courts to the church—in their native tongue. In official matters, both written and spoken, English was history—so much so that for more than three centuries after the Norman invasion, no king of England spoke English as his first language.

Which is not to say that English disappeared. Far from it. Because even as the Norman elite parlayed their victory into economic and ecclesiastical authority, the vast majority of English people continued speaking their mother tongue. Inevitably, the two languages began to influence each other. Over time, English absorbed an estimated ten thousand French words, including *debonair*, *décolletage* and, notably, *double entendre*. Meanwhile, as Normans began to intermarry with English-speakers and have children, these successive generations were often bilingual, until eventually French (and French identity) fell away in England altogether.

Apart from enriching English with a wealth of descriptive vocabulary, the imposition of French as England's official language had another beneficial effect. Because English in this period was mostly spoken, not written, it was able to evolve more quickly (as all languages do over time) unrestrained by the shackles of "official" grammar. So by the fourteenth century, when English began to reemerge as a written language, people had dramatically simplified its grammar and spelling. And while quite a few remnants of its contributory languages survived (*knot*, *haggle* and *law*, for example, are of Norse origin), a modern hybrid, what historian John McWhorter calls "our magnificent bastard tongue," was beginning to put down its roots.

OF PARASITES, PLAYWRIGHTS AND PUNS

In 1348, however, another wave of invaders scrambled down the mooring lines of arriving merchant ships, this time at Weymouth. Nobody saw them coming, but who could, really? Hitching a ride in the warm fur of Asian rats, the common flea, each the size of a pinhead, drew little blood compared to the arrows of William the Conqueror. But these particular fleas, infected with bacteria causing bubonic plague, were far more prolific and much more deadly.

Among humans, a single bite from an infected flea often triggered a raging fever, vomiting, and the eruption of oozing boils around the neck, armpits and groin. Two of three infected people would be dead within days, their corpses often left to rot as those able to flee the mysterious onslaught sought escape in the next village, only to fan fear and outbreak alike.

The resulting pandemic, known as the Black Death, killed off a third of Europe's population in just fifty years, including more than a million people in England alone. Soon, entire English estates were devoid of agricultural workers. Children were left orphans. Churchmen, including many of the country's remaining French speakers, died by the drove or abandoned their monasteries altogether. Thriving hamlets became ghost towns almost overnight. The resulting social and economic disruption was severe, breaking down class structure and driving mass migrations. From a linguistic standpoint, this massive social upheaval stirred together people with strongly distinct regional accents and, in a world turned upside down, change became the norm.

As a consequence, London became a teeming boomtown in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, flooded by tens of thousands of newcomers speaking a wide range of languages and dialects.

As the rest of Europe, too, recovered from the plague and sea trade grew, sailors and merchants brought back thousands of new loan words from the Continent, Africa and Asia. Meanwhile, a renewed interest in classical literature, both Greek and Roman, introduced even more new vocabulary into English, along with a taste for modern Italian. Amid all this linguistic tumult, spelling was largely a personal choice, assuming one could read and write.

From the 1500s onward, however, this swirling amalgamation of foreign words, spellings and pronunciations drew sharp criticism from conservatives (much like modern proponents of "English Only" standards in the United States currently decry the use of immigrant languages). It was Sir John Cheke, a scholar whom Henry VIII appointed as the first Regius Professor of Greek at Cambridge University, who led the charge. "I am of this opinion that our own tung shold be written cleane and pure, unmixt and unmangeled with borrowing of other tunges," Cheke wrote. The tide of change, however, proved unstoppable.

By any measure, English was a rapidly changing, freewheeling language with an unprecedented wealth of homophones—words that sound the same but have different meanings. All these homophones provided endless raw material for punsters of every station.

"Clergymen punned in the pulpit, judges upon the bench, statesmen at the council-board, and even criminals in their dying speeches," one scholar of the period wrote. When Sir Francis Drake, the dashing privateer, navigator and vice admiral helped defeat the Spanish Armada in 1588, he purportedly dispatched a messenger to Queen Elizabeth (who spoke six languages) bearing a one-word pun in Latin: *cantharides*—the name of an aphrodisiac better known as "the Spanish fly."

Playwrights of the era including William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe and Ben Jonson also punned with abandon, sometimes even making up new words to suit their needs. Because English, long denigrated as a lowly vernacular in comparison to the more ecclesiastical Latin or Greek, suddenly seemed to offer endless possibilities for play, such wordplay quickly became, according to Shakespeare scholar Hëlge Kökeritz, "as much a part of sophisticated conversation as it was a stock ingredient of contemporary comedy."

