Marquess of Queensberry to the Albermarle Club on 18 February 1894 with the words 'To Oscar Wilde posing Somdomite [sic]' (Ellmann, 1988, p. 412). This precipitated the lawsuit and accompanying society scandal which ruined Wilde. Today such a sexual slur would be less likely to incur litigation.

Indeed, a review of a recent biography of Truman Capote began in cavalier fashion: 'Truman Capote was the sort who gives sodomy a bad name.'⁴ Never the less, oaths, curses and insults directed at individuals can still have serious repercussions. In modern times, however, cases of *crimen injuria* are more likely to arise from racist slurs than sexual insults.

WORD-MAGIC AND TABOO

Charms, spells and curses (which are treated in more detail in the following chapter) represent survivals of primitive beliefs in word-magic, which tend to become less potent as a society develops. We can see this evolution encapsulated in the semantic history of the word *curse*. Of uncertain origin and unique to English among the European languages, its Old English meaning was 'to damn'; in Middle English the primary sense developed as the ecclesiastical specialization 'to excommunicate or anathematize'. Since then it has steadily diminished in force as a verb, though the noun still has potency. Dr Johnson defined *cursedly* as 'miserably, shamefully', commenting that it was 'a low cant [slang] word'. We can trace the weakened fossilized forms in *curst*, 'perversely cross, contrary', much used of Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew* and *cussed*, the colloquial American variant, recorded from c.1848^o. An exactly parallel semantic development can be seen in the word *damn*, which has moved from its strictly ecclesiastical 'infernal' sense to one of milder disapproval or exasperation, reflected in the altered forms of *demn* and *dem*, current in the late seventeenth century and facetiously extended by Dickens in *Nicholas Nickleby* to *demnition*. (The American forms *darned*, *durned* and late eighteenth-century *tarnation* show the same development.) Otto Jespersen noted appositely, 'Thus we have here a whole family of words with an initial *d*, allowing the speaker to begin as if he were going to say the prohibited word, and then turn off into more innocent channels' (1962, p. 229). *Blast* has shown similarly pattern of diminishing force since Elizabethan times. So, in a more limited fashion, has *take*, which had an earlier sense of 'exert a malign influence', still heard in imprecations like 'The Devil take it!' In one of his horrifying curses against Goneril, King Lear uses the term in this sense:

... Strike her young bones,
You taking airs, with lameness!
(II. iv. 160-1)

Our modern insensitivity to the language of cursing clearly derives