MARK
FORSYTH'S
GEMEL
EDITION

THE ETYMOLOGICON   MARK FORSYTH

THE HOROLOGICON   MARK FORSYTH

MARK FORSYTH'S GEMEL EDITION

Typeset in Minion by Marie Doherty

THE ETYMOLOGICON
THE HOROLOGICON

Two beautiful books on words
by Mark Forsyth

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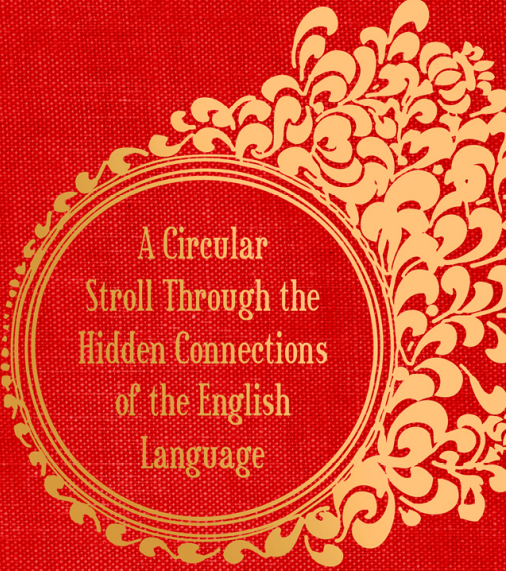# Contents

THE
ETYMOLOGICON

A Circular
Stroll Through the
Hidden Connections
of the English
Language

MARK FORSYTH (The Inky Fool)

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Contents

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.

*... 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.

Preface

(or that which is said – *fatus* – before)

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 very often 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 *gen*tleman 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 erythema[1] 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 homo*gen*ous and sometimes they are en*gen*dered in odd ways. For example, a group of things that reproduce is a *gen*us and if you're talking about a whole *gen*us then you're speaking in *gen*eral and if you're in *gen*eral command of the troops you're a *gen*eral and a *general* can order his troops to commit *gen*ocide, which, etymologically, would be suicide.

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.

[1] That's a blush to you and me.

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 pro*test* (bear witness for), de*test* (bear witness against), con*test* (bear witness competitively), and *testi*cle. What are testicles doing there? They are *testi*fying to a man's virility. Do you want to prove that you're a real man? Well, your *testi*cles will *testi*fy 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 bits*. Nobody knows how oaths were sworn in the ancient world, but many scholars believe that people didn't put their hands on their hearts or their thighs, but on the testicles of the man to whom they were

swearing, which would make the connection between *testis* and *testes* rather more direct.

Testicles. Bollocks. Balls. Nuts. Cullions. Cojones. Goolies. Tallywags. Twiddle-diddles. Bawbles, trinkets, spermaria. There are a hundred words for the danglers and they get everywhere. It's enough to make a respectable fellow blush. Do you enjoy the taste of avocado? So did I, until the terrible day when I realised that I was eating Aztec balls. You see, the Aztecs noticed the avocado's shape and decided that it resembled nothing so much as a big, green bollock. So they called it an *ahuakatl*, their word for testicle. When the Spanish arrived they misheard this slightly and called it *aguacate*, and the English changed this slightly to *avocado*. To remember that I used to like avocados with a touch of walnut oil only adds to my shame.

Even if you flee to an ivory tower and sit there wearing an orchid and a scowl, it still means that you have a testicle in your buttonhole, because that's what an orchid's root resembles, and *orchis* was the Greek for testicle. Indeed, the green-winged orchid used to rejoice in the name *Fool's Ballocks*. The technical term for somebody who has *a lot of balls* is a *polyorchid*.

And it's very possible that this *orb* on which we all live comes from the same root as *orchid*, in which case we are whirling around the Sun on a giant testis, six billion trillion tons of gonad or *cod*, which is where *cod-philosophy*, *codswallop* and *codpiece* come from.

There are two codpieces at the top right of your computer keyboard, and how they got there is a rather odd story.

Parenthetical Codpieces

Your computer keyboard contains two pictures of codpieces, and it's all the fault of the ancient Gauls, the original inhabitants of France. Gauls spoke Gaulish until Julius Caesar came and cut them all into three parts. One of the Gaulish words that the Gauls used to speak was *braca* meaning trousers. The Romans didn't have a word for trousers because they all wore togas, and that's why the Gaulish term survived.

From *braca* came the early French *brague* meaning trousers, and when they wanted a word for a codpiece they decided to call it a *braguette* or *little trousers*. This is not to be confused with *baguette*, meaning stick. In fact a Frenchman might brag that his baguette was too big for his braguette, but then Frenchmen will claim anything. They're *braggarts* (literally *one who shows off his codpiece*).

Braguettes were much more important in the olden days, especially in armour. On the medieval battlefield, with arrows flying hither and thither, a knight knew where he wanted the most protection. Henry VIII's codpiece, for example, was a gargantuan combination of efficiency and obscenity. It was big enough and shiny enough to frighten any enemy into disorganised retreat. It bulged out from the royal groin and stretched up to a metal plate that protected the royal belly.

And that is significant. What do you call the bit of stone that bulges out from a pillar to support a balcony or a roof? Until the sixteenth century nobody had been certain what to call them; but one day somebody must have been gazing at a cathedral wall and, in a moment of sudden clarity,

realised that the architectural supports looked like nothing so much as Henry VIII's groin.

And so such architectural structures came to be known as *braggets*, and that brings us to Pocahontas.

Pocahontas was a princess of the Powhatan tribe, which lived in Virginia. Of course, the Powhatan tribe didn't *know* they lived in Virginia. They thought they lived in Tenakomakah, and so the English thoughtfully came with guns to explain their mistake. But the Powhatan tribe were obstinate and went so far as to take one of the Englishmen prisoner. They were planning to kill him until Pocahontas intervened with her father and Captain John Smith was freed. The story goes that she had fallen madly in love with him and that they had a passionate affair, but as Pocahontas was only ten years old at the time, we should probably move swiftly on.

Of course, it may not have happened exactly that way. The story has been improved beyond repair. But there definitely *was* a Pocahontas and there definitely *was* a Captain John Smith, and they seem to have been rather fond of each other. Then he had an accident with one of his guns and had to return to England. The cruel colonists told Pocahontas that John Smith was dead, and she pined away in tears thinking that he was lost for ever. In fact, he wasn't dead, he was writing a dictionary.

The Sea-Man's Grammar and Dictionary: Explaining all the Difficult Terms of Navigation hit the bookstands in 1627. It had all sorts of nautical jargon for the aspiring sailor to learn. But, for our story, the important thing is that Captain Smith spelt *braggets* as *brackets*, and the spelling stuck.

The original architectural device was called a bragget/bracket, because it looked like a codpiece. But what about a double bracket, which connects two horizontals to a vertical? An architectural double bracket looks like this: [

Look around you: there's probably one on the nearest bookshelf. And just as a physical bracket got its name because it resembled a codpiece, so the punctuation bracket got its name because it resembled the structural component.

In 1711 a man called William Whiston published a book called *Primitive Christianity Revived*. The book often quotes from Greek sources and when it does, it gives both Whiston's translation *and* the original in what he was the first man to call [brackets].

And that's why, if you look at the top right-hand corner of your computer keyboard, you will see two little codpieces [] lingering obscenely beside the letter P for *pants*.