"Shakespeare's penchant for punning," Kökeritz wrote, "reflects the spirit of the age." Not that Shakespeare was an average punster by any measure. He was far and away the best of his era and used puns to reveal not just his own wit but the knowledge and depth of the characters who uttered them.

Fundamentally though, Shakespeare and his fellow playwrights punned because puns helped engage and entertain audiences, many of which included illiterate but clever tradespeople whose ears were highly attuned to jokes, innuendos and double meanings. It enticed them to pay close attention to the speaker's intent or miss the moment, which was vitally important in an age of live performance. At capacity, the thatched galleries of London's Globe Theater held about 3,000 people, and the most popular plays could quickly make a big impression in a city of only 200,000.

While plays were popular entertainment, though, they often conveyed not-so-subtle political or social commentary, too. "To an Elizabethan the play upon words was not merely an elegance of style and a display of wit; it was also a means of emphasis and an instrument of persuasion," wrote Frank Wilson, author of *Shakespeare and the Diction of Common Life*. "An argument might be conducted from step to step—and in the

pamphleteers it often is—by a series of puns. The genius of the language encouraged them."

With this in mind, dramatists used puns for yet another reason: to outwit censorship imposed by the monarch's "Master of the Revels." Consider the cobbler in the opening scene of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. "Truly, sir, all that I live by is with the awl," the cobbler says. "I meddle with no tradesman's matters, nor women's matters, but withal I am, indeed, sir, a surgeon to old shoes." It all sounds innocent enough, but as Frankie Rubinstein notes in *A Dictionary of Shakespeare's Sexual Puns and Their Significance*, audiences of the time would have caught what were then obvious double entendres about using a phallic tool to play doctor with "old shoes," meaning prostitutes.

Such puns managed to slip past Queen Elizabeth's Master of the Revels, just as they would frustrate, several centuries later, the Shakespeare scholar (and father of the modern dictionary) Samuel Johnson. Today some of Shakespeare's wordplay, especially rhymes and rhyming puns, can sound a little awkward, or even forced. But that's largely because the pronunciation of certain words has evolved, breaking apart couples that once danced together gracefully. With this in mind, Kökeritz, a noted scholar of archaic English pronunciation, has suggested that perhaps as many as half of Shakespeare's homophonic puns have been lost in the modern era.

It's also important to note that many of Shakespeare's puns, including most in his tragedies, weren't even intended to be funny in the first place. In the second act of *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth describes how she will incriminate the innocent by smearing them—gilding them—with the king's blood.

"If he doe bleed,
Ile guild the faces of the Groomes withall,
For it must seeme their Guilt."

While the archaic spelling might initially confuse modern readers, guilt—that is, culpability—sounds identical to gilt, as in the layering on of gold or, in this case, blood. The pun is clearly clever, yet anything but funny. One should remember, though, that puns are at their core defined by multiplicity of meaning, not necessarily humor. The common expectation that puns should always be funny, or die in the attempt, is a relatively modern development.

When *Macbeth* was first performed, most likely in 1611, the pun was a common rhetorical device for both comic and dramatic purposes. Poets, playwrights and preachers alike used it often as a tool to prise open the full meaning of language, and thereby more fully express the human experience.

Even a serious Elizabethan poet such as John Donne, who penned a great deal of deeply meditative religious poetry, punned to make his point. Sometime around 1622, struggling to recover from a serious illness, Donne (which rhymes with "sun") wrote "A Hymn to God the Father," playing on his own name to beg forgiveness from his creator. By the end of the first verse, he is already punning.

"When Thou hast done, Thou hast not done, For I have more." According to historical accounts, the poem was put to music and sung under the great dome of St. Paul's Cathedral, in London.

Donne, Shakespeare and their contemporaries were all influenced, to a significant degree, by the Renaissance and its as-

sociated embrace of all things classical. This included the art of rhetoric and its use of puns, a respectable tradition that could be traced back to Homer's epics and beyond.

In ancient Athens, Plato himself punned, and Aristotle expounded upon such metaphorical wordplay in his instructional treatise, *Rhetoric*. In the book, which is still in print, Aristotle both highlights and praises the use of clever, well-constructed semantic surprises to introduce a new idea or establish a new connection. "In all these jokes, whether a word is used in a second sense or metaphorically, the joke is good if it fits the facts," he wrote. "Well-constructed riddles are attractive for the same reason."

Roman orators later put an even greater emphasis on such wordplay, as recorded by Cicero in his classic series *De Oratore*. "Wit and humor are always very agreeable, and often highly serviceable," Cicero wrote. "Equivocal sayings are esteemed as being of the wittiest kind, but they are not always employed in jests, they are sometimes applied seriously."

