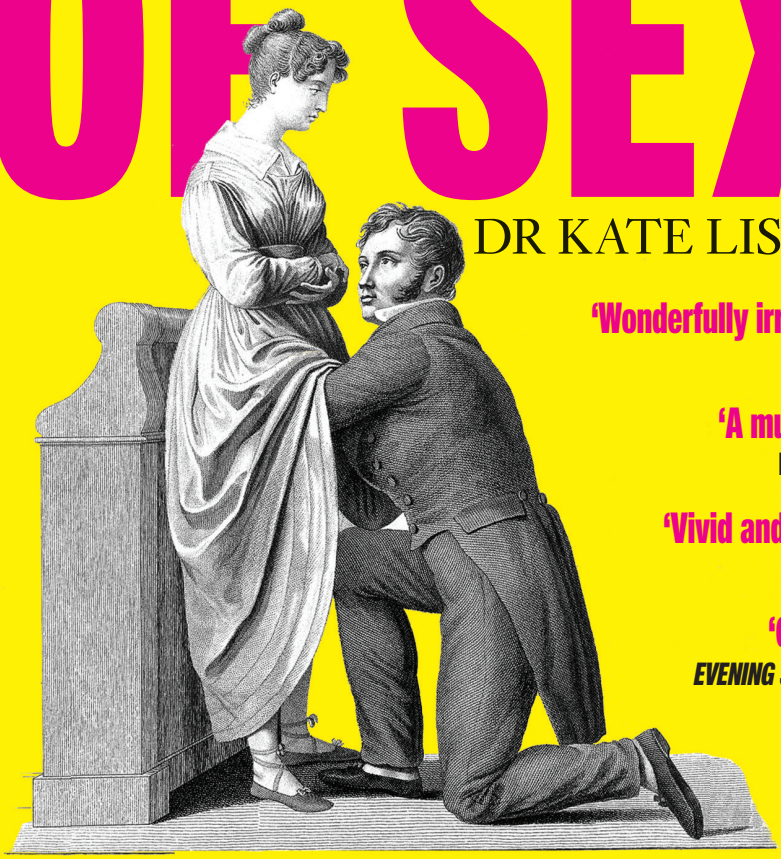
A CURIOUS HISTORY OF SEX

DR KATE LISTER



'Wonderfully irreverent'
THE TIMES

'A must-read'
DAN SNOW

'Vivid and playful'
GUARDIAN

'Glorious'
EVENING STANDARD

Dr Kate Lister is an historian, columnist, television presenter and host of the award-winning History Hit podcast *Betwixt the Sheets*. She has published widely in the field of sex history, and lives in the North of England.

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KATE LISTER



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For my family (sorry!)

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Introduction

Unexpressed emotions will never die. They are buried alive and will come forth later in uglier ways.

Sigmund Freud

Sex is one of the great universal levellers; to paraphrase Geoffrey Rush's Marquis de Sade, 'we eat, we sleep, we shit, we fuck and we die'.[1] Desire cuts across boundaries of culture, gender and class. It cares little for our 'rules' and, as anyone who has ever been caught with their pants down will tell you, it cares even less for common sense. Of course, humans do far more than eating, shitting and fucking – our intellect is what really sets us apart from the beasts. And herein lies the problem. To say that humans have overthought sex is something of an understatement.

All life on this planet shares the desire to reproduce, but what makes humans unique are the infinitely complex and varied ways we seek to gratify our sexual desires. In *Forensic and Medico-legal Aspects of Sexual Crimes and Unusual Sexual Practices* (2008), Professor Anil Aggrawal listed 547 different paraphilic sexual interests, and noted that 'like allergies, sexual arousal may occur from anything under the sun, including the sun'.[2] And, in case you're wondering, sexual arousal caused by the sun is called 'actirasty'.

Humans are also the only creatures that stigmatise, punish and create shame around their sexual desires. While all animals have courtship rituals, no wildebeest has ever gone into therapy

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because it's struggling to express a latex fetish. The queen honeybee will shag up to forty partners in one session, return to her hive dripping in semen and clutching the severed cocks of her conquests, and not one drone will call her a slut. Male baboons will happily bugger each other all day long and never fear being sent to a gay conversion camp. Yet the guilt we humans feel around our desires can be paralysing, and severe punishments have been doled out to those who break 'the rules'.

Colombian novelist Gabriel García Márquez once wrote that 'everyone has three lives: a public life, a private life and a secret life'.[3] Paradoxically, our secret life is us at our most honest. We force this honest piece of ourselves into secrecy because the systems we have created have rendered it incompatible with our public and private lives. In an effort to control this secret part of ourselves, humans turned sex into a moral issue and developed complex social structures to regulate our urges. We invented categories to try to control it: gay, straight, monogamous, virginal, promiscuous, etc. But sexuality does not fit neatly into man-made boxes; it spills over, and that's when things get messy. When we try to suppress our desire, it becomes a fault line running underneath our structures of morality, ethics and decency. But when the pink mist descends, people will still risk the earthquake to have an orgasm.

The act of sex itself has not changed since we first worked out what went where. Penises, tongues and fingers have been probing mouths, vulvas and anuses in search of an orgasm since humans first crawled out of the primordial sludge. What does change is the social script that dictates how sex is culturally understood and performed. For example, according to Pornhub, the largest pornography site on the internet, 'lesbian' has remained the number one search term used on their site worldwide since they first launched in 2007. In the Netherlands, 'lesbian' searches on

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Pornhub were up by 45 per cent in 2018 from 2016.[4] So, it's fair to say that the Dutch are giving lesbian sex a big thumbs-up. However, they have not always been so appreciative of V-on-V love. Between 1400 and 1550, fifteen women were burned alive in the Netherlands as 'female sodomites'.[5] Those who were not put to death still faced severe punishments. In 1514, Maertyne van Keyschote and Jeanne van den Steene of Bruges were both publicly flogged, had their hair burned off, and were banished from the city for having committed 'a certain great kind of the unnatural sin of sodomy with several young girls'.[6] Six hundred years later, 'the unnatural sin of sodomy with several young girls' is the most watched porn category among the descendants of the same people who thought it reasonable to chuck lesbians on a bonfire.

