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Meaning of Folklore

Alan Dundes, Simon J. Bronner

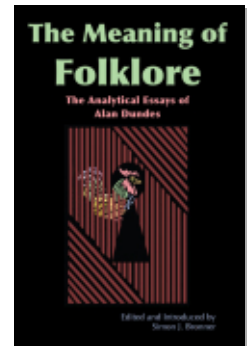
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MUCH ADO ABOUT “SWEET BUGGER ALL”: GETTING TO THE BOTTOM OF A PUZZLE IN BRITISH FOLK SPEECH

Introduction

Dundes's frequent reference to folklore's homoerotic symbolism, which is missed by scholars who are narrowly focused on genre studies, supported Freud's view that homosexuality was “constitutional,” or innate, in humans, but was socially suppressed. Freudian theory holds that society inhibits same-sex affection, especially for males, and individuals deal with the restraint by expressing their desires, as well as frustrations, in symbols found in dreams—and folk customs and narratives. For instance, in “Infantile Sexuality” (his second of Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex), Freud noted that the “anal zone” is significantly “erogenous” at an early age. He wrote, “Through psychoanalysis, one finds, not without surprise, the many transformations that normally take place in the sexual excitations emanating from here, and that this zone often retains for life a considerable fragment of genital irritability” ([1905] 1995).

Another of Dundes's concerns, drawn from Freud, was the relation of folklore to human development and gender identity. Following sexual development through the life course, Freud understood puberty as a special period when conflicting desires—affective ties to the mother and father, a combination of homoerotic and heterosexual impulses, simultaneous longing for past childhood and future adulthood—produced anxieties that were projected in an abundance of rituals, jokes, and customs. Freudian theory further holds that a common response to extra societal pressure on the male is for him to separate from his feminine attachments by symbolically repudiating his mother, so as to fit the expectation of acquiring the manly traits of independence, aggression, and strength. The boy shifted his attachments to other males, Freud observed, and dealt with ambivalent feelings of embracing, and replacing, the father. Of consequence to the nature of male initiatory rituals, male bonding invites the risk of homophobic prejudice, and males often compensate with ritualized displays of aggressive, hypermasculine, and homophobic behavior, or so the theory goes.

To Dundes, it appeared odd that, according to this theory, homosexuality was an integral part of the social and psychological dynamic of male development evident in the symbolism of folklore, but that cultural scholars had been relatively silent on the matter.

Dundes surmised that despite the paths of folklore investigation opened by the Freudian revolution, cultural scholars, particularly folklorists, resisted taking this interpretative route, both on an external level, because of a socially instilled homophobia, and internally, because of their proclivity toward anal eroticism—evident in an “obsession” with collection and classification of piles of texts (see his essay on the “Psychology of Collecting” at the end of this volume). Texts with homosexual themes were defined as “obscene,” and not analyzed, even though risqué material in jokes, customs, and speech are prevalent in oral tradition. This, to Dundes, epitomized the folkloristic dilemma of keeping an open mind while probing the folk mind. Stated as a question, can scholars free themselves from cultural biases so as to render the meaning of traditions in culture—especially when there is a suppression of liberated, critical inquiry? Notable exceptions to the prevalent suppression of scholarly inquiry into erotica, frequently cited by Dundes as Freudian analyses of humor, were Gershon Legman’s *Rationale of the Dirty Joke*, which included a long section on homosexuality (1975, 55–183), and Martha Wolfenstein’s *Children’s Humor* (1978), with a foreword by Alan Dundes. Elliott Oring is a prominent folklorist who often disputed Dundes’s interpretations of humor as projections of sexual and aggressive tendencies. Instead, Oring proposed the contextual concept of “appropriate incongruity” as an alternative to psychoanalytic interpretation (2003, 1992). Dundes emphasized humor as societal constructs, but there are also a variety of essays on individual humor (e.g., Oring 1984b; Davies 1998).

As a folklorist, Dundes strove to view the relation of folklore to homosexuality as one more problem to be explicated. In examining the acquisition of gender identity during adolescence, manly displays invited analysis because of their function in repudiating the feminine by enacting homosexual activities. To Dundes, the prevalence of homoerotic content in folkloric performance also suggested the constant emergence and enactment of folklore as expressions of wish fulfillment, and as projective processes. In addition to viewing folklore as a *consequence* of anxiety and ambiguity, a fictive plane or social outlet in which conflicts could be mediated, Freudian theory raised questions of the psychological *source* of folklore for Dundes, particularly in the symbolic models of dreams. Although his interpretive logic is rooted in Freudian theory (i.e., the discernment of symbols as signifiers in the outward, disguised expression of repressed thoughts which are moving from unconscious to conscious levels), Dundes applied the interdisciplinary concepts of cultural relativism, textual and contextual comparison, and linguistic structuralism to depathologize homosexuality, and place it in a cross-cultural perspective. He unshackled homosexuality from the biological determinism of “constitution” and reproductive function, and located it culturally in the issues of societal worldview, and of gender, age, and national identity.

