

I DON'T KNOW WHY, but *stink* used to be considered a word that wasn't quite polite. When I was a child, I was told not to say that something stinks. It was all right to say, "It smells bad," but not, "It stinks." In a scene in *The Philadelphia Story* the mother tells her younger daughter that she should not say *stinks*. "Say 'smells,'" she says, "but not 'stinks'."

These days, when almost anything goes and good authors who once knew better words now only use four-letter words, you'd think *stinks* would be quite acceptable. But I suppose it isn't. I say this because I noticed that in Franco Zeffirelli's big television film, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Lazarus' sister Martha, leading Jesus to her brother's tomb, says, "He hath been dead four days, and by this time his body must be decaying."

I am by no means a Bible scholar, but I know those are not the words that appear in the King James version. For after I had been told not to say something stinks, I saw in the Bible that Martha's words are, "Lord, by this time he stinketh: for he hath been dead four days." Verily I rejoiced, saying "Aha! How come I'm not supposed to say *stink*, and here it is, right in the Bible?"

When I heard the line in Zeffirelli's film, I wrote it on a scrap of paper and filed it away. Then, out of curiosity, I went to the New English Bible to see how they handled the line. There, Martha says, "Sir, by now there will be a stench. He has been there four days." Evidently, *stink* is still in disrepute.

Just now I said I had filed that scrap of paper. This is perhaps as good a time as any for a confession. I do, in fact, have filing cabinets full of thousands of "Fans Double-Crostics," but for everything except Double-Crostics, my filing areas are desk tops, table tops, a day bed, wicker baskets, plastic baskets, cardboard boxes, bookcases, drawers, pigeonholes, clips glued to the walls, and, occasionally, chairs. So the truth is that I filed Martha's dialogue in a desk drawer under an ancient Remington electric shaver. When I dug it out yesterday, I found next to it another slip of paper with, "Olivier: I'll make a ghost of him that hinders me."

I'm not sure when I committed that jotting, but I suppose I must have been watching Sir Laurence's film of *Hamlet* on television, and obviously I was struck by his having altered Shakespeare to conform to today's English—with good reason, I think.

The line is from the scene in which Hamlet wants to follow his father's ghost. Horatio and Marcellus try to stop him, Horatio warning him of how foolhardy it is to follow ghosts. When his two friends grab Hamlet, he says, "Hold off your hands." Still they try to hold him, so he says, "Unhand me, gentlemen, By heaven! I'll make a ghost of him that lets me!"

For years I—and, I suspect, millions of others—thought that Hamlet's "of him that lets me" meant "of him that permits me," that he was saying something like, "If you get in my way, you'll have to let

me run you through with my sword."

Actually, Hamlet's *let* is the *let* that barely exists today. It is the archaic *let* of "without *let* or hindrance" and tennis's *let ball*, a serve that is impeded in its flight over the net.

Let is one of those words with two almost diametrically opposite meanings. It has meant both *to permit* and *to prevent*. There are lots of other words that seem to contradict themselves, although only a few come to mind immediately: *cleave*, meaning both *to unite* and *to divide*; *overlook*, meaning *to inspect* or *examine* as well as *to ignore* or *disregard*; and *fast* (a superfast man can run a hundred yards in nine seconds, while a superfast dye does not run at all).

I first noticed a word with opposite meanings when I was in my teens and my favorite Shakespearean play was, of course, *Macbeth*. *Macbeth* is, or at least used to be, irresistible to adolescent boys, with its blood-gouted blades, murder most foul, gory locks, and eyes that glare without speculation.

After Macbeth has made Duncan's quietus with a bare bodkin, he tells his wife about the voice that cried:

"Sleep no more!
Macbeth does murder sleep"
the innocent sleep,
Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve
of care.

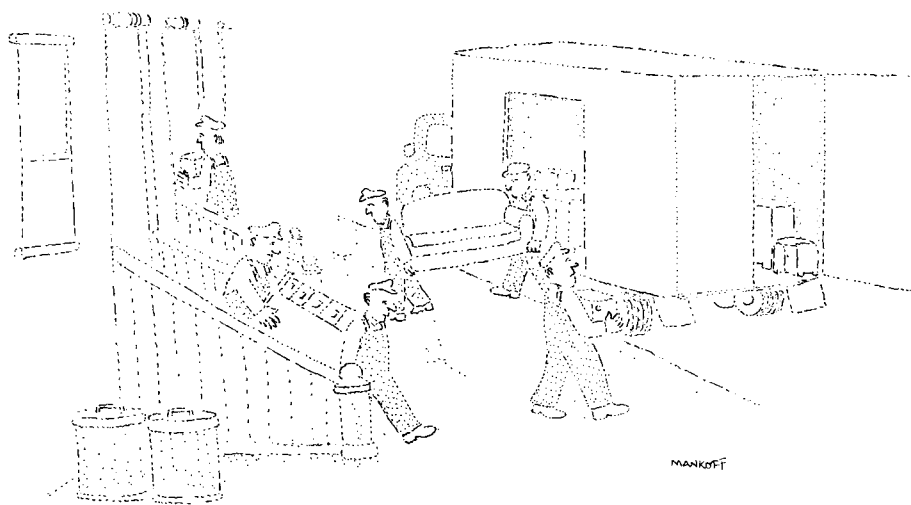
Naturally, I pictured the sleeve of the image as one of my sweater sleeves, whose elbows and cuffs had a tendency to become ravell'd or unravell'd.