Pornhub searches for 'porn for women' were up by 359 per cent in 2018, with women viewing lesbian pornography 197 per cent more often than men did in the same year. This would have come as quite a shock to Dr William Acton (1813–1875), who claimed that 'the majority of women (happily for them) are not very much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind'.[7] And what the *Sunday Express* editor James Douglas (1867–1940) would have made of all this is anyone's guess. In 1928, Douglas attacked Radclyffe Hall's landmark lesbian novel, *The Well of Loneliness*, writing, this 'pestilence is devastating the younger generation. It is wrecking young lives. It is defiling young souls.' Douglas urged society to 'cleans[e] itself from the leprosy of these lepers'.[8] And yet here we are, ninety years later, with millions of women around the world jilling off to such 'pestilence' with our leprous souls intact. What a time to be alive.

This is a book about how attitudes to sex have changed throughout history. It is the curious history of sex and some of the things we have done to ourselves and to each other in the pursuit (and denial) of the almighty orgasm. This is not a

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comprehensive study of every sexual quirk, kink and ritual across all cultures throughout time, as that would entail writing an encyclopaedia. Rather, this is a drop in the ocean, a paddle in the shallow end of sex history, but I hope you will get pleasantly wet nonetheless. I have tried to choose subjects that provide valuable context for issues today, particularly issues of gender, sexual shame, beauty, language, and how desire has been regulated. I have chosen subjects that are close to my heart, such as the history of sex work, deeply emotive subjects, such as abortion, and also subjects that made me laugh, like 'cocklebread' and orgasming on a bicycle. Although it is easy to laugh at the silly things people have believed throughout history, and I hope you do, it is far more valuable to see how similar we are to people who have gone before us and question our own beliefs as a result. Sex remains a deeply divisive issue around the world, and in many places is a matter of life and death. These attitudes will turn and turn again – hopefully for the better. But we will never arrive at a place where sex is free of stigma and shame unless we first know where we have come from.



A note on the use of language. As far as offensive language goes, you are now entering a hard-hat area. This is a book that uncovers historical attitudes to sex and gender. Our ancestors had little understanding of gender fluidity and understood gender as binary and biologically determined. As a result, much of the historical material in this book defines women as having vulvas and men as having penises. For example, in the chapter on the history of the word 'cunt', 'cunt' is understood to be the genitals of a woman. Today, we know that those who identify as women have

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cunts and some do not, just as those who identify as men do and some do not. But our ancestors did not view gender or biology in such terms – they understood 'cunt' as being a woman's genitals. While this may be offensive to some modern ears, understanding historical attitudes to gender identity and sexual morphology is essential if we are to fully appreciate how heteronormativity and constructs of the binary of masculine and feminine came to dominate cultural narratives today.

The slang used throughout this book is all genuine historical slang and is followed by the date it was first recorded. My primary source for the historical slang is Jonathon Green's *Dictionary of Slang*, which I cannot recommend enough if you want to learn more.

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SEX AND WORDS

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'Tis Pity She's a Whore

A History of the Word 'Whore'

Language is an important battleground in the fight for social equality. As the linguist Daniel Chandler succinctly put it, 'language constitutes our world, it doesn't just record it or label it'.[1] Language is fluid and malleable; it drives social attitudes, rather than simply expressing them. To see the evolution of language we only have to look at what was once everyday terminology to describe people of colour: 'half caste' was once perfectly acceptable for a person of mixed race, just as 'coloured' was an accepted term for a black person. Such words were not thought of as offensive, merely descriptive, and can occasionally still be heard in usage, though thankfully less often. But when we break down the power structures implicit in such phrases, we can begin to understand how words do reinforce and create our reality. A person who is 'half caste' is, by definition, half of something; they are half formed, half made, half a person rather than a whole person in their own right. A person who is 'coloured' has been metaphorically coloured in, which suggests an original state of not being coloured in (or, white); it reinforces difference and tacitly suggests racial hierarchy. We might not immediately recognise the implications of such phrases, but describing someone as half formed simply reinforces racial attitudes; as Chandler argued, it makes our reality, it does not record it.

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Language that reflects the humanity of the person or people being described is a constantly evolving process, and while political correctness frequently comes in for scorn, we cannot and will not achieve social equality if the language we use to describe marginalised groups only reinforces stigma. Language informs much of the debate around LGBTQ rights, body issues, ageism and, of course, gender.

The reclamation of terms of abuse is a linguistic minefield where no one has written down the rules, but we all know there are rules. 'Fag', 'ho', 'bitch', etc., can function as terms of inclusion and even affection when used within specific groups. As a straight, white woman, I cannot call a gay man a 'queer', but I can call my female friend a 'bitch', whereas a straight man cannot – though a gay man might be able to (minefield, indeed). When a term of abuse is reclaimed and owned by the people it once stigmatised, it is a defiant action, one that takes the power away from the oppressor, galvanises an identity within the formerly oppressed, and sticks two politically incorrect fingers up at the establishment. Of course, many argue that such words, used in any context, only serve to reinforce a prejudice as such words are never shaken free of historical baggage; they create reality, rather than recording it. The word 'whore' is also in a state of reclamation among certain groups of the sex work community (others reject it entirely). But the history of that word is an important one, and one that I want to emphasise. Debate around what 'whore' actually means is a conversation worth having.

The German dramatist Georg Büchner (1813–37) once wrote that 'freedom and whores are the most cosmopolitan items under the sun'.[2] But what does the word 'whore' actually mean? Where has it come from, and what does someone have to do to earn that particular title? Why was Joan of Arc, who died a virgin, called the 'French Whore'? And why was Elizabeth I, the 'Virgin Queen',

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attacked as the 'English Whore' by her Catholic enemies? French revolutionaries called Marie Antoinette the 'Austrian Whore'; Anne Boleyn was the 'Great Whore', and in the 2016 presidential campaign, Hillary Clinton was repeatedly attacked by Trump supporters as a 'whore'.[3] Perhaps we think we know perfectly well what we mean should we ever choose to drop the W-bomb, but the word is historically and culturally complex. This simple monosyllable is loaded with over a thousand years of attempting to control and shame women by stigmatising their sexuality.

The word is so old that its precise origins are lost in the mists of time, but it can be traced to the Old Norse *hora* (adulteress). *Hora* has multiple derivatives, such as the Danish *hore*, the Swedish *hora*, the Dutch *hoer*, and the Old High German *huora*. Going back even further to the Proto-Indo-European language (the common ancestor of the Indo-European languages), whore has roots in *qār*, meaning 'to like, desire'. *Qār* is a base that has produced words in other languages for 'lover', such as the Latin *carus*, the Old Irish *cara* and the Old Persian *kama* (meaning 'to desire').[4] 'Whore' is not a universal word; the indigenous Aborigines, First Nation people and native Hawaiians have no word for 'whore', or indeed for prostitution.