All across Renaissance Europe, not just in England, people were giving this rich, ancient tradition a fresh voice. In 1528, a dashing soldier and Papal diplomat named Baldesar Castiglione published his *Book of the Courtier*, a handbook of sorts for proper behavior in the courts of nobility. The topic of punning, specifically how to pun in good taste, merited an entire section.

Conceding that puns "are more usually praised for their ingenuity than for their humor," Castiglione urged speakers to "be cautious in their use, hunting carefully for the right words, and avoiding those that cause the joke to fall flat and seem too laboured, or, as we have said, that are too wounding."

Punning was similarly popular among Europe's court jesters, whom in earlier times had been known as bards, minstrels,

troubadours or fools. In an age when travel was still difficult and dangerous, those who did were automatically suspect. Traveling entertainers, especially, were commonly viewed as vagabonds, tricksters or parasites. Jesters, even those who stayed put, suffered a similar reputation. So while keeping a court jester was something of a status symbol among Europe's nobility, the jesters themselves were often of low status.

Many of those employed by royal courts were people who suffered a severe physical deformity, such as dwarfism. As such, they lived entirely by their wits and talent for entertainment, totally dependent on their patrons for food, shelter and protection. They entertained well—punning, riddling, singing, making music, or juggling—or paid for their failure with physical abuse such as dunkings, beatings, or being tossed up and down in a blanket. Sometimes, such inhumane abuse *was* the entertainment. As such, juggling double meanings and dishing out thinly disguised satire were often a jester's only hope of escape, or recourse.

Given their direct access to royalty, however, a few of these court insiders also managed to acquire wealth, and even political influence as they voiced "crazy" opinions that ordinary courtiers would never dare utter. One such joker was Archy Armstrong, jester to England's Charles I. Like many of his brethren, Armstrong was a dwarf. Born poor, somewhere near the Scottish border, he got his start stealing sheep but eventually found his way, as a jester, into the royal household. In return for his loyal service, Armstrong was eventually rewarded with a pension, a monopoly on the burgeoning trade in tobacco pipes, and an estate of one thousand acres in Ireland.

But as his stature continued to grow in the palace, "King Archy," as he became known, acquired enemies. First among

them was the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud, who vied for influence with the king and couldn't stand his irreverent rival. In one famous instance, the king, the archbishop and Armstrong were about to dine at the Palace of Whitehall, and the king asked Armstrong, not the man who crowned him, to say grace. With a smirk, Armstrong drove the knife in with a perfectly unassailable pun: "Great praise be given to God and little *laud* to the Devil."

It took a few years, but the incensed archbishop eventually got the last laugh. In 1637, he finally persuaded the king to oust Armstrong and had the royal privy council sentence the jester "to have his coat pulled over his head and be discharged [from] the king's service and banished from the king's court." Angry but ever adaptable to change, Armstrong launched a new career as a moneylender.

TORTURED ENGLISH

Though Laud had finally managed to silence the irreverent punster, his troubles were really just beginning, as he and the royal family struggled to stave off the growing political power of a group of zealous religious conservatives known as Puritans. One of their leaders was William Prynne, a Puritan lawyer who in 1632 published *Histriomastix*, a thousand-page diatribe against the monarchy and society's moral corruption. Laud had Prynne locked up in the Tower of London and tried for seditious libel, on the grounds that he used "implicite meanes" to suggest the legality of overthrowing the monarchy. Convicted, he was pilloried and had the tops of his ears snipped off.

Undeterred, Prynne continued to publish anonymous pamphlets, even when he was arrested and imprisoned again. One such pamphlet, which urged church wardens to defy their bishops, featured an elaborate initial letter *C* in the style of an illuminated manuscript. It was an unlikely flourish from a Puritan known for aesthetic restraint. But when tipped on its side, the C looked just like the pope's head, faced by an army of soldiers and ordinary men. Prynne's letter was a visual pun.

The Holy See was none too pleased. Nor was King Charles (married to a Catholic), and especially not the apoplectic Laud. On discovering the identity of the pamphlet's author, Laud had Prynne hauled before the Star Chamber yet again. Convicted once more of seditious libel, he was sentenced this time to public branding, and his cheeks were burned with an *S* and an *L*. According to one account, the sentence was carried out to the very letter of the law: when the hangman "burnte one cheeke with a letter the wrong waye," he promptly rebranded Prynne's face to correct his typographical error.