In this essay concerning the folk speech complex of “bugger,” representing a sodomite, Dundes went beyond the usual facile comparison of linguistic difference between British and American English (e.g., a “lift” in Britain is an “elevator” in the United States). He addressed the symbolic and cognitive significance of distinguishing active from passive sexual roles in the British mindset. This led to questioning the meaning of replacing bugger in America with words that did not differentiate between these roles. Characteristically, Dundes used a play on words in the title of “Much Ado About ‘Sweet Bugger All.’” Readers may think of Shakespeare’s play “Much Ado About Nothing,” and wonder whether cultural impact can be shown from an analysis of a single word. The “nothing,” though, refers to the idiomatic meaning of “bugger all,” and Dundes showed that there is indeed much ado about it. He demonstrated the national obsession with rhetoric and its negation in the

United States, and raised the question of the relationship of language to culture. The rationale for this analysis was that rhetoric was a socially constructed vehicle for self-knowledge, while language was the primary expression, from early on in people's lives, of the workings of a mind responding to social and historical conditions. Folk speech told scholars about deep-seated values conveyed, through tradition, into everyday life. Similarly, Dundes argued that what made people laugh was often what they took most seriously, or was what they had difficulty in broaching in everyday speech, and in their consciousness. Humor therefore deserved analysis, to understand anxieties in the course of life and the contexts of different cultures.

Although Dundes presented the divide across the Atlantic vis-à-vis the word bugger in either/or terms, readers can consider whether the shared American and British fondness for "boogie" and "bogey" men in children's folklore may be related conceptually, if not etymologically, to bugger. Boogie and bogey are usually traced to a specter or goblin, but they are frequently reported as applying to a dreadful character (consistently male), an old, ugly, or black man. The "bug" root is found, in fact, in various figures scaring children, such as buggie, bugaboo, and bugbear. Linguist John Widdowson observed that the complex of boo, bug, boggart, pooh, and poop all have "unpleasant or frightening connotations" because of the use of labial sounds in the initial positions of these words. According to oral tradition, scary "boogie" figures often lurk in closets and under the bed. Narrations involving these figures exert social control over children. But is this because of an unconscious fear of molestation, as well as the more conscious fear of the dark? Or is the tradition connected to Freud's idea of anal sexuality early in human development, by suggesting the risk of assault on a child's erogenous zone while that child is sleeping in the dark? Is there sexual significance in the common rhetoric of the boogie man "having," "getting," "grabbing," "gobbling," "pouncing on," and "bagging" children, especially as a metaphor for the consequences of "immoral or undesirable behavior," to quote Widdowson (1977)?

Boogie men in both America and Britain are connected by being less often ghosts and goblins than scary men, and they are often connected racially to dark or diabolical figures. Yet Dundes has a credible point that in America, the sexual object may be male or female, and the binary collapses between receiver and giver. The American jazz dance of boogie-woogie (perhaps a play on the erotic "oriental" dance of "hoochie-coochie" at late-nineteenth-century world fairs) is usually visualized as a gyration of the hips and buttocks, and is especially sexually suggestive in the frequent call to "boogie my woogie" or "boogie on down!" The genre—a musical performance with energetic key pounding and a host of double entendre lyrics—can also be viewed as sexual, with animated variations on the upper keys overlaying a steady bass beat. An example of a traditional verse in African-American boogie music, with its sexual bravado and verbal dueling, is: "I like your mama, I like your sister too, I did like your daddy, but your daddy wouldn't do, I met your daddy on the corner the other day, You know about that he was funny that way." (For more on homosexual themes in blues and boogie music, see chapter four in Paul Oliver's *The Meaning of the Blues* [1960]). Even if readers accept or deny that there are more cognates of bugger in American usage than Dundes allowed, they should heed Dundes's central proposition that the cultural context, and folkloric expression, of related tendencies toward homophobia and homoeroticism vary according to historical and social conditions.

Prior to writing this essay, Dundes had inquired into differences of worldview between Americans and Brits in "Misunderstanding Humor: An American Stereotype of the Englishman" (1982; reprinted in his *Cracking Jokes* [1987]). In this study, he examined

jokes concerning the symbolism of national differences in the English language. Often distinctions between English and American usage (such as the British use of “tin” for what Americans call a “can”) became the basis of humor, underscoring the stereotype that Americans were inferior while the Brits were superior. Linguistically, Dundes observed, Brits viewed the Americans as exaggeration-prone, and the Americans viewed Brits as favoring understatement. Perhaps inspiring the later study on “bugger,” Dundes reported “one of the very best examples of the marred anecdote tradition” was a misinterpretation of a limerick by an Englishman on an American practice of sex.

For other interpretations by Dundes of homoeroticism in different cultural traditions, see Dundes, Leach, and Özkö 1970; Dundes 1979b (reprinted in *Interpreting Folklore* [1980b]); Dundes and Pagter 1991; Dundes and L. Dundes 2002; and Dundes 2002a, 2004c. For examples of folklorists applying Dundes’s explanations for homoeroticism in folklore, see Mechling 1980; Newall 1986; Dresser 1994; and Bronner 2006a.

Much Ado About “Sweet Bugger All”: Getting to the Bottom of a Puzzle in British Folk Speech

Introduction

There is a well-known quotation enjoying near proverbial status claiming that “England and America are two nations (countries) divided by a common language.” According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, this bit of oxymoronic wisdom is usually attributed to George Bernard Shaw (Partington 1992, 638) despite the fact that it does not seem to appear in the playwright’s published writings. It is not listed, for example, in Bryan and Mieder’s comprehensive *The Proverbial Bernard Shaw: An Index to Proverbs in the Works of George Bernard Shaw* (1994).