From the twelfth century, whore was a term of abuse for a sexually unchaste woman, but it did not specifically mean a sex worker. Thomas of Chobham's thirteenth-century definition of a whore was any woman who had sex outside marriage (hands up all those who have just learned they are a thirteenth-century whore).[5] Shakespeare used 'whore' nearly a hundred times in his plays, including *Othello*, *Hamlet* and *King Lear*; but in these plays it doesn't mean someone who sells sex, it means a promiscuous woman. John Webster's *The White Devil* (1612) explores narratives around badly behaved women. In one memorable scene Monticelso defines what a whore is:

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Shall I expound whore to you? sure I shall;
I'll give their perfect character. They are first,
Sweetmeats which rot the eater; in man's nostrils
Poison'd perfumes. They are cozening alchemy;
Shipwrecks in calmest weather. What are whores!
Cold Russian winters, that appear so barren,
As if that nature had forgot the spring.
They are the true material fire of hell:
Worse than those tributes i' th' Low Countries paid,
Exactions upon meat, drink, garments, sleep,
Ay, even on man's perdition, his sin.
They are those brittle evidences of law,
Which forfeit all a wretched man's estate
For leaving out one syllable. What are whores!
They are those flattering bells have all one tune,
At weddings, and at funerals. Your rich whores
Are only treasures by extortion fill'd,
And emptied by curs'd riot. They are worse,
Worse than dead bodies which are begg'd at gallows,
And wrought upon by surgeons, to teach man
Wherein he is imperfect. What's a whore!
She's like the guilty counterfeited coin,
Which, whosoe'er first stamps it, brings in trouble
All that receive it.[6]

Monticelso doesn't admit it, but what is driving this rant is a fear of women, fear that they can wield power over men; they can 'teach man wherein he is imperfect'. Here, a whore is not a sex worker, she is a woman who has authority over a man and must be shamed into silence at all costs.

Historically, 'whore' has been used to attack those who have upset the status quo and asserted themselves, usually in

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an attempt to reassert sexual control and dominance over her. But unlike the word 'prostitute', whore is not tied to a profession but to a perceived moral state. Which is why many powerful women, with no connection to the sex trade, have been attacked as 'whores'; Mary Wollstonecraft, Phulan Devi, even Margaret Thatcher, were all labelled whores. The word is an attempt to shame, humiliate and ultimately subdue its target, and your average woman on the street is just as likely to be called a whore as a world leader, perhaps even more so.

'Whore' is a nasty insult today, but calling someone a whore in the early modern period was regarded as such a serious defamation of character that you could be taken to court for slander.* By far the most frequent insult cited in these cases where a woman has been slandered is 'whore' and myriad creative variants thereon: 'stinking whore', 'ticket-buying whore', 'drunken piss-pot whore', 'lace petticoat whore' and 'dog and bitch whore' have all been recorded.[7]

In 1664, Anne Blagge claimed that Anne Knutsford had called her a 'poxy-arsed whore'.[8] Poor Isabel Yaxley complained of a neighbour alleging that she was a 'whore' who could be 'fucked for a pennyworth of fish' in 1667.[9] In 1695, Susan Town of London accused Jane Adams of shouting to 'come out you whore, and scratch your mangy arse as I do'.[10] In 1699, Isabel Stone of York brought a suit against John Newbald for calling her 'a whore, a

* Three excellent sources to read more about Tudor slander courts are Dinah Winch, 'Sexual Slander and its Social Context in England *c*.1660–1700, with Special Reference to Cheshire and Sussex' (unpublished PhD thesis, The Queen's College, Oxford University, 1999); Bernard Capp, *When Gossips Meet: Women, Family, and Neighbourhood in Early Modern England (Oxford Studies in Social History)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); and Rachael Jayne Thomas, '"With Intent to Injure and Diffame": Sexual Slander, Gender and the Church Courts of London and York, 1680–1760' (unpublished MA, University of York, 2015).

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common whore and a piss-arsed whore . . . a Bitch and a piss-arsed Bitch'.[11] And in 1663, Robert Heyward was hauled before the Cheshire courts for calling Elizabeth Young a 'salt bitch' and a 'sordid whore'. In court he claimed he could prove Elizabeth was a whore and she should just go home and 'wash the stains out of thy coat'.[12]

In order to prove a case of slander, you would need a witness to the insult, to prove the accusation was untrue with a character witness, and to show how your reputation had been damaged by being called such names. The punishment for slander ranged from fines and being ordered to publicly apologise, through to excommunication (though this was rare). One example of punishment occurred in 1691, when William Halliwell was ordered to publicly apologise in church to Peter Leigh for defaming his character:

> I William Halliwell forgetting my duty to walk in Love and Charity towards my neighbour have uttered spoken and published several scandalous defamatory and reproachful words of and against Peter Leigh . . . I do hereby recant revoke and recall the said words as altogether false scandalous and untrue . . . I am unfeignedly sorry and I hereby confess and acknowledge that I have much wronged and injured him.[13]

The accusation of 'whore' was particularly damaging as it directly affected a woman's value on the marriage market. So when Thomas Ellerton called Judith Glendering a 'whore' who went from 'barn to barn' and from 'tinkers to fiddlers' in 1685, he was doing more than being abusive, he was preventing her finding a husband.[14] In 1652, Cicely Pedley alleged she had been called a 'whore' with the intention 'to prevent her marriage with a person of good quality'.[15] It could even affect business. In 1687,

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a Justice of the Peace decided that calling an innkeeper's wife a 'whore' was actionable because it had affected trade.[16]

There are numerous slander cases brought by a husband whose wife had been called a whore. Calling someone's wife a whore was a particularly devastating insult as it not only insulted the wife, but also impugned the husband as a cuckold and questioned his ability to sexually satisfy the missus. In 1685, for example, Abraham Beaver was accused of ordering Richard Winnell to 'get thee home thou cuckold thou will find Thomas Fox in Bed with thy Wife'.[17]