Rumors swept London that Prynne had died from the punishment, but it was too early to print this rebel's epitaph. Even before his guards had bundled him back into the Tower, he was busy composing a blistering, punning verse of defiance. Half English, half Latin, it played off of the double meaning of *Stigmata Laudis*—the glorious stigmata, akin to the wounds that Christ himself suffered upon the cross, only this time inflicted by Laud. Ironically, far from branding Prynne with shame, Laud had transformed the incorrigible punster into a political and religious martyr.

If Prynne was stoic, though, others were unwilling to turn the other cheek. Popular opposition to the church and monarchy continued to escalate. In 1641, desperate to regain control of the increasingly bitter public debate, King Charles led four

hundred soldiers to Westminster to arrest his principal parliamentary critics. His targets escaped, and the gambit only threw fuel onto the fire of his opponents.

Within days the king was forced to flee London. Within months, England was engulfed in a bloody civil war. For Prynne, that meant vindication and release from prison. For Laud, it spelled the beginning of the end, and he was soon behind bars himself. Finally, after a show trial in which Prynne played chief prosecutor, Laud found himself kneeling in prayer one last time, his head atop the chopping block.

The ensuing years were rough for England. While Parliamentary forces (in alliance with the Puritans) quickly prevailed in most areas, King Charles and his Royalists held out elsewhere, until finally forced to take refuge in Scotland. In 1649, the Scots handed over the deposed king to the Parliamentary forces. After a short trial for treason, he was led to a scaffold in front of the very palace he had once called home, and was beheaded with a single stroke of the axe.

Within a few years, England was under the iron rule of a grim and puritanical general, Oliver Cromwell. As England's Lord Protector, Cromwell imposed a series of increasingly draconian measures of social and religious control throughout England. Among other things, he imposed strict censorship, banned all plays, established a female dress code, suspended most sporting events, tore down the famous Globe Theatre, nixed the traditional celebration of Christmas and even outlawed pie—those who dared bake them did so charily.

Mercifully, Cromwell died in 1658, and England's totalitarian religious fever began to break. By 1661, the religious zealots were marginalized and a more independent and moderate parliament began liberalizing the country once again. They relaxed censorship, reopened the theaters, loosened up social controls and even restored a limited monarchy, with a second King Charles atop the throne.

The pun, like a pinecone that survives a forest fire, was soon sprouting anew. As the story goes, when the king was told that his jester, the playwright Charles Killigrew, could pun on any subject, he issued a challenge and commanded that Killigrew "make one on me."

Instantly, Killigrew quipped that this was impossible, because "the king is no subject."

It was a clever retort, even if the king was actually somewhat constrained by an assertive, postwar parliament. Yet, if the Restoration was a good time to be king, relatively speaking, it was an even better time for English punsters, many of whom began to fill London's burgeoning coffeehouses.

GROUNDS FOR DISPUTE

The city's first coffeehouse had opened in 1652, perhaps in response to the Puritan crackdown on public drunkenness, in a shed behind a church in the central Cornhill neighborhood. Right away, it drew a devoted clientele. Only a decade later, there were eighty-two such establishments in the city, and they were already sparking complaints from competing tavern keepers and also authorities, who feared the freewheeling, sometimes subversive discourse the coffeehouses seemed to inspire.

Neither were entirely wrong to feel threatened. Right from the start, coffeehouses had taken off as popular social hubs where people of different classes (and in a few documented

cases, sexes) began to mix and exchange commercial news, political opinion, literary manuscripts, scientific ideas, palace gossip and humor, including puns.

One 1662 anonymous satire was entitled, in part, *The Tryall of the Coffee-Man: Wherein He Is Indicted, Arraigned, Convicted, and Condemned, by Sir Benjamin Bacchus, Sir Mathew Malt, Sir Henry Hop, Sir Francis Froth, judges of the court.* The indicted coffeeman, one Don Ballingo Blackburnt, is found guilty of stealing business from the taverns and robbing the city's men of their virility. His sentence included, among other punishments, immersion in coffee, a beating with bulls' penises and stoning with sheep's testicles—a true and bitter testament to the hard justice of the day, or at least the satirist's imagination.

Some of the punning was more overtly political. A tavern keeper named William Hicks, writing under the pen name of Roger L'Estrange, published a joke book in 1677 entitled *Coffee House Jests.* In it, he recounts the punning anecdote about an Army chaplain during the recent troubles, who had prayed aloud asking that God bless the parliament and "grant they may all hang together."

"Yes sir with all my heart," a bystander answered the chaplain, "and the sooner the better."