On a purely lexical *level*, it is easy enough to demonstrate the “divide” and there have been quite a number of semi-popular books containing lists of many of the distinctive vocabulary differences (de Funiak 1967; Bickerton 1973; Moss 1978; Schur 1987; Walmsley 1987; Davies 1997). I am not speaking of variations in spelling, for example, American “flavor” versus British “flavour,” nor am I concerned with differences in pronunciation, for example, of the word “tomato” (Americans pronounce the second vowel like the one in “may” while the English pronounce the second vowel like the one in the abbreviated form of “mamma,” that is, “ma”) but of actual clear-cut lexical distinctions. Examples would include the following:

<i>British English</i>	<i>American English</i>
Biscuit (sweet)	Cookie
Braces	Suspenders
Bum	Butt(ocks)
Chemist	Druggist
Crisps	Potato chips
Dustbin	Garbage can
Estate agent	Realtor
Flat	Apartment
Fortnight	Two weeks
Lift	Elevator
Lorry	Truck
Nappy	Diaper
Pram	Baby carriage

An example of the sort of sexual terminology that is the subject of this article would be wank off (British) and jerk off (American).

This brief list is meant only to give a few representative examples of definite differences between British and American English (cf. Zviadadze 1983 and Davies 1997). These lexical pairs tend to be in complementary distribution. No American would feel comfortable referring to a lorry carrying a load of crisps. Nor would s/he be likely to refer to a “jerk” as a “wanker” even though both terms derive similarly from slang idioms for masturbation. And few Americans are even aware of the large number of British slang expressions involving the term “bugger.”

Bugger and Buggery

Bugger in its original and literal sense refers to an act of sodomy; that is, an act of anal penetration. Bugger as a noun signifies the active agent in such an act while bugger as a verb refers to the act itself. Legman (1975, 75) offers several folk definitions of buggery: Queen Victoria asks her chamberlain, “What is a bugger?” “A bugger, Your Majesty,” replies the courtier imperturbably, “is a man who does another man an injury behind his back.” This text comes from England c. 1927. In a variant, it is a butler who replies, “A bugger is an individual who enlarges the circle of his acquaintances.” Another folk definition of buggery cited by Legman is: “Buggery: The right man in the wrong place,” which he points out is undoubtedly intended as a spin-off of the folk definition of adultery as “The wrong man in the right place” (Legman 1968, 791).

Buggery in Limericks

The popularity of buggery as a folk theme is nowhere more evident than in limericks. Among the dozens referring to buggery reported in Legman’s canonical collections, the first published originally in Paris in 1953 (1974, 92–108) and the second compilation some years later (1977, 187–218), is the following:

Then spoke the headmaster of Rugger,
A most accomplished old bugger:
“I spend half each night
With a smooth catamite.
My wife? I don’t even hug’er” (Legman 1977, 212, no. 1051).

Although some buggers are thus depicted as women-hating homosexuals, there are also limericks indicating that females may provide appropriate fodder for such appetites (cf. Legman 1974, 110, no. 534), or the object of a bugger’s action in the world of limericks may frequently be an animal rather than a human. Legman includes numerous examples under “Zoophily” (1974, 118–36; 1977, 238–71) and La Barre in his pioneering survey of limerick content notes that “Male bestiality occurs with an ape, hog, cat, parrot, mule, porcupine, bear, swans, owls, a duck and a bug” (1939, 208). One representative example, a truly classic limerick, should suffice:

There was a young man of St John’s
Who wanted to bugger the swans,
But the loyal hall-porter
Said, “Pray take my daughter!
Them birds are reserved for the dons” (Legman 1974, 130, no. 637).

The limerick is a fixed-phrase folkloristic genre, meaning that the reciter performs a given text exactly verbatim each time s/he narrates it. (Free-phrase genres, in contrast, allow for improvisation and the wording may vary.) The precise and invariable generic restrictions with respect to meter and rhyme make it an ideal form for obscene content (for discussion of some of the more formal characteristics of limericks, see Matthews 1911, 144–45; Bouissac 1977; Bibby 1978, 69–75). The underlying rationale is to manage to compress as much content as possible within severely limiting textual constraints, so the limerick embodies the more or less successful insertion of sexual content in a narrowly defined restrictive poetic container. If artfully constructed, the last line of the limerick may well serve as a fitting climax to a purported sexual intrigue.

In any case, the abundant limerick tradition clearly demonstrates that buggery unquestionably refers to anal intercourse, and can refer to male or female sexual objects, human or animal. It is also noteworthy, as Legman points out, that the limerick is part of the folklore of the educated classes (1964, 439; cf. La Barre 1939, 204; Belknap 1981, 28) rather than the uneducated, and since buggery is such a frequent subject of limericks, one can logically assume that the popularity of “bugger” idioms in England cannot be explained away as simply being a vulgar practice of lower-class speech. There is even a classic anecdote that attributes the use of the word to none other than King George V. Supposedly, on his deathbed in 1936, his last words were said to be “How goes [or “is”] the Empire?” But a much more famous and well-known tradition offers an alternative version. According to this bit of apocrypha, his physician to cheer him up suggested he would soon be well enough to visit his favorite resort, Bognor Regis, at which point the King allegedly responded: “Bugger Bognor!” (Guthke 1992, 207 note 4; Green 1999, 20).

