

MEDES IN THE MARSUPIUM

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The ancient world had to deal with its Media, that savage land whence came barbarians to ravage the neighboring empires. We, in turn, have our Media with their unstories celebrating sweat-freaks charged with carrying or propelling balls of differing sizes and shapes from an improbable point of departure to an even more improbable destination, detailing drug busts of jet-setters and car makers, and chronicling the concubinages, miscarriages, and splits of movie and TV face-makers distinguished primarily by busts of another kind. Therefore on a recent warm and oppressive afternoon in an attempt to escape for a time the attacks of the modern Medes I availed myself of a standing invitation from Dr. H. K. Wombat to visit him in his study, The Marsupium, to discuss amphibologies.

I found the pawky pundit munching from a silver platter piled high with cream puffs and chocolate eclairs. Let Jove brandish his lightning, my friend was content to brandish but his eclair toward the platter in invitation to me to partake thereof, while with his other paw, which clutched a book labeled Plutarch, he waved toward the hazy horizon and enigmatically and dissyllabically said "Samuel."

"Samuel who?" I answered, laying hold of a particularly appetizing puff.

"Some yell," responded the gastronome.

"They do?" was my reply as I bit into the delicacy.

"S-A-M-I-E-L" spelled the wombat. "The Santa Ana wind, pronounce it as you will, is responsible for this sultry weather."

"Oh," ohed I, and, to forestall any ode which the wombat might think he owed to the occasion, I continued "I see you are reading Plutarch's Lives."

"Not so," retorted my friend. "I am reading one of Plutarch's works on animal psychology, of far more interest to me, namely the Gryllus."

Picking up an adjacent dictionary I read out "'Gryllos, gryllus, In Greco-Roman glyptic art, especially in intaglios, a comic combination of animals or of animal and human forms.'"

"No," said the wombat.

I went on. "'Gryllus. The genus consisting of the typical crickets.'"

"No," repeated the phascolome. "Gryllus means 'Grunter' and is the name of a talking pig in a dialogue between him, Odysseus, and Circe. Odysseus wishes that all the human beings changed by Circe into porcine shape should be changed back into human form. The pig very correctly argues that animals are much superior to man in bravery, chastity, temperance, and other moral virtues."

"How does it end?"

"How could it end? The manuscript breaks off before Odysseus's rebuttal, which, of course, could not have been strong enough to overcome Gryllus's arguments."

I feigned busyness in choosing an éclair and then cast my eyes about the room. They lit upon the closet door behind which reposed the Monosyllable Machine. To avoid carrying on a discussion which I felt I could not win I asked, "Where's Atholl the Vole?"

"On a trip to the Salami State."

"Ah, undoubtedly to visit the Holy Places," I surmised.

"Your conjecture is wholly correct. The very holeyest places in the entire land -- Swiss cheese factories. He has been hired for his extronics genius and will kibitz kibbutz casein cotes."

I gave voice to my fear that because of certain of the Vole's animadversions on the Salami State's premier the latter might persecute, prosecute, bait, or even bug the intrepid microtine. To this the wombat's reply was that Me-Knock-'Em Bagel was more likely a master baiter than a bugger, but that the Vole was cared of very little. The wombat also explained that after the Vole had taken care of the holey places he was going to pursue certain zoological studies on Mount Cavalry, in the Dome of the Roc, and at the Whaling Wall.

"Is nothing sacred to that misbegotten lemming?" I exclaimed.

"I told you," said my friend, "that he is scared of very little; therefore very little is sacred to him. The closeness of the two adjectives to each other is proven by their being anagrams of each other."

"That is all very interesting," I said, "but what about Bacon's words in his Advancement of Learning, 'The first distemper of learning (is) when men study words and not matter'?"

"That does not apply to me," rejoined the good doctor, "for I am a wombat. Moreover, I remember that in Shakespeare's Richard II old John of Gaunt on his death-bed puns outrageously on his name. Such a master of words as Coleridge, however, comments 'On a

death-bed there is a feeling which may make all things appear but as puns and equivocations.' And even more to the point Coleridge adds, 'And a passion there is that carries off its own excess by plays on words.' So, long live paronomasia!"

"Then, long live ambiguity on which paronomasia feeds," I amended.

"And long live amphibologies, too, because they are but ambiguities," the wombat chimed in. "Verbal fallacies, that is, stemming from ambiguous grammatical structure. Two examples from *The Bard*: 'He jests at scars that never felt a wound' (*Romeo and Juliet*) and 'The duke yet lives that Henry shall depose' (*Henry VI*)." The wombat selected another eclair.

"How about the puzzling oracles delivered by the Pythoness at Delphi, such as the one to Croesus to the effect that if he marched against Cyrus a great empire would fall. So it happened, but the empire that fell was Croesus's, not Cyrus's."

"Mere equivocations," sniffed the wombat. "There was no grammatical ambiguity involved. By the way, consult Plutarch's *On the Cessation of Oracles* and *On the Pythian Responses*. Of course, verse is better suited than prose to ambiguity, and the Pythoness replied in verse."

I persisted. "How about Problem 76 in the Master Logologist's *Beyond Language* where he asks for more meanings for the words LET YOUR HAIR DOWN beyond these four (which I quote in brief): (1) shed your reserve, (2) unbind your hair, (3) disillusion your hair, (4) rent out the downy portion of your hair?"