It wasn't until years after I'd been graduated from college that I learned that Shakespeare's *sleeve* had nothing to do with a *sleeve*. A sleeve is a thin strand of silk obtained by separating a thicker thread. Because Macbeth's line is so well known and so often quoted, *sleeve* has come to mean also simply a "tangle." And, speaking of a tangle, let's go back to *ravel*: *The Random House Dictionary* says *ravel* means "to disentangle ... to involve; confuse; perplex ... to make clear; unravel." Is that clear?

Macbeth wants to get some innocent sleep that will knit up his ravell'd, or unravell'd, sleeve of care, but he hears a voice that won't let him, or, as Hamlet might have said, *will* let him.

Contemplating these linguistic aberrations in conjunction with my filing system, I can only sigh, "Confusion now hath made his masterpiece."

—Thomas H. Middleton



Even if you're only moving next door, it's best to have it done professionally.

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TOP OF MY HEAD

I ASKED AN attractive young woman of my acquaintance, who is shopping for a husband, what she expects her husband-to-be to be. "Well," she said, "first and foremost, he must have a terrific sense of humor." Or to quote her exactly, "a terrific *sensa* humor."

"That's a good start," I conceded. "But tell me young woman, what other qualifications do you fondly seek?"

"I fondly seek," she replied, "a man who will be compatible, gentle, compassionate, magnanimous, thoughtful, considerate, kindly, and well off."

I tried to plumb the depths of each of these high qualifications, but she side-stepped the plumbing and said, "He will understand what I mean after we are married, because we will both have terrific *sensa* humors."

Please join me, if you will, in an in-depth examination of her long laundry list of angelic prerequisites for a blissful marriage:

Compatible: easy to mold.

Gentle: to her mother.

Compassionate: no children for three years.

Magnanimous: separate checkbooks and credit cards.

Thoughtful: phone from his office hourly.

Considerate: never bring unexpected guests to dinner.

Kindly: see magnanimous, thoughtful. Well off: he is but he doesn't realize it.

Now we know. You don't have to be a psychiatrist to recognize that this gal is preparing to enter the state of matrimony with Fear and Trepidation—the handmaidens of practically every new bride. She anticipates a bouquet of early adversities that her groom will accept with grace and laughter. The little things, such as bent fenders, burnt dinners with the ever-present night after night after night after night of the same vegetable course—asparagus tips vinaigrette. To say nothing of her weird monthly myth math on her checkbook stubs—because she has a great deal of difficulty counting to 20 without taking off both her shoes.

However, his joining her in laughter through the semiserious, semicomical incidents of everyday life takes time, years, and a heap of living together—legitimately of course. I've been avoiding the word, but it's the "molding" she is depending upon to create her ideal man.

If I may inject a bit of personal biography, I confess I was the moldiest man a woman ever molded. Throughout our 50 years of marriage, I never realized I was being molded. I guess that was because I loved her. Better still, I liked her. There's a difference, you know.

Some years ago, someone (I) composed

a couplet about that:

*Like is always understanding,
Love is often too demanding.*

You may have noticed, a lot of people fall out of love, but rarely do they fall out of like.

Our adversity began even before we were married. During the two-month period that was then known as "going together," Jane mentioned a diamond engagement ring. My take-home pay from the newspaper where I worked was \$40 a week. You can readily see how those two components—\$40 dollars a week and a diamond ring—might lead to a slight adversity. So what did I do? I said, "Of course, a diamond ring." And I went to a friend, a jeweler, and bought a ring, a small diamond ring, a minuscule diamond ring, that tried its hardest to sparkle when Jane showed it off to her girl friends. Jane reported they were underwhelmed. If that bothered her, she didn't show it. All she said was, "You forgot to have it engraved inside. Something like, 'I love Jane,' or 'To my one and only.'" So back to the jeweler I went and had him engrave it, but not with either of her two creative suggestions. I used a line of humor to hurdle the adversity. This would shake 'em up and get their minds off the size of this pitiful little diamond. The engraving read, "In case of fire, break glass."

It worked. Jane was often asked to show off her ring, and she invited one and all to read the engraving. It became a conversation piece, and, best of all, Jane was happy with it. Humor through adversity. It worked throughout our long marriage. It became an unspoken code between us. At a party, say, when things became dull, all either of us had to do was to look at the other and softly ask, "Break glass?" and we would leave. Humor through adversity.

As to the above-mentioned young woman on the prowl for a husband who will laugh off all early domestic problems, I believe she is indulging in an exercise in futility. I sadly foresee for her a long series of short engagements. Searching for a man with a matching sense of humor will keep her busy a long time, returning bridal shower gifts of matching salt and pepper shakers and monogrammed doorstops, to say nothing of returning engagements rings engraved "To whom it may concern."

—Goodman Ace



"If you really loved me you wouldn't have that man in your bathrobe."