Although there has been some debate about where and when the limerick form may have originated (Baring-Gould 1967, 29; Belknap 1981), a few authorities have claimed an English origin for it. Brander Matthews remarked, “The humble limerick has the distinction of being the only fixed form which is actually indigenous to English” (1911, 145). Similarly, Norman Douglas, in his delightfully witty 1928 compilation, *Some Limericks*, insisted that limericks are “English to the core” and “are as English as roast beef” (1928, 24 and 25). Others, including Legman (1974, lxxii), concur with respect to the theory that the limerick seems to be an original English creation. Whether or not the theory is correct, it is safe to say that whatever the origin of the limerick may have been, the frequency of occurrence of “buggery” in English limericks is irrefutable. Moreover, it is also to be found repeatedly in “rugby songs,” a staple of the English bawdy folk song tradition (Morgan 1967; 1968). Here is just one stanza from the classic “The Good Ship Venus,” which in fact is in limerick format:

The captain’s name was Slugger
 He was a dirty bugger
 He wasn’t fit
 To shovel shit
 On any bugger’s lugger (Morgan 1967, 68).

“Bugger” in British Folk Speech

A survey of entries in various English dictionaries does reveal that “bugger” is “chiefly British” (Aman 1986–87, 238–41). This is confirmed by entries in American slang

dictionaries stating that “The standard English sense ‘sodomite’ is no longer commonly understood in the U.S.” (Lighter 1994, 293). Writing in the first half of the twentieth century, Mencken claimed that “bugger” was “not generally considered obscene in the United States.” Mencken also recalled that as a small boy, he heard his father use “bugger” often “as an affectionate term for any young male,” adding that “if it shows any flavor of impropriety today the fact must be due to English influence” (1938, 314). An authoritative dictionary of American regional English cites a 1945 discussion of New England sailor slang that observed that “to bugger is to confuse or perplex,” such that “I’ll be bugged” is an expression of mild astonishment. The discussion cited includes:

That seamen—at least fifty years back—had not the remotest idea of the real meaning of the word is amply proved . . . by the fact that they used it freely in the presence of respectable women. (Cassidy 1985, 437)

Along the same lines, we find that “bugger all,” which means “nothing,” is labelled as “Rare in the United States” (Lighter 1994, 294). What we have, then, is “bugger” as a very common slang item in Great Britain (and Australia) that is virtually absent in American slang. Moreover, it is “a wholly innocent word in America” but “not at all welcome in polite conversation in Britain” (Bryson 1990, 224). Hughes, in his *Swearing: A Social History of Foul Language, Oaths and Profanity in English*, ranks “buggery” as the most flexible term of all English obscenities (1992, 31), claiming it is even more flexible than “fuck” though Sheidlower’s remarkable compilation (1995) of phraseological constructions based on the F word might challenge that assertion. (It is curious that the field known as “Phraseologie” [cf. Pilz 1981] in Germany and Europe generally, a field which treats traditional idioms ranging between single lexical items of folk speech and sentential proverbs, appears not to be often identified by that label in the Anglo-American academic world.)

Perhaps the most common phraseological construction involving “bugger” is “bugger off,” demanding that the addressee depart, leave immediately, get lost, or cease bothering the speaker. We find “bug off” in American slang, meaning “Get out!” or “Go away!” (Cassidy 1985, 434; Lighter 1994, 295; Spears 1997, 51), but with absolutely not the slightest connotation of “bugger.” The likely original English phrase in question, “bugger off,” is deemed equivalent to “piss off” (Phythian 1986, 135) or “sod off” (*ibid.*, 164), which is another expression totally absent from American folk speech. It is noteworthy that the exhortation to “piss off” in this context is also not common in American folk speech although the expression “pissed off,” meaning angry, disgusted or fed up, is widespread in the United States (Wentworth and Flexner 1967, 393), albeit sometimes euphemised as “to be P.O.’d” (Burke 1993, 9). The popularity of the “Piss off” idiom in England is suggested by the dismissive acronymic POETS, standing for “Piss Off Early, Tomorrow’s Saturday.”

“Sod” is clearly short for “sodomite” (Schur 1987, 338). According to one authority, “Sod all” is an intensification of “bugger all,” which is, in turn, an intensification of “damn all, and means ‘not a goddamned thing’” (*ibid.*). Another comparable locution meaning “nothing” is “fuck all” (Sheidlower 1995, 123), which also seems to be largely in British usage. What this suggests is that “bugger” equals “sod” equals “fuck.” The only difference is that “bugger” and “sod” have homosexual connotations whereas “fuck” can in theory refer to either sex.

A verbal technique of emphasising the absoluteness of the state of “nothing,” especially with reference to the alleged degree of knowledge held by an individual, consists of inserting the adjective “sweet” before the idiom. Accordingly, while “bugger all” does mean “nothing,” “sweet bugger all” means “absolutely nothing.” In similar fashion, “Sweet Fanny Adams” or

"Sweet Fanny" or "Miss Adams" (Brophy and Partridge 1931, 364), or "sweet eff-all" or "Sweet F.A." (Ayto and Simpson 1993, 253) are slightly disguised ways of saying "Sweet fucking all" meaning "not a goddamned thing" (Schur 1987, 358). I do not believe that "Sweet Fanny Adams" and its variations are known to any extent in the United States. Both "bugger" and "fanny" are listed as offensive and vulgar words "to be avoided by an American in Britain" (Davies 1997, 95). "Bugger all" is also found in Australia where it is defined as meaning "Very little" (Hudson and Pickering 1987, 25). Doing "bugger all" therefore means "doing nothing whatsoever" (Jonsen 1988, 73). Brophy and Partridge, in their extended discussion of World War I British soldiers' slang, report an Australian soldier's description of a desert as "miles and miles and bloody miles of b—r all" (1931, 289; cf. Schur 1987, 36). The continued traditionality of the expression in Australia is attested by the title of a pamphlet protesting the plight of the aborigines: *We Have Bugger All!: The Kulaluk Story* (Buchanan 1974). Incidentally, Brophy and Partridge indicate that "Bill Adams" served as a euphemism for "Bugger all" much as "Fanny Adams" did for "Fuck All" (1931, 282).