King Charles and other conservatives took a dim view of such critiques, whether couched in humor or not. But ultimately, there wasn't a lot the king could do; his royal proclamation forbidding coffeehouses from selling "coffee, chocolet, sherbet or tea" had promised severe penalties for those who disobeyed. Stirred to outrage, the city's coffeehouse owners and their influential, caffeinated patrons had launched a furious and popular counterattack. The king, taken aback by the brewing rebellion, had quickly capitulated.

Over the course of the next century, before tea claimed the cup as the quintessential English beverage, thousands of coffeehouses sprang up in London and throughout Britain. Many such establishments became known for specific topics of discussion and the business conducted there. One was called London's, just off Fleet Street, where publishers gathered to sell copyrights. Lloyd's became the place for maritime news and shipping insurance. The Grecian (site of the dueling scholars) often drew Fellows of the Royal Society, who gathered to discuss the latest scientific ideas. First among these coffeehouses for a time, though, was Will's Coffee-House, famous for attracting the nation's literary intelligentsia. Located just east of Covent Garden, it was nicknamed the "Wits' Coffee-House" for the quality of its witty repartee.

Among its customers were the anti-Puritan playwright William Wycherley (whose play *The Country Wife* puns unabashedly on sex), Addison (the pun critic), the poet Alexander Pope, the diarist Samuel Pepys and the revered poet and playwright John Dryden. Dryden, who held court by the fireplace during winter and on the balcony during summer, liked to call these tables his winter and his summer seat.

Dryden had a conflicted relationship with puns; while he used them liberally in his plays, he publicly disdained them. Predictably, such inconsistency drew the jibes of unapologetic punsters. In one instance, he was at the coffeehouse with his back to Poet Laureate Nicholas Rowe, when an observant punster quipped: "You are like a waterman; you look one way, and Rowe another." Dryden got angry, but the punster was right; he couldn't have it both ways—it was either or.

The writer Jonathan Swift also frequented Will's. Unlike Dryden, Swift punned without reserve or remorse, reveling in the infinite, often stinging, possibilities of language. While at this time Swift's

most popular masterpiece, *Gulliver's Travels*, was still just a Lilliputian spark of an idea in the back of his mind, he was already a renowned satirist who churned out essays, poetry, pamphlets and political commentary—some high and some low.

According to Carole Fabricant, Professor of English at the University of California at Riverside, Swift, like many writers before him, exhibited a conservative impulse to stabilize the English language. But at the same time, this impulse never prevented him from bending language to suit his own needs. He often invented new words and played word games with his fellow London wits, many of them punsters-in-arms from his native Ireland.

For example, Swift, a clergyman well educated in the classics, once wrote the following nonsensical Latin verse, which might seem familiar to a generation of grammar school students:

Mollis abuti,
Has an acuti,
No lasso finis,
Molli divinis.
Omi de armis tres,
Imi na dist res,
Cantu disco ver
Meas alo ver?

Now read it phonetically:

Moll is a beauty
Has an acute eye,
No lass so fine is,
Molly divine is.

O my dear mistress,
I'm in a distress,
Can't you discover
Me as a lover?

Despite his remarkable skills and success, Swift was always something of a literary outsider, perhaps because of his Irish roots or blunt opinions. And eventually, he grew weary of the constant, caffeinated commentary at the Wit's Coffee-House and penned a short critique of the daily, literary gossip that people passed off as insight:

"Be sure at Will's the following day,
Lie snug, and hear what critics say."

Swift's pen was on the mark. In the late 1600s and early 1700s, there was no shortage of critics debating the nature of snug lies—and truth—in every possible form, and not just at Will's. From biology to physics to politics to language, provocative thinkers began to investigate, argue and discover a world of rationality. Shaking off the shackles of faith, myth and custom that had defined so much since antiquity, they sought to examine everything around them through the lens of reason.

Among other issues, puns themselves became a source of contention, a litmus test of one's views on language, meaning, and the possibility of defining absolute truth. In this Age of Enlightenment, the roots of rationalism were quickly taking over the intellectual garden, and language was no exception. As such, many came to view the pun's very ambiguity as a serious flaw. Yes, it had once been a commonly accepted rhetorical tool, but now many rationalists began dismissing it as a relic, an out-

dated stylistic device of ancient philosophers, aging clergy and dead playwrights.

Not that Aristotle, Cicero and other ancients had nothing worthwhile to offer, but much of their wisdom was now seen as static or outdated. By contrast, observation and experimentation provided a new, direct and more reliable way to acquire knowledge.