Although cases of men alleging slander were less frequent, they too were often sexual in nature. In 1680, Elizabeth Aborne of London was taken to court by Thomas Richardson for saying that his penis was 'rotten with the pox'.[18] Men were also attacked as 'whoremongers', 'cuckolds', 'bastard-getters', 'rogues', and in one case a 'jealous pated fool and ass'.[19] Men brought cases against people who had called them thieves, beggars or drunkards. In 1699, for example, Thomas Hewetson was brought before the courts in York for calling Thomas Daniel a 'mumper' (beggar): 'he was a mumper and went about the Country from door to door mumping'.[20]

By the end of the seventeenth century, there was a notable decline in the number of slander cases brought before the Church courts. Historians have long debated why this may have been the case. It may be that as cities swelled and the population grew, the courts became more concerned with crimes other than women calling each other 'hedge whores' and 'poxy-arsed whores'. It may just be that there was a shift in culture and taking your slagging matches before a judge became less the done thing. By 1817, UK law ruled that 'calling a married woman or a single one a whore is not actionable, because fornication and adultery are subjects of spiritual not temporal censures'.[21]

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As the above chart shows, since the seventeenth century there has been a notable decline in the use of the word 'whore'. Until the end of the seventeenth century, 'whore' was still a legal term and turns up in no less than 163 trials at the Old Bailey from 1679 until 1800. Historians such as Rictor Norton have examined how 'prostitute' or 'common prostitute' came to replace 'whore' as the legal terminology for a person who sells sexual services.[22] I suspect the sharp decline in the usage of 'whore' at the end of the seventeenth century is linked to the linguistic shift from legal terminology to a pure insult.

Today, 'whore' is largely confined to abusive and coarse speech. However, like the word 'slut', 'whore' is also in a state of reclamation and can be used to directly challenge the shame the word has carried for hundreds of years. 'Whore' may be a term of abuse, but it is one rooted in fear of female independence and sexual autonomy. Its progression from meaning a woman who desires, to an insult seeking to shame that desire, traces cultural attitudes around female sexuality. Historically, if you desire, you are a whore; if you have sex outside of marriage, you are a whore; if you transgress and threaten 'the man', you are a whore. We are all historical whores.

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‘A Nasty Name for a Nasty Thing’

A History of Cunt

I love the word cunt. I love everything about it. Not just the signified vulva, vagina and pudendum (which are all kinds of cunty goodness and will be returned to shortly), but the actual oral and visual signalled sign of cunt. I love its simple monosyllabic form. I adore that the first three letters (c u n) are basically all the same chalice shape rolling through the word until they are stopped in their ramble by the plosive T at the end. I love the forceful grunt of the C and the T sandwiching the softer UN sounds, enabling one to spit the word out like a bullet, or extend the *un* and roll it around your mouth for dramatic effect: cuuuuuuuuuuunt!

I love it because it’s deliciously dirty, endlessly funny and, like an auditory exclamation mark, is capable of stopping a conversation in its tracks. Walter Kirn called cunt ‘the A-bomb of the English language’, and he’s absolutely right.[1] I love its versatility. In America, it is spectacularly offensive, while in Glasgow it can be a term of endearment; ‘I love ya, ya wee cunt’ is an expression heard throughout Glaswegian nurseries. That’s not true, but Scottish folk do possess a dazzling linguistic dexterity with cunt. Irvine Welsh’s 1993 novel, *Trainspotting*, contains 731 cunts (though only nineteen made it into the film).

But more than anything else, I love the sheer power of the word. I am fascinated by cunt’s hallowed status as, to quote Christina

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Caldwell, 'the nastiest of the nasty words'.[2] There are other contenders for the 'most offensive' word in the English language; racial slurs are obvious heavyweights. The N-word is a deeply offensive word because of its historical context. It is not just a descriptive word, it is a word that was used to dehumanise black people and justify some of the worst atrocities in human history. It enabled the enslavement and brutalisation of millions of people by linguistically denying black people equality with white people. We can understand why racial slurs are hideously offensive, but cunt? Does it not strike anyone else as odd that one of the most offensive words in English is a word for vulva? Or that this word could even be considered in the same league of offence as racist terms spawned from the darkest and most rank of human atrocities? As far as I am aware, cunt has not enabled racial genocide, so we have to ask: how did cunt get to be so offensive? What did cunt do wrong?

Let's turn to the etymology first. Cunt is old. It's so old that its exact origins are lost in the folds of time and etymologists continue to debate where in the cunt cunt comes from. It's several thousand years old at least, and can be traced to the old Norse *kunta* and Proto-Germanic *kunt*, but before that cunt proves quite elusive. There are medieval cunty cognates in most Germanic languages; *kutte*, *kotze* and *kott* all appear in German. The Swedish have *kunta*; the Dutch have *conte*, *kut* and *kont*, and the English once had *cot* (which I quite like and think is due a revival).* Here's where the debate comes in: no one is quite sure

* 'Oxford English Dictionary', *Oed.Com*, 2018 <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/45874?reirectedFrom=cunt#eid> [Accessed 7 September 2018]. Other excellent sources that cover the etymology of cunt include Mark Daniel, *See You Next Tuesday* (London: Timewell, 2008); Pete Silverton, *Filthy English* (London: Portobello Books, 2009); Jonathon Green, *Green's Dictionary of Slang* (London: Chambers, 2010); Melissa Mohr, *Holy Sh*t: A Brief History of Swearing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); and Matthew Hunt, 'Cunt', *Matthewhunt.Com*, 2017 <http://www.matthewhunt.com/cunt/> [Accessed 3 September 2018].

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what cunt actually means. Some etymologists have argued cunt has a root in the Proto-Indo-European sound '*gen/gon*', which means to 'create, become'. You can see 'gen' in the modern words gonads, genital, genetics and gene. Others have theorised cunt descends from the root *gune*, which means 'woman' and crops up in 'gynaecology'.[3] The root sound that most fascinates etymologists is 'cu'. 'Cu' is associate with the female, and forms the basis of 'cow' and 'queen'.[4] 'Cu' is linked to the Latin *cunnus* ('vulva'), which sounds tantalisingly like cunt (though some etymologists claim it is unrelated), and has spawned the French *con*, the Spanish *coño*, the Portuguese *cona*, and the Persian *kun* (کون).[5] My favourite cunt theory is that the 'cu' also means to have knowledge. Cunt and 'cunning' are likely to have descended from the same root – 'cunning' originally meant wisdom or knowledge, rather than sneakiness, while 'can' and 'ken' became prefixes to 'cognition' and other derivatives.[6] In Scotland today, if you 'ken' something, it means you understand it. In the Middle Ages 'quaint' meant both knowledge and cunt (but more of that later). The debate will rage on, but the bottom line is that cunt is something of a mystery.

