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A BRIEF HISTORY OF SWEARING

MELISSA MOHR

HOLY SHIT

A Brief History of Swearing

Melissa Mohr

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HOLY SHIT

To John Harington and Samuel Johnson
And to my husband

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Writing this book—which spans more than four thousand years of history, give or take, and addresses everything from the Bible to poetry to legal cases to neuroscience—I very much felt the misgivings Samuel Johnson described when he set out the plan of his dictionary in 1747: "I cannot hope, in the warmest moments, to preserve

so much caution through so long a work, as not often to sink into negligence, or to obtain so much knowledge of all its parts as not frequently to fail by ignorance. I expect that sometimes the desire of accuracy will urge me to superfluities, and sometimes the fear of prolixity betray me to omissions: that in the extent of such variety, I shall be often bewildered; and in the mazes of such intricacy, be frequently entangled: that in one part refinement will be subtilized beyond exactness, and evidence dilated in another beyond perspicuity. Yet I do not despair of approbation from those who, knowing the uncertainty of conjecture, the scantiness of knowledge, the fallibility of memory, and the unsteadiness of attention, can compare the causes of error with the means of avoiding it, and the extent of art with the capacity of man; and whatever be the event of my endeavours, I shall not easily regret an attempt which has procured me the honour" of your attention, my dear reader.

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HOLY SHIT

Introduction

It was the last word my grandmother ever said to me. She was suffering from advanced Alzheimer's disease and didn't speak at all as I helped her eat her lunch or even when I showed her family photos. I'm not sure she recognized me. When I took her for a walk outside in her wheelchair, though, she found her voice. I wheeled her over a crack in the sidewalk and her chair bumped. Out it came—"Shit!" This from a woman who, even when she was feeling particularly frustrated, had rarely gone further than "Nuts!" or "Darn it!" She relapsed into silence for the rest of my visit.

In 1866, the French poet Charles Baudelaire was laid low by a stroke. He lost his ability to speak, except for one phrase he repeated so often that the nuns taking care of him threw him out of their hospital: "Cré nom!"—short for *sacré nom de Dieu*. Today, the English equivalent to this would be the mild *goddamn* or *damn*, but in 1866 "Cré nom!" so unforgivably offended the nuns that they could explain Baudelaire's outbursts only as the result of satanic possession.

Embedded deep within the brains of Baudelaire and my grandmother, remaining even when other language had been stripped away, were swearwords. Baudelaire's swearing was a violation of religious taboo, taking God's name in vain. My grandmother's violated taboos against mentioning certain body parts or bodily excretions and actions. Over the centuries these two spheres of the unsayable—the religious and the sexual/excremental, the Holy and the Shit, if you will—have given rise to all the other "four-letter words" with which we swear. A history of swearing is a history of their interaction and interplay. Sometimes the Holy has been the main source of swearwords, sometimes the Shit, and sometimes the two fields have

joined in what we today would consider unusual combinations—obscene words shouted during religious rituals, for example. In the twenty-first century, we have an embarrassment of riches, and can choose words from both areas, as demonstrated by one precocious four-year-old at my son's nursery school, who responded to something his mother had said with "Well, fuck me, Jesus!"

Holy Shit is a history of swearing in English. It begins in a place where public buildings are covered with graffiti ("If you're reading this, you're a faggot"); where the most popular entertainers have the foulest mouths; where swearwords graphic enough to offend not very delicate sensibilities are heard on every street corner. This is not New York City. It is Rome, two thousand years ago. We start with ancient Latin, because the Roman idea of *obscenitas* guided the development of our own concept of obscenity—along with republicanism, the Julian calendar, and numerous literary classics, the Romans gave us a model for our use of obscene words. The Romans had a very different sexual schema than we do, however, which led to some fascinating differences between their obscene words and ours, as we'll see in Chapter 1. The Bible, in turn, gave us the Holy, and a model for our oath swearing. Such swearing is very important to God, who demands again and again that believers swear by him and him alone. In the Old Testament, God is fighting a war for supremacy with other Near Eastern gods, and he wields oath swearing as one of his most powerful weapons.