Lest any American reader still be sceptical about the prevalence of bugger idioms in British folk speech, let me cite a small sample of some of the more colourful examples. "Go to buggery" (Go away), "Oh bugger" (damn), "Oh bugger me" (frustration), "I'm bugged if I know" (I haven't a clue), "Well, bugger me" (I'm surprised or Well, I never did hear the like), "Bugger me sideways" (even more surprised), "Bugger me with a wire brush" (extremely surprised), "It's bugged" (it's messed up), "Bugger it" (damn or fuck it), "It's a bugger" (that's a really taxing situation or a tiresome problem to be dealt with), "A bugger's muddle" (an absolute mess), "What a bugger!" (Something's gone wrong or not turned out as expected), "I don't give a bugger" (I care not a jot or I don't give a damn), "Bugger this/that for a lark" (I'm having none of it or I don't want to continue doing this annoying or boring activity), and "Bugger this (Stuff that) for a game of soldiers" (I'm fed up and not happy with the plans for the further conduct of this operation, reminiscent of a futile military exercise) and "Blown (Gone, all) to buggery" (vanished, usually with a nuance of having been totally demolished). The great variety of buggery idioms lends credence to the comment made in a popular primer on Australian slang that "bugger" seems to function as a "utility word" that, at least in Australia, has lost its original offensive connotation and can be used whenever one can't think of the "right word" to employ in a given situation (Bowles 1986, 18; for an enlightening discussion of the semantics of "bugger" in Australia, see Wierzbicka 1997, 223–27).

There are many other derivative expressions. For example, "to play silly buggers" means to get up to mischievous tricks, or to pay insufficient attention to an issue or to behave in an inappropriate and foolish manner (Phythian 1986, 136). Australian sources define "Silly buggers" as "People who waste time on trivial things" or "play the fool" (Hudson and Pickering 1987, 25 and 99) or "who badly mismanage a situation" (Bowles 1986, 18). Australian prime minister Bob Hawke, during a visit to Japan in the 1980s, used a variant form when he said, "We are not going to play funny buggers," an expression that his interpreter was unable to render in Japanese (Wierzbicka 1997, 224). "Sillybuggers" is described as "A mythical game supposedly played by a person trying to avoid work or be deceptive" (Hudson and Pickering 1987, 115). "Buggeration" means utter ruin and confusion: "This word is often used as an exclamation of impatience by middle-class and upper-class speakers" (Thorne 1990, 68). A New Zealand slang glossary lists "buggerama" as an "exclamation of mock disgust or distress" (McGill 1988, 22). An "embuggerance factor" is something unforeseen that unexpectedly delays or impedes the execution of a plan (Jolly

and Wilson 1989, 97). A vivid idiom dating from World War I evidently referring to being given an irritating and lengthy runaround is “buggered about from arse-hole to breakfast time” (Partridge 1985, 39). “Bugger’s grips” or “buggery grips” or “bugladders” (James 1999, 23) refers to sideburns or side-whiskers (mutton chops). According to one source, “The phrase invokes the idea of any unorthodox protuberance inviting homosexual attention” (Thorne 1990, 69). Specifically, the active member of the homosexual pair might grasp his companion’s sideburns from behind to facilitate anal intercourse. Bugger’s grips would thus be roughly analogous to “love handles” in American folk speech, a term that refers to rolls of fat around the waist that can be held on to during lovemaking (Spears 1997, 239). An alternative Royal Navy slang term for “bugger’s grips” is “muff diver’s depth marks” (Jolly and Wilson 1989, 189), but this refers to the heterosexual act of performing cunnilingus (Rodgers 1972, 139; Richter 1995, 147).

While “bugger” has a primary meaning of “sodomite,” it is also true that the word can be employed in a totally non-sexual sense to refer to a guy, a chap, a fellow (Partridge 1972, 124). “Silly old bugger” can be used affectionately to someone who has done something either stupid or touching. In the latter case, for instance, if the person had gone out of his way to help or reward the speaker, the phrase would be appropriate. Similarly, “Poor (little) bugger” could serve as a means of expressing pity for someone who has suffered some kind of misfortune or disaster. The addition of “little” would be used if the referent were a small child (usually male). “Little bugger” or “cute little bugger” by itself can function as a term of affection (typically to a small male child). On the other hand, the basic taboo nature of “bugger” probably accounts for why “beggar” is sometimes substituted instead. There is even the euphemistic “I’ll be beggared” in place of “I’ll be buggered” (Partridge 1972, 60). Such euphemisms are unmistakable markers of taboo words, comparable in American English to “By golly” (for By God), “gosh darn” (for God damn), “Dagnabbit” or “Doggone it” (for God damn it), “my gosh” or “my goodness” (for my God), “Oh my” (for Oh my God), “egad” (for Oh God), “Oh shoot” or “Oh sugar” or “Aw shucks” (for Oh shit), “Oh fudge” (for Oh fuck), “Phooey” (for fuck), “Jeez” or “Jeez Louise” or “Gee whiz” or “Gee Whillikers” (for Jesus), “By Jimmy” (for By Jesus), “Cripes” or “Crikey” (for Christ), “Jeepers Creepers” or “Jimmy Cricket” (for Jesus Christ), “for crying out loud” (for Christ’s sake), “Holy Cow” (for Holy Christ) and “*Sacrébleu*” in French (for “*Sacré Dieu*”) (cf. Allan and Burridge 1991, 38–9; Hughes 1992, 13–14; Burke 1993; Green 1997, 137–46).