Here is what we do know: cunt is the oldest word for either the vulva or the vagina in the English language (possibly the oldest in Europe). Its only rival for oldest term for 'the boy in the boat' (1930) would be yoni (meaning vulva, source or womb). The English language borrowed yoni from Ancient Sanskrit around 1800 and today it has been appropriated by various neo-spiritual groups who hope that by calling their 'duff' (1880) a yoni they can avoid the horror of cunt and tap into some ancient veneration of the 'flapdoodle' (1653). Of course, the irony is cunt and yoni may even have sprung from the same Proto-Indo-European root. Furthermore, cunt is far more feminist than vagina or vulva could ever dream to be.

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Vagina turns up in seventeenth-century medical texts and comes from the Latin *vagina*, which means a sheath or a scabbard. A vagina is something a sword goes into; that's its entire etymological function – to be the holder of a sword (penis). It relies on the penis for its meaning and function. We may as well still be calling the poor thing 'cock alley' (1785) or the 'pudding bag' (1653). There are many cunning linguists who rightly get their proverbials in a twist when you confuse vagina with vulva: to be clear, the vagina is the muscular canal that connects the uterus to the vulva, and the vulva is the external equipment (comprising the mons pubis, labia majora, labia minora, clitoris, vestibule of the vagina, bulb of the vestibule, and the Bartholin's glands). Vulva dates to the late fourteenth century and comes from the Latin *vulva*, meaning 'womb' – some have suggested it comes from *volvere*, or to wrap. In his 1538 Latin dictionary, Thomas Elyot defined a vulva as 'the womb or mother of any female animal, also a meat used of the Romans made of the belly of a sow, either that hath farrowed or is with farrow'.[7] So, yet again, the meaning of vulva is dependent on being the container for a penis – or a questionable cut of a pregnant Roman pig.

Cunt, however, predates both these terms and derives from a Proto-Indo-European root word meaning woman, knowledge, creator or queen, which is far more empowering than a word that means 'I hold cock'. Plus, cunt is the whole damn shebang, inside and out. There's no need to split pubic hairs when it comes to cunt. Words like vulva and vagina are linguistic efforts to offer sanitised, medicalised alternatives to cunt. And if that wasn't enough to sway you over to team cunt, in 1500 Wynkyn de Worde defined vulva as 'in English, a cunt'.[8] Cunt is not slang; cunt is the original. So, cunt is the godmother of all words for 'the monosyllable' (1780) – but then the question arises: has cunt always been such an offensive word as it is today?

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The simple answer is no. To the medieval mind, cunt was simply a descriptive word, a little bawdy perhaps as cunts tend to be, but certainly not offensive. The fact that cunt would make it into de Worde's dictionary and medical texts shows how everyday the word was. John Hall's sixteenth-century translation of Lanfranc of Milan's medical text *Chirurgia Parua Lanfranci* is not cunt shy and describes 'in wymmen neck of the bladder is schort, is made fast to the cunte'.[9] The earliest cunt citation in the *Oxford English Dictionary* dates to 1230, and is a London street in the red-light district of Southwark – the beautifully named 'Gropecuntelane'.[10] It did exactly what it said on the tin: it was a lane for groping cunts. There were Gropecuntelanes (or variations of Grapcunt, Groppecuntelane, Gropcunt Lane) found throughout the cities of medieval Britain. Keith Briggs locates Gropecuntlanes in Oxford, York, Bristol, Northampton, Wells, Great Yarmouth, Norwich, Windsor, Stebbing, Reading, Shareshill, Grimsby, Newcastle and Banbury. Sadly, all of these streets have now been renamed, usually as 'Grape Lane' or 'Grove Lane'.[11]

While Scottish folk may be calling their friends cunts, medieval people seem to have been calling their children cunts. Cunt actually turns up in a number of medieval surnames (though they are quite possibly aliases): Godwin Clawecunte (1066), Gunoka Cuntles (1219), John Fillecunt (1246) and Robert Clevecunt (1302) have all been recorded. And if the possibility of meeting Miss Gunoka Cuntles on Gropecuntelane was not an exciting enough prospect (and it should be), a Miss Bele Wydecunthe appears in a Norfolk Subsidy Roll of 1328.[12] While we are on the subject of cunt monikers, in his study of humorous names, Russell Ash found a whole family of Cunts living in England in the nineteenth century: Fanny Cunt (born 1839), also her son, Richard 'Dick' Cunt, and her daughters, Ella Cunt and Violet Cunt.[13]

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Medieval literature is similarly awash with cunts. *The Proverbs*

of Hendyng (*c*.1325) contains this advice to young women: 'Give your cunt cunningly and make (your) demands after the wedding' (3eve þi cunte to cunni[n]g, and craue affetir wedding).[14] The fifteenth-century Welsh poet Gwerful Mechain advised fellow poets to celebrate the 'curtain on a fine bright cunt' that 'flaps in a place of greeting'.[15] Medieval society was far more sexually liberated than we give them credit for, and one reason cunt wasn't considered offensive is because sex wasn't that offensive to them. It was certainly not a sexually liberated utopia, but neither were medieval people waddling about in chastity belts, as popular mythology would have us believe. Sex was a source of great humour, eroticism and absolutely central to married life; finding


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A twelfth-century sheela na gig on the church at Kilpeck, Herefordshire, England.

sex deeply offensive is something that came into its own during the early modern era.

Historically, the most heavily tabooed language has shifted from the blasphemous to bodily functions, and is now in a process of moving to race. Swear words that would get you into serious trouble in the Middle Ages were blasphemous ones. If you caught your soft areas in a zipper in the thirteenth century, you might cry out something like 'God's teeth', 'God's wounds' (Z'wounds) or 'God's eyes'. Cunt, by comparison, was a descriptive word and suitable for all occasions. It was not euphemistically twee, overly medicalised or humorously grotesque – cunt was cunt.