The Middle Ages (a huge span of time, roughly 470–1500) was firmly under the sway of the Holy. Despite using plenty of words that we today would consider to be shocking and offensive, medieval English people were unconcerned about the Shit. Oath swearing instead was the most highly charged language—the truly obscene—thought to be able to injure God's reputation and even assault Christ physically. In the Renaissance (c. 1500–1660), the Holy and the Shit were more in balance. The rise of Protestantism and its changing definition of people's relationship to God, as well as the growing importance of "civility," created conditions for the development of

obscenity, one of the things that proper, polite behavior is defined against. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw the ascendancy of the Shit, what we today would recognize as fully developed obscenity. Obscenities possessed perhaps their greatest power to shock and offend during this age of euphemism, when even words such as *leg* and *trousers* were deemed too scandalous and vulgar for the public sphere. Today, all bets are off, and both obscenities and oaths are flourishing in public discourse, as any look at television, the Internet, or political debate will demonstrate.

For more than two thousand years, swearing has alternated between the twin poles of oaths and obscenities, between the Holy and the Shit. What makes a word a swearword, though? What distinguishes *fuck* from *bonk* or *sleep with*, "Jesus Christ!" from "Heavens above!"? These questions can be approached from several different angles: physiological, linguistic, and historical.

Physiologically, swearwords have different effects on people than do other, superficially similar words. They induce greater skin conductance responses than do other words, even emotionally evocative words such as *death* or *cancer*. (The skin conductance response indicates the extent of a person's emotional arousal by measuring the degree to which his or her skin conducts electricity.) Swearwords help us deal with physical pain. In a recent experiment, subjects were able to keep their hands immersed in very cold water longer when they repeated a swearword such as *shit* than when they repeated a neutral word such as *shoot*. Speaking swearwords increases your heart rate. It is also easier to remember taboo words than non-taboo ones in a word recall test. If you are given a list that includes a mix of obscenities and neutral words, you can bet that the ones that stick in your mind will be *fuck* and *nigger*, not *kiss* and *angry*.

Scientists today believe that swearwords even occupy a different part of our brain. Most speech is a "higher-brain" function, the province of the cerebral cortex, which also controls voluntary actions and rational thought. Swearwords are stored in the "lower brain," the limbic system, which, broadly, is responsible for emotion, the

fight-or-flight response, and the autonomic nervous system, which regulates heart rate and blood pressure. This is why my grandmother and Charles Baudelaire could still come up with "Shit!" and "Cré nom!" even though their ability to speak had otherwise been eroded by disease.

Linguistically, a swearword is one that "kidnaps our attention and forces us to consider its unpleasant connotations," as Steven Pinker puts it. *Connotation* is a word's baggage, the emotional associations that go along with it, as opposed to its *denotation*, its dictionary definition. Cognitive psychologist Timothy Jay saw this distinction summed up in an exchange of graffiti on a bathroom wall. "You are all a bunch of fucking nymphomaniacs," one line read. Someone had circled "fucking" and added below, "There ain't no other kind." The second writer chose to interpret "fucking" as a denotative use, not a connotative one. The literal definition is, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "that engages in or is engaged in sexual intercourse." It can have many connotations, however, from "really bad" to "extraordinarily good." "Fucking nymphomaniacs" could be either, really—it is difficult to tell whether the tone is one of admiration or exasperation. Swearwords are almost *all* connotation—they carry an emotional charge that exceeds the taboo status of their referents.

To put it another way, as some linguists do, swearwords are often employed in a *nonliteral* sense. "He fucked her" is a literal or denotative use—they had sex. "The fuck you are!" is a nonliteral use—nobody is having any kind of sex here, or referring to it; it is simply a vigorous denial. The *f*-word here serves as an intensifier, important for the connotation it carries and not for its literal meaning. Our strongest offensive words can almost always be used nonliterally (except, as we will see, the racial epithets).

Historically, swearwords have been thought to possess a deeper, more intimate connection to the things they represent than do other words. *Shit*, to put it another way, is more closely connected to the thing itself in all its smelly, sticky yuckiness than is *poop* or *excrement*. These words vividly reveal taboo body parts, actions, and excretions

that culture demands we conceal, whether by covering with clothing, shrouding in privacy, or flushing down the toilet. A version of this theory was given legal sanction by the United States Supreme Court in 2009, when it heard a case on "fleeting expletives," including that of the musician Bono, who accepted an award at the Golden Globes ceremony with "This is really, really fucking brilliant." The Court agreed with the Federal Communications Commission that the use of the *f*-word "invariably invokes a coarse sexual image." Even when a happy rock star uses the word to describe his surprise, it "inherently has a sexual connotation." The idea is that when Bono says "fucking," you cannot help picturing people (who?) getting it on. Some language experts have criticized the FCC's and the Court's argument, and it would seem that this case pretty obviously involves a nonliteral use, employed for its connotation. It has nothing to do with sex and everything to do with expressing how happy and surprised the singer feels. But this does not change the point that *fucking* acquired its intense emotional power and its status as one of the worst words in the English language from its ability to access one of our deepest taboos and bring it to light in a way that no other word could or can.