The taboo nature of “bugger” is also signalled by the fact that Brophy and Partridge felt it necessary to dash the word in their 1931 compilation of military slang. In fairness, it should be noted that up until 1934, one could be fined or imprisoned for saying or writing “bugger” (Bryson 1990, 224). “Bugger” has even been called “one of the most unprintable words in British English” (Pyles 1952, 151). In 1954, the BBC broadcast Dylan Thomas’s play *Under Milk Wood*, apparently unaware of the fact that the name of the fictional Welsh town Llaeggub described in the play was an ingenious literary back-slang creation, namely, “bugger all” spelled backwards (Moss 1978, 128; Richter 1995, 32). Sometimes, establishment institutions are more alert to detect possible verbal transgressions. According to one anecdote, which may or may not be apocryphal, Oxford University Press once considered entitling the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* as simply “Shorter Oxford Dictionary” but upon reflection decided that the resultant acronymic abbreviation might prove to be an embarrassment (Schur 1987, 338).

Origin of the Term

The alleged origin of "bugger" seems not to be in dispute. Most authorities accept the theory that the word derives from the French "Bougre," meaning "a Bulgarian," with the idea that Bulgarians were thought to indulge in anal intercourse (Hyde 1970, 36–7; Hughes 1992, 129; Williams 1994, 164). In twelfth-century France, "bogre," meaning heretic, evolved into "bougre" in the thirteenth century, meaning sodomite (Coward 1980, 239). A pamphlet entitled *Dom-Bougre*, published at the time of the French Revolution, indicates that buggery served as a recognised form of birth control (Bretonne 1789, 15). In England, the initial meaning of heretic (1340) evolved into sodomite (1555) before becoming a general term for "chap, fellow or customer" (1719) according to another summary (Hughes 1992, 254). Supposedly, the medieval Latin "Bulgarus" for Bulgarian was the source of the French term (Aman 1986–87, 238–41). Certainly, it is common xenophobic practice to attribute sexual perversity or illness to another nation or people. So the English call syphilis "the French disease" (Roback 1979, 33; Green 1997, 236), just as the Germans do, calling the same malady "französische Krankheit" (Roback 1979, 104). The French, however, call syphilis "the disease of Naples" (*ibid.*, 99; Allan and Burridge 1991, 174) or "le vice italien" (Hyde 1970, 6; Coward 1980, 234). Sodomy is described by similar *blason populaire* traditions. For example, in modern Greek folk speech, sodomy is called "ala tourka," that is, "in the Turkish way" (Koukoules 1983, 148). In American folklore, however, the same activity is associated with modern Greeks. The "Greek way" refers to anal copulation (Thompson 1988, 184; Green 1997, 231).

Despite the overwhelming consensus and conventional wisdom pointing to a "Bulgarian" origin of "bugger," there is another possibility that has hitherto not, to my knowledge, been considered by scholars. In ancient Greece, a critical distinction was made between active and passive male homosexuals. It is no disgrace to be the active member of a homosexual pair, but it was considered to be dishonorable to be the submissive "female" individual. The English utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) commented on this in an essay recommending the decriminalisation of sodomy written c. 1785: "According to the notion of the antients there was something degrading in the passive part which was not in the active . . . it was playing the woman's part: it was therefore unmanly" (1978, 395). Even, apparently, in ancient Assyrian law where it is mandated that "If a man has lain with his neighbour . . . he shall be lain with and be made a eunuch," the punishment for the "active" participant, as David Daube astutely remarks, is that "he is to suffer first the despicable passive role, then castration—in a way, a double unmaning" (Daube 1986, 447–48).

A similar differentiation was articulated in Old Norse culture. The condition of anal submission was called *argr* (Vanggaard 1972, 118; cf. Weisweiler 1923, 16–27). As one scholar puts it, "The man who is *argr* is willing or inclined to play or is interested in playing the female part in sexual relations" (Sorensen 1983, 18). There is also a synonymous word, *ragr*, created by metathesis which even occurs in a more overt form also produced by metathesis, *rassragr*, with the initial morpheme derived from anus or "arse" (Weisweiler 1923, 27–9; Strom 1974, 6). But what is significant in the Norse case is that there is a word, *baugr*, that means anus (Pipping 1930; Ross 1973, 82). (The word literally refers to "ring" but then so does the Latin word "anus.") Inasmuch as buggery specifically refers to anal intercourse (whether with male or female partners), the phonetic and semantic similarity is quite striking. One might speculate that it was the Old Norse word "*baugr*" in the

sense of anus that is the true root of English “bugger” and that the anti-Bulgarian *blason populaire* merely provided a convenient later verbal foil and support for the folk speech. In the Old Norse tradition, just offering a male a ring evidently constituted a highly offensive insult as it implied that the male had submitted to or would submit to anal intercourse (Ross 1973). In English slang, “ring” means anus but can also signify vagina (Phythian 1986, 147; Thorne 1990, 426; Richter 1995, 186).