One medieval author who dropped the C-bomb with the precision of a military drone is Geoffrey Chaucer (1343–1400). The word that Chaucer uses in *The Canterbury Tales* and *House of Fame* is not 'cunt' but 'queynte'. However, the reader is left in little doubt as to what a queynte is – the Wife of Bath is quite clear:

> What eyleth yow to grucche thus and grone?
> Is it for ye wolde have my queynte allone?
>
> (What ails you that you grumble thus and groan?
> Is it because you'd have my cunt alone?)[16]

Chaucer's most famous cunt joke is in 'The Miller's Tale', where 'queynte' means both knowledge and cunt (remember the root to both cunning and cunt?):

> As clerkes ben ful subtile and ful queynte,
> And privelý he caughte hire by the queynte,
> And seyde, 'Ywis, but if ich have my wille,
> For deerne love of thee, lemman, I spille.'

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(The clerk had been subtle and cunning,
and quickly he caught her by the cunt,
and said, 'If I cannot have my will,
for love of thee, darling, I will spill.')[17]

The use of 'quaint' as a synonym for cunt is seen in a variety of other works. In his 1598 Italian/English dictionary, John Florio uses 'quaint' as a synonym for cunt and defines *potta* as 'a cunt, a quaint', and a *pottuta* as 'that hath a cunt, cunted, quainted'.[18] The playful double meaning of 'quaint' turns up again in Andrew Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress':

Thy beauty shall no more be found;
Nor, in thy marble vault, shall sound
My echoing song: the worms shall try
That long preserved virginity:
And your quaint honour turn to dust;
And into ashes all my lust.[19]

It has also been suggested that William Shakespeare's 'acquaint' in his Sonnet XX (1609) is a play on 'quaint' and 'cunt'. And if any man knew the comedic power of a well-placed cunt it was Shakespeare. In Act III, Scene 2 of *Hamlet*, the eponymous hero asks Ophelia, 'Lady, shall I lie in your lap?' Ophelia replies, 'No, my lord.' Hamlet then asks her, 'Do you think I meant country matters?'[20] When David Tennant played Hamlet, he paused on the first syllable to emphasis this: 'Cunt-ry matters'. In *Twelfth Night* (Act II, Scene 5) Malvolio describes his employer's handwriting: 'There be her very Cs, her Us, and her Ts: and thus makes she her great Ps' – making for a simultaneous pun on 'cunt' and 'piss'.[21] The immortal bard's status as a smut peddler has been discreetly swept under the cultural rug, but his work is full of innuendo and nob gags. In 1807, a shocked Thomas

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Bowdler edited out all the rude jokes so women and children could safely read it, and published *The Family Shakespeare* (which was completely cunt free). Among the many changes made in *The Family Shakespeare*, Ophelia doesn't commit suicide in *Hamlet*, the character of Doll Tearsheet (a sex worker) is entirely edited out of *Henry IV*, and in *Romeo and Juliet*, Mercutio's saucy 'the bawdy hand of the dial is now upon the prick of noon' was altered to read 'the hand of the dial is now upon the point of noon'.[22] This led to the addition of the word 'bowdlerise' to the English language, which means to remove passages of a text that are considered objectionable.

Cunt was also used freely in the bawdy ballads of Shakespeare's contemporaries, who felt no such compulsion to veil their cunts in double entendres. *Ragionamenti della Nanna e della Antonia* (1534–6) by Pietro Aretino tells readers to shun flowery euphemisms and just say cunt: 'Speak plainly, and say fuck, cunt and cock; otherwise thou wilt be understood by nobody'.[23] The Scottish play *Philotus* (1603) contained the lines 'doun thy hand and graip hir cunt'.[24] And the *Mercurius Fumigosus* (1654) celebrates 'cunt and good company'.[25] But the fact that big-name writers, such as Shakespeare and Marvell, used cunt as a saucy punchline and camouflaged it in puns and cheeky hints suggests that, by Shakespeare's time, cunt was starting to be censored.

It is no coincidence that it was around this time that the first laws banning sexually obscene material came into force. In Britain, the first parliamentary bill to restrain 'books, pamphlets, ditties, songs, and other works that promote lascivious ungodly love' was drafted by William Lambarde in 1580.[26] The Licensing Act of 1662 banned the publication of any 'heretical, seditious, schismatic or offensive books, or pamphlets wherein any doctrine of opinion shall be asserted or maintained which is contrary to Christian faith'.[27] Language is a powerful tool of social control:

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as sex became repressed, words linking to the body became taboo. After all, how can we enjoy the sexuality of our bodies, shame free, when the very words we use to talk about them, think about them or write about them are considered obscene? Ellis Cashmore argued that cunt's banishment to the naughty step is a result of mass sexual censure and the rise of 'modesty': 'with rules came manners, and with manners came courtesy, and with courtesy came modesty, and the word "cunt" [was] referring to parts of the body that were enclosed, they were secreted away'.[28] Women's sexuality came in for particular censure and punishment, and cunt was an obvious symbol of all Puritan rule sought to repress.

By the seventeenth century cunt had acquired a shock factor, and one author who revelled in the deliciously deviant embrace of cunt was John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester (1647–80). Rochester was an English poet and courtier of King Charles II. He was the poster boy of debauchery and sexual excess and simply dripped with 'fuck you'. If Cromwell's parliament had attempted to dam up sexuality, Rochester surfed to notoriety on the tidal wave of sexual repression that was unleashed when the plug was pulled on Puritan rule. Geoffrey Hughes once perfectly described Rochester as delighting in 'a world seen from crotch level'.[29]

Wilmot's poem 'Advice to a Cuntmonger' begins as follows:

> Fucksters you that would bee happy
> Have a care of Cunts that Clapp yee,
> Scape disease of evill Tarsehole,
> Gout and Fistula in Arsehole.[30]

He described his attraction to a lover as 'A touch from any part of her had done't, / Her hand, her foot, her very look's a Cunt' (1680). His 1684 play *Sodom* features characters such as 'Queen

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Cuntigratia' and her maid 'Cunticula'. His 'A Ramble in St James's Park' (1672) contains eight cunts as he grows increasingly jealous of his mistress's other lovers.

> When your lewd cunt came spewing home
> Drenched with the seed of half the town,
> My dram of sperm was supped up after
> For the digestive surfeit water.
>
> Full gorged at another time
> With a vast meal of slime
> Which your devouring cunt had drawn
> From porters' backs and footmen's brawn . . .[31]

It's tempting to read Rochester's work as a celebration of sexuality, but he directs considerable anger and hatred towards cunts and their owners. In *Sodom* he defines cunt as 'Love's common nasty sink' and claims 'she that hath a cunt will be a whore'. His verse is full of degrading, grotesque descriptions of diseased, balding, biting, feral cunts. In 'A Ramble in St James's Park', his hatred towards the women (and genitals) he desires is projected onto the other men, whom he spurns as 'obsequious' 'curs' in their hunt for cunt.