It is fairly easy for us today to see how obscenities fit the physiological, linguistic, and historical criteria that we've laid out. But what about oaths, which were the most highly charged, most offensive language in English for centuries? Swearing an oath can mean two different things, one positive and one negative. In the "good" sense, an oath means promising before God to tell the truth—this is sincere oath swearing. Such oaths are an important part of society today: witnesses swear to tell the truth and nothing but the truth, public officials swear oaths of office, businessmen swear to their wives that they are not shtupping (Yiddish for "to push, shove") their secretaries. In the past, such oaths could be a matter of life and death. People were imprisoned and even executed because they refused to swear before God, or swore in some wrong way. In the "bad" sense, an oath means blasphemous or vain swearing, words or

phrases that take God's name in vain, mention his body parts, or otherwise detract from his honor. This includes everything from making God witness a lie—swearing that you are not shtupping when you are—to exclaiming "Jesus Christ!" when you are upset.

Oaths have come a long way from the days of the Middle Ages, when *by God's bones* would have been more shocking than *cunt*. Today, *God* and *damn it* are probably too mild to increase the heart rate of many people, but, I would argue, they would have in the past. Empirical evidence for this is hard to come by—there was obviously no medieval skin conductance testing, and though the Victorians discovered the galvanic skin response in the late nineteenth century, they did not use it to investigate swearing. Anecdotal evidence suggests, however, that oaths were carriers of and triggers for great emotion, like obscenities today, and were stored in the same "lower" regions of the brain. We have already encountered Baudelaire and his "cré nom"; other evidence comes from early reports of people suffering from Tourette's syndrome. Tourette's syndrome is characterized by a variety of motor and vocal tics including, most famously, *coprolalia*, the apparently uncontrollable utterance of obscene words. The patient with the first reported case of Tourette's syndrome (1825) compulsively called out oaths as well as obscenities. She was a French aristocrat, the Marquise de Dampierre, who apparently shocked society with periodic outbursts of *sacré nom de Dieu* as well as *merde* ("shit") and *foutu cochon* (best translated as "fucking pig"). This balance is exactly what we would expect in the nineteenth century. Her brain had stored a mix of oaths and obscenities with which to offend when the irresistible urge came on.

Linguistically, vain oaths were used in the same ways and for the same reasons that we employ obscenities today. A fourteenth-century tailor who pricked himself with his needle would have shouted "By God's bones!" (or nails, blood, eyes, etc.), not "Shit!" Oaths in the past offered the catharsis we now seek in obscene language. Medieval insults too were often prefaced with an oath—"By God . . . thy drasty rhyming is not worth a turd," the Host of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*

(1386) tells another pilgrim when he wants him to shut up. The Host uses his oath for emphasis, to make clear how much he hates the other pilgrim's poetry. Just like *fuck* or *cunt*, here "by God" has an offensive power in excess of its literal meaning. It is used for its connotation, not its denotation.

Lastly, we have the historical idea that swearwords possess a closer connection to the things they represent than do other words, and this is also true for oaths. In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, oaths were thought to have direct and automatic effects on God—this is what gave them their power. An oath forced God to look down from heaven and witness that a person's words were true. And as surprising as it sounds, oaths in certain forms—those by God's bones and other such body parts—were thought to rip apart Christ's body as it sat in heaven. They had an extremely close connection to what they represented—they could in certain respects control God and even injure him.

English has many other terms with which to define and describe swearing. Racial slurs and epithets are the most important of these. (An *epithet* indicates a quality that is supposed to be characteristic of the person or thing being described, or is simply an abusive term.) To many people, words such as *nigger* and *paki* are now the most offensive words in the English language. Certainly for me, the sections on racial slurs in Chapter 6 and in the epilogue were the hardest to write. I found surprisingly little problem in writing *fuck* over and over and over, but I balked at thinking about and discussing the *n*-word. In 1970, the editor in chief of *Webster's New World Dictionary* was likewise more uncomfortable with epithets than with the old sexual vocabulary, referring to "terms of racial or ethnic opprobrium" as "those true obscenities."

In what sense are racial slurs obscenities? *Obscene* is the term we use to describe our worst, most offensive words, which up until the recent past have been the sexual obscenities. Racial slurs access a taboo that is now as strong as or stronger than those against mentioning or revealing certain body parts, and so we call them obscene