"Again mere equivocations because there is no grammatical ambiguity, unless we take No. 4 seriously, where 'down' is construed as a noun, not as an adverb. One could, however, interpret 'down' as a noun in the sense of 'tract of open upland, often undulating and with fine turf, for grazing sheep.' Furthermore, assume that that down was acquired from someone named Hair and is therefore called 'Hair Down.' Then an additional meaning would be 'rent out your Hair Down.' You could also play with the word 'let' in the Hamletian ('I'll make a ghost of him that lets me') or the tennis ('a let ball') senses. No, I wouldn't call Problem 76 an amphibology."

"Well, then," I hung on, "how about that anecdote in Steele's *Tatler* No. 58: '...you have heard the story of the Irishman who reading Money for live hair, took a lodging, and expected to be paid for living at that house. If this man had known, For was in that place of quite a different signification from the particle To, he could not have fallen into the mistake of taking Live for what the Latins call Vivere, or rather Habitare.'"

"A delightful example of early 18th-century word play," smiled the wombat. "Also a fine instance of the change in pronunciation of the word 'here.' Yes, for an unlettered Hibernian in Queen Anne's reign

that could have been an amphibology, assuming imperfect knowledge of English on the Irishman's part. Nowadays the sign would probably read 'Money for Good Blood.'

"But I have a better amphibology, I think. In a certain beach paper I noted this bold heading." (Hereupon the wombat spoke words that sounded like 'UNWANTED HAIR WAXING'.) "How would you interpret that?"

"Let's see -- 'Unwanted Hair Is Growing'?"

"No."

"'Hair Growing Is Unwanted'?"

"No."

"'Unwanted Hair Is Being Covered with Wax'? No? Then, 'The Covering of Hair with Wax is Unwanted'? No again? How about substituting 'hare' for 'hair'? Won't do? Let's play the changes on 'unwonted,' which some pronounce as a homonym of 'unwanted.' Wrong again? You couldn't have seen the word 'herr' meaning 'lord, master; man' in a beach paper? I thought not. Well, I give up..."

"My dear boy," explained the Master of The Marsupium, "you have suggested 24 different meanings for a mere three words and have not hit upon the right one. To interpret that heading, which was to an ad, you must understand something of the beach mores of Southern California."

My learned friend paused to take another bite of his éclair. I contemplated in admiration his pronunciation of 'mores' to rhyme 'more ease' and not 'morays.' Such elegance is seldom found these days when people totally ignorant of the classic tongues say 'purr say' for 'per se', 'guy-nick-ology' for 'gynecology,' and so on.

"The Southrons who inhabit this reclaimed desert refer to it merely as the Southland. A Southland damsel may wear the wispiest of bikinis -- a bare G-string barely covering the G-spot -- but the bikini is the only wisp that she may display, any wisp of hair being verboten. 'Waxing' is 'removal by wax,' and the offer is to confer 'bikini lines' by waxing the offending hair. It is left unresolved whether it is the hair that is unwanted or the hair-waxing itself that is unwanted, but required by beach mores. Thus do Oriental customs, formerly found only in the femino-phobic recesses of harmes and zenanas where in the sensually perfumed shadows lurk odalisks, bayaderes, and nautch girls, come out into the light of America's most populous state!

"By the way, Webster II and III and the OED are innocent of this meaning of the verb 'wax.'"

"It is all rather hare-brained, my dear doctor," I observed. "But for a scholar I must say that you exhibit a rare insight into hair!"

"And why not? We wombats -- not wee wombats, who are born naked -- are covered with it, and the barbarity of removing it with wax for the sake of a bikini is something no wombat maid would submit to -- more for the shame than for the pain. Or may I say 'less for the shame than for the pain'? 'Best' can mean 'worst'; can 'less' equal 'more'?"

The hirsute savant put his chin upon his paw and thought deeply.

Then it occurred to me: I had not escaped the Media even in The Marsupium!

AN ACRONYM DICTIONARY

Although acronyms and initialisms have been around at least since Roman times (SPQR = Senatus PopulusQue Romanus), they have proliferated in the twentieth century. The first edition of Acronyms, Initialisms and Abbreviations Dictionary, published by Gale Research Company in 1960, contained only 12,000 entries; in contrast, the just-released two-volume eighth edition contains more than 250,000, the number of words in an unabridged dictionary. Not surprisingly, the price is similar to that of an unabridged dictionary as well: \$98.

Perhaps it's time to recognize acronyms and initialisms as a suitable corpus for logological research. Can acronyms be exploited in new types of wordplay? What investigations become easier, what more difficult? Restricting attention to all-capitals acronyms, the "words" in the AIAD are much shorter and more densely packed in word-space. (In the November 1982 *Word Ways*, Ed Wolpov noted that all but six of the 676 two-letter "words" exist.) Can AIAD be used as a codebook to encode arbitrary messages? It contains thousands of abbreviations of single words. Even though the encoded word usually consists of a subset of letters of the original, decoding would be challenging because any given encoding can correspond to several different words (CR = core, credit, crew, crochet, cruiser, crystals).

AIAD takes a conservative stand on vulgarisms; SNAFU and TS are Bowdlerized using the words "fouled" and "situation". The initial pages for Y and Z are interchanged, causing momentary disorientation.

It's fun, though, to browse through these volumes, finding whimsical entries among the sobersided ones: CSR (Campaign for Surplus Rosaries), HMD (His Majesty's Drifter), FDP (Full Dog Point), PGS (Pretty Good Stuff -- referring to liquor), RLH (Run Like Hell), SMOG (Save Me, Oh God), TSLAJ (This Scherzo Is A Joke), and SNUB (Show Nothing Unless Bad). And for utter confusion in dogdom, SCTA stands for the Scottish, Silky and Skye Terrier Clubs of America!