> So a proud bitch does lead about
> Of humble curs the amorous rout,
> Who most obsequiously do hunt
> The savory scent of salt-swoln cunt.[32]

By the seventeenth century, cunt was also being used as a derogatory synecdoche for women, especially a sexual woman – in much the same way as women can be charmingly referred to as 'pussy' (1699) or 'chunge' (2008) today. In 1665, Samuel Pepys writes about a powder that should 'make all the cunts in town

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run after him', and one 1675 ballad warns that 'Citty Cunts are dangerous sport'.[33]

By the eighteenth century, cunt was regarded as an obscene and ugly word. In his *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (1785), Francis Grose defines cunt as 'a nasty name for a nasty thing', and instead employs the euphemism 'the monosyllable'.[34] Such modesty from a man who lists 'Mrs Fubb's Parlour', 'Buckinger's Boot', 'Scut' and a 'Lobster Pot' as common synonyms for 'a woman's commodity'. 'Cunny', a derivative of cunt, and 'quim' come into common usage in the eighteenth century. John Cleland's 1749 bonkbuster *Fanny Hill* was a completely cunt-free affair, and Cleland boasted he had written it without one rude word. The annual almanac on London sex workers, *Harris's List* (1757–95), also shies away from cunt, preferring instead to use 'mossy grot' and 'Venus mound'.[35]

But one eighteenth-century author who uses cunt precisely for its shock factor was the Marquis de Sade (1740–1814). There are 'little cunts', 'frigged' cunts, 'open cunts', 'pretty cunts', 'infamous' cunts, 'bloodied' cunts, 'fucked', 'licked' and 'rascal' cunts. If you shake any book by Sade, a cunt will fall out; Sade is a cunt piñata. His *La Philosophie dans le Boudoir* (1795) includes such cunt gems as:

> Next, I will lodge my prick in her anus; you will avail me of your ass, 'twill take the place of the cunt she had under my nose, and now you will have at it in the style she will have employed, her head now between your legs; I'll suck your asshole as I have just sucked her cunt, you will discharge, so will I, and all the while my hand, embracing the dear sweet pretty little body of this charming novice, will go ahead to tickle her clitoris that she too may swoon from delight.[36]

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'Les charmes de Fanny exposés' (plate VIII) from *Fanny Hill*, 1766.

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Sade delighted in writing the most extreme, deviant pornography and his repeated use of cunt, rather than the twee euphemisms seen in *Fanny Hill*, is testament to the cunt's ascension to being regarded as the most offensive word in the Western world.

Despite their reputation for being sexually repressed, pornography flowed beneath the upper crust of Victorian prudery like the river of slime in *Ghostbusters II*. There is no doubt that cunt was a thoroughly obscene word. But precisely because of this, Victorian erotica is simply groaning under the weight of cunts. Erotic novels such as *The Lustful Turk* (1828), *The Romance of Lust* (1873) and *Early Experiences of a Young Flagellant* (1876) by Rosa Coote, *Miss Bellasis Birched for Thieving* (1882) by Etonensis, and *The Autobiography of a Flea* (1887) and *Venus in India* (1889) by 'Captain Charles Devereaux' are a veritable blitzkrieg of C-bombs. *The Pearl* was a pornographic magazine that was published in London from 1879 to 1880, when it was closed down for publishing obscene material. Most editions contained a collection of limericks, or 'Nursery Rhymes', that have a lot of fun with cunt.

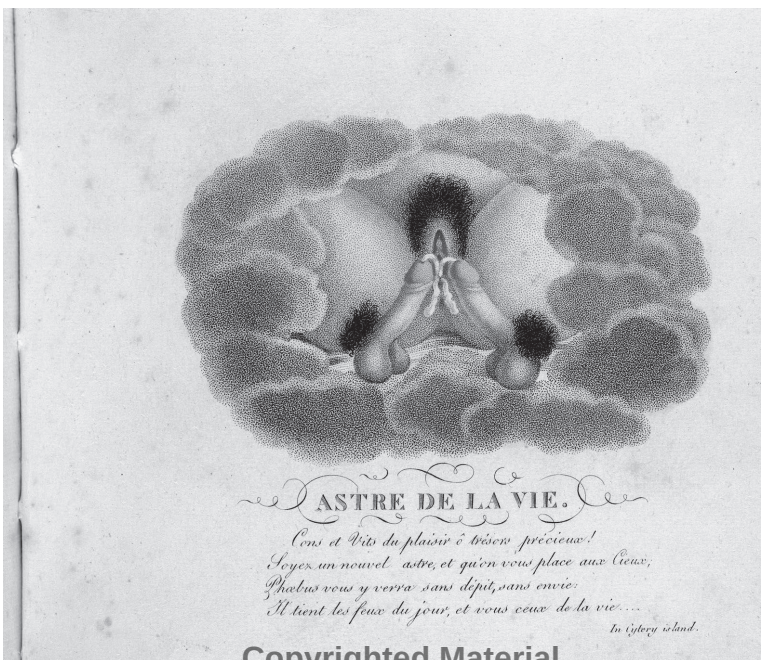
> There was a young man of Bombay,
> Who fashioned a cunt out of clay,
> But the heat of his prick
> Turned it into a brick,
> And chafed his foreskin away.
>
> There was a young lady of Hitchin,
> Who was scratching her cunt in the kitchen,
> Her father said 'Rose, It's the crabs, I suppose'.
> 'You're right pa, the buggers are itching'.[37]

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And it is in the nineteenth century that cunt starts to be used

as a general term of abuse. The *Oxford English Dictionary* places the first known use of cunt as an insult at 1860: 'And when they got to Charleston, they had to, as is wont/ Look around to find a chairman, and so they took a Cunt'.[38]

Perhaps one of the most significant cunt moments in the twentieth century was the banning and subsequent obscenity trial of D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928), which contains fourteen cunts (and forty fucks). When Gerald Gould reviewed an edited version in 1932, he noted that 'passages are necessarily omitted to which the author undoubtedly attached supreme psychological importance – importance so great, that he was willing to face obloquy and misunderstanding and censorship



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Invocation a L'amour, 1825.