Compared to things, words were slippery. According to the late Washington University scholar Richard Jones, ambitious and influential scientists of the Royal Society—inspired by Sir Francis Bacon's novel and rigorous approach to scientific inquiry—were determined "to sweep away all the fogginess of words." They aimed, he wrote, "to reduce language to its simplest terms, to make it as accurate, concrete and clear an image of the material world as was possible."

"More than any other linguistic defect, scientists objected to a word's possessing many meanings or the same meaning as another word," Jones wrote. Physician and philosopher John Locke suggested that the study of mathematics helped free the mind "from the cheat of words." If the laws of nature could be reduced to mathematical formulas of unambiguous meaning, why not language? By this calculus, puns, subjective and imprecise, failed the test of rationality.

The rise of scientific thought also undermined the primacy of the Bible, whose original Hebrew texts were rich with puns. Not only did many seventeenth-century thinkers begin to question the authority of the Hebrew alphabet as God's original creation, they also began to question the utility of language, especially religious language, as a tool to describe and understand the world with any accuracy.

"The pun was just one high-profile victim of these shifts in

beliefs," writes Simon Alderson, a scholar who has studied puns and punsters of the period. As attitudes toward language evolved, so did attitudes toward the language of humor, including puns. According to Alderson, "this hierarchy was adjusted in a way that tended to reflect the priorities of the New Science with its empiricist search for truth in *things* rather than *words*."

Meanwhile, advancing technology, specifically printing, also began to spell the pun's decline in social status. The first printing press in England had arrived in 1476. Over the ensuing two centuries, the spread of more presses had driven a dramatic increase in literacy. By 1600, about half of England's urban population could read and write, and the percentage only continued to rise. Printing, by its very nature, placed more binding demands on language. Surely and steadily, it helped transform what had been an oral culture into a written one and forced writers, punsters included, to commit to a single spelling before the type was set.

As printing became more accessible and affordable, both advocates and detractors of the pun used this technology to press their case in increasingly heated essays, pamphlets and satires. In 1709, Anthony Ashley-Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, took a jab at puns in his *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*. "We have seen in our own time the Decline and Ruin of a false sort of Wit, which so much delighted our Ancestors, that their Poems and Plays, as well as Sermons, were full of it," he wrote. "The very Language of the Court was Punning. But 'tis now banish'd the Town, and all good Company: There are only some few Footsteps of it in the Country; and it seems at last confin'd to the Nurserys of Youth, as the chief Entertainment of Pedants and their Pupils."

Shaftesbury, perhaps, might have felt some personal animus. Not too many years earlier, political opponents had publicly ridiculed his favorite coffeehouse, The Amsterdam, as well as his political views, in a punning broadside entitled *The Amsterdamnable Coffee-House*.

Other detractors of the pun soon joined the fray. In 1711, Joseph Addison and Richard Steele launched *The Spectator*, a daily publication that Addison intended "to enliven Morality with Wit, and to temper Wit with Morality . . . till I have recovered [readers] out of that desperate State of Vice and Folly, into which the Age is fallen." Aimed primarily at the emerging middle class now patronizing the coffeehouses of London, *The Spectator* attempted to impart a sense of culture, manners and refinement.

Punning became an early target. Briefly noting punning's rise and fall from ancient times, Addison conceded that the Greeks and Romans were certainly brilliant writers and philosophers. But they also suffered, in some areas of thought, a lack of rational judgment. "The moderns cannot reach their beauties," he wrote, "but can avoid their imperfections." The pun, he asserted, had finally been "entirely banished out of the learned world."

Addison was overstating his case, and his fellow anti-punsters conceded as much, at least tacitly, by virtue of their vigorous public debate on the matter. In an anonymous 1714 satirical pamphlet entitled *God's Revenge Against Punning, Shewing the Miserable Fates of Persons Addicted to This Crying Sin, in Court and Town*, one writer drew comparisons between punning, the Black Death and the Great Fire of London, which had destroyed much of the city a half century earlier. He identified "the woeful practice of punning" as "a contagion"

that had "first crept in among the first quality, descended to their footmen and infused itself into their ladies."

"This does occasion the corruption of our language, and therein the word of God translated into our language, which certainly every sober Christian must tremble at."

As evidence of God's wrath, the writer went on to cite instances of well-known punsters who were disfigured, crippled, lost the capacity to speak, broke their necks, squandered their fortune to gambling or became "great drunkards and Tories." Despite such antipathy toward puns, the pamphlet's author (probably Alexander Pope) somehow couldn't resist slipping in at least one of his own, writing that even Daniel Button, the proprietor of Will's Coffee-House was lately "deprived of his wits."