Explaining “Bugger’s” Presence in England and Absence in the United States

Questions of origins are almost always problematic, however, and the obvious issue, with respect to “bugger,” is not so much where and when it began as why is it so prevalent in British oral and written tradition? And secondly, why is it essentially absent in the United States? The answer to the first question may lie in part in legal and moral attitudes towards homosexuality and the specific act of buggery in England. Whether or not pederasty was ever an Indo-European adolescent rite of passage, as has been suggested (Bremmer 1980; cf. Tarnowsky 1967; Bleibtreu-Ehrenberg 1990), there is plenty of documentation of the fact that male homosexual acts including buggery were fairly common in sex-segregated institutions in England for many centuries. These institutions include the military, prisons, boarding schools, and universities among others. Henry VIII’s Act of 1533 proclaimed that “the detestable and abominable Vice of Buggery” was a felony, punishable with death by hanging (Hyde 1970, 39; Vanggaard 1972, 167), and buggery remained in theory a capital offence in England until 1861 and “conviction from that date until 1967 was punishable by life imprisonment” (Gilbert 1976, 72). The 1967 Sexual Offences Act did legalize homosexual acts between consenting adults (age twenty-one) in private, but no mere legislative act could possibly succeed in overturning centuries of stigmatized behaviour with one stroke of the pen. There is surely no need to rehearse the various trials, for example famous ones like that of Oscar Wilde, to prove that buggery was, and continues to be, a very serious moral issue in England (Bloch 1934; Bailey 1975, 145–52). Indeed, part of the hubbub arising from the publication of D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* and the trial held at the Old Bailey was caused by his graphic descriptions of anal intercourse, though in this case involving a male and a female (Sparrow 1962). Some definitions of buggery include anal intercourse with women as well as with animals though the term for the latter is more often referred to as “bestiality” (Hyde 1970, 37 note 1; Aman 1986–7, 229).

C. S. Lewis, remembering his days at Wyvern College, downplays the pederasty that occurred. “I cannot give pederasty anything like a first place among the evils of the Coll” (1955, 108). Older boys “would have preferred girls to boys if they could have come by them” but “we should have to say that pederasty, however great an evil in itself, was, in that time and place, the only foothold or cranny left for certain good things . . . A perversion was the only chink left through which something spontaneous and uncalculating could creep in” (1955, 109–10). Leaving aside the rather explicit metaphorical language consisting of “cranny left for good things” and “only chink which something . . . could creep in,” we have the testimony of what anthropologists would label a “participant observer” confirming the existence of “buggery” in a representative upper-class English educational institution. Similar personal accounts refer to practices at other elite schools, for example, Harrow and Eton (Hyde 1970, 110–12). Supposedly, British schoolboys once spoke of

the three B's of single-sex public boarding school life: "birching, boredom and buggery" (Paros 1984, 161). A diary entry written in the 1960s by a sixteen-year-old boy muses, "the thought of actually bugging a little boy is repulsive to me but they're just a substitute, something pretty to look at when there are no girls around" (Lambert and Millham 1974, 23). Knowler comments, "Generations of public-school boys have reported sodomy" but confirms that "Girls would be best, but as the sailor says in *Fanny Hill*, 'any port in a storm'" (Knowler 1974, 112 and 113), quoting a proverb seemingly appropriate as a justification for buggery (Legman 1977, 197 no. 979). Knowler adds that poet Rupert Brooke, acting as temporary housemaster at Rugby, said, "What is the whole duty of a house-master? To prepare boys for Confirmation, and turn a blind eye on sodomy" (Knowler 1974, 113). One angry letter written after the Oscar Wilde trial in 1895 asked indignantly, "Why does not the Crown prosecute every boy at a public or private school or half the men in the Universities?" (Hyde 1970, 170).

Iwan Bloch, in his book *Sex Life in England*, in speaking of homosexuality but almost certainly referring to buggery in particular makes this strong statement: "No other people has looked upon this act with so much disgust or judged those participating in it as harshly" (1934, 124). Knowler makes a more restrained comment: "I know of no evidence that the British are more inclined to homosexual practice than other nations. We certainly view it with less tolerance than some" (1974, 111). If there is any truth to this judgment, one can well understand why the accusation of having indulged in pederasty could carry so much emotional freight. No one would want to be called a "bugger" in such a climate of prejudice. So, I would maintain that it was not just the threat of legal punishment that brought buggery to the forefront of public consciousness, but rather, the general attitude towards male homosexual acts, an attitude which was no doubt responsible for the enactment of the legislation pertaining to sodomy in the first place.

The question then arises as to what were the causes of this abhorrence of pederasty. A simplistic answer might refer to the biblical charter prohibiting homosexual acts. *Leviticus* 20:13: "If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death" (cf. *Leviticus* 18:22) and the sad saga of Sodom and Gomorrah provide ample charters for both Jewish and Christian homophobia (Bailey 1975; Goodich 1974-76). One intriguing, if somewhat speculative, argument suggests that God is not really homophobic but, rather, simply opposed to the misuse or wasting of precious male semen (Cohen 1990, 7 and 14), which would also account for the prohibition against acts of bestiality and masturbation. While the Bible tends to treat both active and passive participants in a homosexual act as equally guilty, Derek Bailey has suggested that patriarchal and androcentric bias may be a factor in placing a particular stigma on the male who takes or assumes the female role. The logic runs along the following lines: if God created man superior to woman, then a man who acts as a woman "has betrayed not only himself but his whole sex" (1975, 162).