because of them'.[39] The book caused a sensation not only because of its graphic descriptions of sex and women's sexual pleasure, but because it uses sex to smash down class boundaries. Sex is one of the supreme levellers, and for all her titles, money and privilege, Lady Constance Chatterley has a cunt: she is a sexual being. Sexual desire and pleasure have no understanding of the class system. Lawrence uses the word cunt throughout because it is the only word that can express the yearning, primal sexuality of Constance and subvert the pretensions of a society that viewed women as sexless wives and mothers. Lawrence's use of cunt is shocking, but also incredibly tender and passionate; for Lawrence, cunt is a truly wonderful thing. One of the pivotal scenes in the novel is where Mellors teaches Constance the difference between cunt and fuck:

> 'Th'art good cunt, though, aren't ter? Best bit o' cunt left on earth. When ter likes! When tha'rt willin'!'
>
> 'What is cunt?' she said.
>
> 'An' doesn't ter know? Cunt! It's thee down theer; an' what I get when I'm i'side thee, and what tha gets when I'm i'side thee; it's a' as it is, all on't.'
>
> 'All on't,' she teased. 'Cunt! It's like fuck then.'
>
> 'Nay nay! Fuck's only what you do. Animals fuck. But cunt's a lot more than that. It's thee, dost see: an' tha'rt a lot besides an animal, aren't ter? – even ter fuck? Cunt! Eh, that's the beauty o' thee, lass!'[40]

Cunt: 'that's the beauty of thee, lass' – I don't think I have heard a more marvellous definition of cunt. Sadly, despite Lawrence's best efforts and a jury that agreed a work stuffed with cunts does have artistic merit, cunt has yet to be welcomed back to polite society. James Joyce uses one cunt in *Ulysses* (1922) and calls the Holy Land 'the grey sunken cunt of the world'.[41] (Though

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he freely uses cunt in his private erotic letters to his wife, Nora, whom he delightfully calls 'fuck bird'.) The American Beat poets like the shock of the cunt. In 'Howl' (1956) Ginsberg writes about a 'vision of the ultimate cunt'.[42] But cunt is there to shock. Cunt didn't make it into mainstream cinema until 1971, in *Carnal Knowledge*, starring Jack Nicholson and Ann-Margret. Jonathan Fuerst, Nicholson's character, screams at Bobbie (Ann-Margret): 'Is this an ultimatum? Answer me, you ball-busting, castrating, son of a cunt bitch!'[43] *The Exorcist* (1973) uses 'cunting' as an adjective twice (i.e. 'cunting daughter'). There is a third cunt that was cut from the final edit where the troubled Regan tells her doctor he must keep his fingers away from her cunt.[44] Notice that the only cunt that was cut was the one that actually means vulva? This has been true of most cinematic uses of cunt – it is far more often used as an insult than it is to mean the genitals.

As the twentieth century wore on, cunt settled into its role as a powerful insult. The *Oxford English Dictionary* did not admit cunt until the seventies. But in 2014 the *OED* added 'cunty, cuntish, cunted, and cunting' to the entry under cunt; 'cunty' is defined as 'highly objectionable or unpleasant'; 'cuntish' means an 'objectionable person or behaviour'; 'cunted' means to be drunk and 'cunting' is an intensifier that means 'very much'.[45] There is no doubt that cunt is a very versatile word (noun, adjective, verb), but it still shocks. In 2016, Ofcom (the regulator for UK communications) ranked swear words in order of offensiveness, and cunt came out on top.[46] The British Board of Film Classification's guidelines state that the word cunt can only be used frequently in films that are rated 18+.

Cunt maintains an uneasy relationship with feminists, who are undecided if the word is empowering or demeaning. Various feminist movements have tried to reclaim cunt. Judy Chicago led the 'Cunt art' movement of the 1970s and created works of

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art that aggressively used 'cunt' to cut through prudish attitudes around female sexuality. Inga Muscio's 1998 *Cunt: A Declaration of Independence* inspired a movement called 'Cuntfest' – 'a celebration of women'. In 1996, Eve Ensler premiered a new play called *The Vagina Monologues* at the HERE Arts Centre. The play features different characters talking about their sense of self, their sexuality and how they feel about their vaginas. In a performance of the monologues in 2000, Ensler serenaded the audience with the wonders of cunt:

> I love that word
> I can't say it enough
> I can't stop saying it
> Feeling a little irritated at the airport?
> Just say CUNT and everything changes
> 'What did you say?'
> 'I said CUNT, that's right, SAID CUNT, CUNT, CUNT, CUNT.'
> It feels so good.
> Try it. Go ahead. Go ahead.
> CUNT.
> CUNT.
> CUNT.
> CUNT.[47]

The audience are encouraged to shout CUNT in unison and to feel the explosive power of the word as one. *The Vagina Monologues* was a landmark production in feminist theatre. But although I am very much in agreement with Ensler and also consider shouting cunt at Ryanair baggage reclaim services to be highly therapeutic, Ensler's work hasn't forced the mass renegotiation with cunt we may have hoped for. Perhaps cunt

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is beyond reclaiming now. But it remains a deeply powerful and special word.

Words for women's genitals tend to be clinical (vagina, vulva, pudendum, etc.), childlike (tuppence, foof, fairy, minky, Mary, twinkle, etc.), detached (down there, bits, special area, etc.), highly sexual (pussy, fuck hole, etc.), violent (axe wound, penis flytrap, gash, growler, etc.), or refer to unpleasant smells, tastes and appearance (fish taco, bacon sandwich, badly stuffed kebab, bearded clam). Cunt doesn't convey any of these. Cunt is cunt. Words for the vulva seem to be in a constant state of trying to deny the very thing being described – your genitals aren't a 'twinkle' or 'fur pie'. Sadly, just as cunt the word has been censored, cunts themselves have been culturally censored to the point where the only cunts that we feel are acceptable are plucked, waxed, surgically trimmed, buffed, douched with perfumed cleaning products and served up covered in glitter. The vaginoplasty business is booming and you can now have your labia cut off, your hymen rebuilt and a car air freshener installed (I joke). Is it any wonder we can't cope with the directness of cunt and resort to 'down there'? Cunt may never be allowed off the naughty step, but it is surely far less offensive than many synonyms on offer. And while people insist on calling cunt a vagina or a vulva so as not to cause offence, it's worth remembering that we are actually calling cunt a scabbard – a cock holder, a sausage pocket.

Cunt may be classed as an offensive word, but it's an ancient and honest one. It's also the original word; everything else came after.

Welcome to #TeamCunt.

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