A SWIFT RESPONSE

Unwilling to let such provocation pass, England's top punsters fired back. Among them was Swift, who in 1716 published (also anonymously) *A Modest Defence of Punning: or a compleat Answer to a scandalous and malicious Paper called God's Revenge Against Punning*. Contrary to its title, the essay was anything but modest. Rather, it was absurd, mocking and brilliant at once, interweaving pun after pun in Latin, Greek, English and French—running intellectual circles, in effect, around the anti-punsters.

Swift argued that the author of *God's Revenge Against Punning* "seems to have *founded* his whole Discourse upon one grand Mistake: And therefore his whole Discourse will be *founddead* as soon as I have removed that Mistake; which is, that He condemns the whole Art in generall [sic] without dis-

tinguishing Puns into Good and Bad: whereby it appears how ignorant he is in Antiquity. The antient [sic] Romans very well understood the Difference between the *fine* or *pretty* Pun, and the *bad* Pun. . . ."

Building his argument with pun after pun, Swift even alluded—with a rhetorical wink—to the incident some years earlier with Rowe and Dryden, back at the Wit's Coffee-House, "of which our Author is as ignorant as a certain Gentleman who, reading of a *Roman Scholar*, thought *Roman* was a *Waterman* and *Scholar* a *Sculler*." To the intensely competitive Swift, it seems, the old exchange was still *au courant*.

In 1719, Thomas Sheridan, most likely with input from Swift, followed up with another defense of punning by publishing (pseudonymously) a booklet entitled *Ars Punica, Sive Flos Linguarum. The Art Of Punning; Or, The Flower Of Languages: In Seventy-Nine Rules; For The Further Improvement Of Conversation, And Help Of Memory. By The Labour And Industry Of Tom Pun-Sibi.*

Ars Punica asserted that "Punning, of all arts and sciences, is the most extraordinary: for all others are circumscribed by certain bounds; but this alone is found to have no limits, because, to excel therein requires a more extensive knowledge of all things. A punner must be a man of the greatest natural abilities, and of the best accomplishments: his wit must be poignant and fruitful, his understanding clear and distinct, his imagination delicate and cheerful . . ."

The humorous booklet, which quickly became popular among the coffeehouse set, mocked the academic pretentiousness of Addison, Steele and their fellow literary pundits through a series of prefaces, dedicatory poems and classical scholarship, much of it clearly satirical. Included was the case of Ptolemaeus Philopunnaeus, a Greek ruler who supposedly propagated a doctrine of puns in six of his major cities and ordered that every pun uttered within his dominions over the past three years be collected for his personal library.

Similarly, *Ars Punica* suggested that in the Aeolic dialect, the Greek god Pan is called Pun and that he was, in his day, a practitioner of the art. "Pan being the god of universal nature, and punning free of all languages, it is highly probable that it owes its first origin, as well as name, to this god."

Like punsters of all ages, the essay's author wrestled with the very definition of a pun and ended up offering two. The first was "The Physical Definition of Punning," describing the "art of harmonious jingling upon words, which, passing in at the ears, and falling upon the diaphragma, excites a titillary motion in those parts; and this, being conveyed by the animal spirits into the muscles of the face, raises the cockles of the heart."

The second was "The Moral Definition of Punning," which appears to be much simpler. "Punning is a virtue that most effectually promotes the end of good fellowship." But on second glance, there are two ways to interpret this: fellowship as a goal of friendship, or the termination of a friendship.

At the core of *Ars Punica* were its rules for punning. Despite the seventy-nine cited in the title, only thirty-seven were actually included, and even among these not every clause bears repeating. A few highlights, slightly paraphrased, include:

> No. 8—The Rule of Interruption: Although the company may be engaged in a discourse of the most serious consequence, it is and may be lawful to interrupt them with a pun.

No. 9—The Rule of Risibility: A man must be the first that laughs at his own pun.

No. 10—The Rule of Retaliation: If a man makes fifty puns, you are obliged to return all, or the most of them, in the same kind.

No. 11—The Rule of Repetition: You must never let a pun be lost, but repeat and comment upon it, till every one in the company both hears and understands it.

No. 26—The Rule of Mortification: When a man having got the thanks and laugh of a company for a good pun, an enemy to the art swears he read it in "Cambridge Jests."

Taken together, *Ars Punica*'s rules (and the puns Sheridan offered to illustrate them) revealed a historic shift, one which had been taking shape for several centuries but was quickly becoming codified. Essentially, after millennia in which the pun had served as a respected rhetorical device both serious and comic, its star was finally falling—at least in Western culture.

