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*QHAT* *n* an error in printed matter usually attributed to the printer but just as likely to be the result of unwarranted interference by a publisher's editor or his proof-reader. Qhats include examples of unconscious humour removed prior to publication - but not always!

Of the many obsolete spellings of WHAT, QHAT holds the greatest appeal for me. It possesses an impact which expresses instant disbelief that such a word has appeared in print. And that is the quality of a qhat. It says WHAT!!!

Those of us who are established writers - and one of the glories of *Word Ways* is the professionalism of so many of its contributors - must have experienced at various proof stages items which have strained our credulity to the utmost. This article, illustrated with examples, is an appeal for the qhats of the *Word Ways* readership to be relished by all of us.

## 1. THE ULTIMATE QHAT

James Sutherland's The Oxford Book of Literary Anecdotes describes the curious history of the accent on the first syllable of the name of Madame de Sévigné. It was constantly queried by the proof-reader and just as constantly marked "stet" by the editor of an edition of her letters. This occurred on each galley proof and when the persistent proof-reader was still querying the accent on the page proofs, the editor finally lost his patience and, in the margin, addressed himself in no uncertain terms to that proof-reader. The book was printed and, in the middle of one of Madame de Sévigné's letters, occurred the immortal words of that editor: For God's sake, stop popping up between Madame de Sévigné and me!

## 2. THE SCRABBLE QHAT

In the three galley proofs for one of my earlier books the following passage was left unmolested:

(To illustrate the differences in US and UK 2-letter word validity) imagine that only ... TAENIAE has been played on the (Scrabble) board and you have created the 7-letter word STEALER but can't of course make a tangential line with the S on the end of TAENIAE as that word is already a plural. How do you play it? Amazing as it may seem the answer is to put it directly above the existing word:-

S T E A L E R  
T A E N I A E

as ST, TA, EE, AN, LI, EA and RE are all valid for play. On the other hand if your reference dictionary was the Official Scrabble Players Dictionary then you would have to make an anagram of STEALER and place it below TAENIAE as follows:-

T A E N I A E  
E L A T E R S

However, on the page proofs I was horrified to discover that the proof-reader had increased the score for the American Scrabble player and, in the process, "validated" TE, AL, EA, NT and LE with the more attractive-looking construction

T A E N I A E  
E L A T E R S

### 3. DAD'S QHAT

In a book dedicated to my father I needed to supply a terse definition for the word MORTUARY. On the first galley proof it appeared as: **Temporary place for dad.**

### 4. A NUTTY QHAT

Chambers Dictionary is a treasure trove of errors. More than one of my books has detailed its more ludicrous statements. In a commentary on its curious predilection for the hyphenating of a word on one page and the unhyphenation of that same word elsewhere (it has even been known to hyphenate the plural of an unhyphenated word within the same entry: see NINEPIN) I cited PIGNUT. Given a main entry as PLG-NUT, it describes ST ANTHONY'S NUT as a "pignut". There are many different nuts called PIGNUTS but ST ANTHONY'S NUT applies to only one of them, the earthnut. The relevant parts of my original text read:

- (a) Now consider the humble PIGNUT. A quite ordinary little word..
- (b) ..you will find that ST ANTHONY'S NUT is another name for the unhyphenated PIGNUT

My publisher's editor thought that she would be helpful to the readers by defining a pignut so she amended the first part of the text to read:

Now consider the humble PIGNUT (a nut found on North American hickory trees).

When I pointed out that, in view of the subsequent statement, this was nonsense, it appeared in print as:

Now consider the humble PIGNUT (a nut found on North American hickory trees and often used to describe a variety of other nuts).

She, I am very pleased to say, no longer works for my publisher!

### 5. PEARS WORD QHATS

The proofs for Pears Word Games brought me to the edge of a ner-

vous breakdown. The printer seemed unable to cope with typeset artwork. So numerous were the errors in the examples of various stages of pencil and paper word play that when the vast majority were rendered sensible (some, unfortunately, still exist) this created considerable problems with the general running order of the book. This I solved by amending the text, adding paragraphs here and making cuts elsewhere. One consequence was that cross-references could not be made to known pages by the author but by a temporary editor who has since quite publishing altogether. A sweet, helpful lass, she informed me that all had been attended to. Those of you who possess a copy and are bemused by the numerous references to "see page 000" should address all such queries to the publisher.

#### 6. A CLASSIC QHAT

An author, mentioned in the book Memoires by Charles Kegan Paul, described a tract of land between a volcanic mountain and the sea. His phrase was **The whole plain was strewn with erratic blocks.** Unfortunately, it appeared in print as **The whole plain was strewn with erotic blacks.** Whilst this last one is more typical of the genuine printer's error which gets requoted in various publications, it was too delicious to ignore and so I added it to what I hope will be the first of many compilations of qhats to grace the pages of **Word Ways**.