Whether or not the biblical tradition is responsible for the European tradition of attaching particular disgrace to the passive homosexual, there can be no question that, as observed previously, the "female" participant who submits to anal intercourse is considered to be especially disgraced. Legman phrases the distinction succinctly: "The insertor is male, the insertee homosexual" (1975, 150). Once again, the relevant Scandinavian data is typical. *Arger* signifies "what a man *must* not be, since in that case he is no man" (Sorensen 1983, 24). Calling a man *arger* constitutes a serious insult. In Norse terms, "The man attacked must show that he is fit to remain in the community . . . that is to say, he must challenge

his adversary to battle" (Sorensen 1983, 32). The word *argr* is not dissimilar in sound to "bugger" and, has been noted, "*baugr*" means anus. Extrapolating from this, we might propose that "bugger off" is a verbal attempt to resist any attempt to be put in the humiliating position of serving as a "female" homosexual victim of a predatory male. Moreover, since in European practice (as opposed to the letter of the biblical law), the active participant in a homosexual relationship is not considered to be shameful—he is, after all, still functioning as a male, as the penetrator, not the penetrated—he can assert his masculinity by offering to "bugger" anything and everything. In American folk speech, the same function is achieved by the word "fuck." Though referring to what is basically a heterosexual act, a male typically uses the word in addressing a fellow male. But whereas an American male uses "fuck" in such instances, an Englishman uses "bugger" or "sod" instead.

This may help explain the frequent use of "bugger" in British folk speech. It can be seen as a kind of hyper-masculinity marker serving as a total repudiation of any implication that the speaker would consider playing a female role in a sexual act. Of course, women, at least in modern times, may also employ the term, but perhaps only as a means of aping male speech. On the other hand, the British male's underlying concern with "covering one's back(side)" for fear of being attacked literally or figuratively by an "arse-bandit" (Thorne 1990, 13; Ayto and Simpson 1993, 6) or "bum bandit" (Jolly and Wilson 1989, 46) or "bumjumper" (Bowles 1986, 85) might conceivably be related to what has been termed the "backside fixation" of the English (Knowler 1974, 105) reflected in English music hall humour centred on the buttocks (Gorer 1955, 192). Knowler observes that the mere mention of the word "bum" can "raise a giggle" (1974, 105). As for the fear, real or imagined, of being attacked from the rear, a remark from a fifteen-year-old public school boy tells the tale as well as anything: "Congreve's queer. *We* don't like them here. Whenever he comes down the corridor, people stand aside and go 'Eeeugggh!' and say 'Backs to the wall chaps, here comes Congers!'" (Lambert and Millham 1974, 258).

There is yet another possible factor involved in the repugnance felt for the act of buggery and that is its animalistic associations. Again, the folk speech is telling. One of the most common slang adjectival terms for ventro-dorsal intercourse is dog-style or doggie-fashion (Thorne 1990, 141; Lighter 1994, 620, Richter 1995, 68). Accordingly, men who participate in sexual acts entailing penetration from the rear are deemed to be no better than savage brutes.

In addition, it has been suggested that anal intercourse is unclean because of the likelihood of the sodomiser being contaminated by contact with "dirty" fecal material (Gilbert 1981, 65–6). In case the reader finds this suggestion far-fetched, s/he might take note of the folk metaphor "to be up the creek (without a paddle)" that means being hopelessly stuck in a situation without being able to extricate oneself. Regardless of whether or not the lack of a paddle has castratory overtones, the fact is that the original full form of the expression is "to be up shit creek," referring to the dangers of being engaged (or discovered) in an act of homosexual anal intercourse (Wentworth and Flexner 1967, 562). The twentieth-century marginally euphemistic folk metaphors "to stir fudge" or "to stir chocolate" for anal intercourse (Richter 1995, 209) would seem to offer additional evidence for the contamination argument. Similarly, such British slang terms for predatory sodomites as "chocolate bandit," "fudgepacker," "brownie-hound," and "turd burglar" (Thorne 1990) would seem to further corroborate the thesis.

But why is "bugger" not to be found to any great extent in American folk speech? The answer may come from the fact that Americans do not tend to distinguish active from

passive homosexuals. For prudish Americans, *both* participants in a homosexual act are equally abhorrent (as the Bible states). Consequently, no American male wants anything to do with "bugger." Instead, "fuck," which carries no obvious homosexual connotation, is used to "put down" a male opponent. Since American males do use "fuck" to insult a rival or enemy, they are in effect threatening to carry out a homosexual act. But the use of "fuck" (rather than "bugger") tends to conceal the homosexual implications of the threat. This may explain why "bugger" and its many colorful idioms have remained in England and have failed to cross the Atlantic. The differences in British and American folk speech are significant. Most Americans telling a "jerk" to "bug off" would not know that the terms in question referred originally to masturbation and anal intercourse. There seems little doubt that "bug off" is an abridged version of "bugger off" (Hughes 1992, 169). I suspect most Englishmen, or English males, at any rate, telling a "wanker" to "bugger/sod off" would be well aware of these terms' sexual connotations. In marked contrast, Americans, for their part, know "sweet bugger all" about "sweet bugger all."

And to illustrate this, let me conclude by citing a joke, which would be easily intelligible anywhere in the English-speaking world except for the United States. A judge in a London court addresses the defendant and says, "Is there anything you would like to say before I pass sentence?" The defendant mutters, "Bugger all!" The judge, somewhat hard of hearing, leans over and asks the bailiff, "What did he say?" "He said 'Bugger all,' my Lord." "That's strange, I distinctly saw his lips move."

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