One factor also driving down the pun's status was a growing British consciousness about social class. For several decades, London's burgeoning coffeehouses had been homogenizing the city's social interactions, casting people of widely disparate backgrounds, professions and social status into a lively, boisterous mix. Indeed, when the coffeehouses first opened, many of them featured seating at a long, common table—a great leveler that forced aristocrats to face a new, more democratic reality.

Not since Geoffrey Chaucer had written his fictional (and punning) *Canterbury Tales* in the fourteenth century had so many people of so many different social classes been thrown

together to exchange ideas and perspectives in such a casual public forum. The resulting awareness of class difference was reflected in a growing concern about a person's accent.

Earlier in English history, strong regional accents shared roughly equal status; their differences merely reflected one's geographic origin. But as time went on and English became increasingly standardized, the upper classes began to stigmatize non-London accents and ridicule regional grammatical differences. And as a new national network of turnpikes began spreading from London like a spider's web, the capital's standards soon shaped the nation's. Puns, which often depend on stretching pronunciations and bending rules, took a corresponding hit in status.

One factor in this may have been related to England's changing standards of politeness. Early in the eighteenth century, as one scholar has written, "verbal refinement was disregarded, even among those people who had received the education of a gentleman and who were in a financial position to sustain the role and mix with good society." Public curses and insults were common, even among royalty. But that was beginning to change, and quickly. Guided by pamphlets, grammars, novels and other books instructing people in "civilized" behavior, many people began to place new value on ceremony and on what they perceived to be proper manners. From the institution of afternoon tea to the proliferation of formal toasts, standards of social propriety shifted.

One influential tastemaker was Philip Stanhope, the Fourth Earl of Chesterfield. A wealthy statesman with distinct views on what made a man a "gentleman," Lord Chesterfield wrote a series of letters to his illegitimate son explaining such behavior. When published posthumously in 1774, the letters became a de facto instruction manual for social strivers of the day.

In one such letter, he criticizes laughter itself. "I would heartily wish that you may often be seen to smile, but never heard to laugh while you live," he wrote. "Frequent and loud laughter is the characteristic of folly and ill manners; it is the manner in which the mob express their silly joy at silly things; and they call it being merry. In my mind there is nothing so illiberal, and so ill bred, as audible laughter. True wit, or sense, never made anybody laugh; they are above it." Given this attitude it's no surprise that Lord Chesterfield sniffed at puns, declaring them "not true wit" and cautioning their attempt.

Lord Chesterfield wasn't alone in looking down on the common man and his habits. The social leveling within London's coffeehouses threatened an entire strata of economic and intellectual elites, who felt that access to the pleasures of coffeehouse culture—even its wit—should not necessarily be so democratic. In their minds, intellectual banter was a privilege that required education and breeding. It was also a practice they found increasingly hard to control and, slowly but surely, the social status once associated with punning eroded. If anyone could do it, then what value did it serve as a mark of intellectual distinction? When the punning playwright William Wycherley defended punning as "a diversion," a snobby friend retorted: "I am for the Diversion of Reasonable Men and of Gentlemen. If there be any Diversion in Quibbling, it is a Diversion of which a Fool and a Porter is as capable as is the best of you."

This was about this time when the phrase "pardon the pun" began entering widespread use, an expression largely supplanted by "no pun intended" about a century later. If social strivers couldn't avoid or, more likely, resist a pun, they could at

the very least offer a half-hearted apology for what was becoming more and more of a faux pas.

Of course, great and unapologetic punsters of the day were quick to defend the form and deflate such elitist pomposity. In an age when strict libel laws continued to proscribe a good deal of political speech, dramatists such as Wycherley and John Gay deliberately used puns—elusive, deniable puns—to goad and insult the powerful, who raged at such cutting satire but could do little to stop it.

Despite such efforts, the pun's status had nearly reached a tipping point. For thousands of years, the form had commanded respect for revealing divine wisdom, as a poetic expression of life's inherent contradictions, and as an elegant rhetorical tool to communicate multiple ideas at once. Now, in an Age of Reason, even the pun's most brilliant, intellectual champions were consigning it to the ghetto of humor. Soon enough, Britain's intellectual establishment piled on. In 1742, when the classical scholar Elizabeth Carter drafted a proposal for a fifteen-volume set, to be written entirely by women, of "a Most Useful and Curious Work, Entitled *The Whole Art and Mystery of Punning*," she was just being facetious.

JOHNSON'S DICTIONARY

In 1746, a former schoolteacher named Samuel Johnson began compiling a new English dictionary. Unlike a similar project recently completed in France, in which officials had assembled a great bureaucracy to compile a French dictionary over the course of decades, Johnson undertook his project largely alone,