

DOING THE QUAMQUAM

This paper is a more popular version of “Quaint and Quondam” (above), with some extra material.

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Of quails and quihillelillies and other quests involving the
most suggestive letter in the English language

In a television production of Graham Greene's story "Monsignor Quixote," the old Communist mayor of a Spanish village goes with the unwitting monsignor to a "hotel" in the city. Beside the bed in the mayor's room the innocent monsignor finds an envelope with an inflatable rubber thing inside, and he tries to blow it up like a balloon. Forced to tell him what it is, the mayor also has to explain that he has brought him to stay the night in a brothel to avoid registering in a hotel and thus attracting the attention of the police. Now that this prophylactic is a regular feature of magazine and newspaper ads, there must be very few people so innocent anymore, whether monsignors or teenagers, to mistake a condom for a balloon. But who can say for sure where it got its name?

A recent learned monograph on the subject by literary scholar William Kruck went through some of the crazy and ingenious etymologies for the word: it was named after an English doctor called Dr. Condom (court physician to King Charles II, according to some). No, it was named for a colonel in the British army. All wrong, says a Teutonic pedant: it is from the Persian word for a seed container! And so on.

Kruck himself did not try to add to this collection of guesstymology, but Joseph Wallfield, who reviewed Kruck's book in *Comments on Etymology*, does seem finally to have tracked down the rather simple origin of the word. Wallfield unearthed an obscure 18th-century Venetian dictionary in which the writer tells us that *gondon* (glove) was the word used for a prophylactic worn on the appropriate organ "like a glove" to prevent venereal infection.

The French, said the writer, are never without them. Clearly smart Frenchmen then carried condoms as "smart girls" do today if we are to believe the ads. And even before AIDS, smart college men were supposed to carry them too, for, as the already-recumbent woman says to her already-mounting cavalier in *The World According to Garp*: "No glove, no love." Obviously she knew the origin of the word, whether or not she knew that

she knew.

Smart streetwalkers in 18th-century London were expected to carry them, too, for the use of their customers. Cost? A shilling a sheath. In an account of one of his many adventures, James Boswell, Johnson's great biographer, tells us that he picked up a prostitute "with intention to enjoy her in armour: but she had none," so Bozzy cautious for once, did not have intercourse with a professional who could not provide him with a condom. He was not always so restrained.

"Armour" was Boswell's regular word for the condom, which clearly indicates that he thought of it as protection from disease, not pregnancy. But it has many other names, as we all know: the British refer to it regularly as a "French letter" and the French call it a *redingote anglaise* (an English riding coat) or a *capote anglaise* (English cloak). The Italians have called condoms *guanti di Parigi* (Parisian gloves), according to Wallfield. And, according to my friend Bernie Nemerson, Brooklyn kids called them "Coney Island Whitefish" as they floated on the Atlantic in large schools near the boardwalk.

Kruck says that the word first appeared in English written by a Scot who called it "quondam," a suggestive spelling to anyone who has spent any time with English literature. For it begins with "qu-," a letter combination laden with sexual connotation. Just as there seems to be something about "gl-" words that suggests sight and light (*glance, glimmer, glitter, glimpse, glint, glare, glass, glaze, gleam, glisten, glossy glow*), there is something about "qu-" words and sex, and there has been from a rather early stage of our language. Chaucer's Wife of Bath, for example, probably still the raunchiest female character in English literature, tells anyone who will listen that her many lovers have told her that she has the best "quoniam" there is. Even the dimmest reader who is not a Monsignor has no difficulty with that.

Similarly in "The Miller's Tale," when Handy Nicholas is living up to his nickname and coming on fast with his hands to Alison, he is in quest of her "quaint." This does not need a gloss either, though editors of college editions do provide such enlightening equivalents as "pudendum." (A student in one class, though, glancing often at the glosses, sounded out the line with a puzzled face and a questioning tone: "seized her by the.. the... puddindom?") This was clearly a realm with which she was not acquainted.)

Words for "prostitute" at various periods of the language have included: "quaedam," "quean," and "quail." A "quoniam" has become a "quim" or a "quiff." "Queer" has not needed any kind of explanatory gloss for a long time now.

The most far out is still "quihillelillie," a word I have never heard and do not know how

to pronounce; I have seen it only in a poem by the medieval Scottish poet William Dunbar. The *Oxford English Dictionary* which does cite the word under the verb “to rise” is too modest to define it in its alphabetical place. Dunbar probably coined it for fun, and its meaning is pretty clear from its priapic context, a poem suggestively entitled “In Secret Place.” That place is where the ardent wooer wishes to introduce the “quihillelillie,” which has been rising while he tries to enchant his beloved with such sweet nothings as “My wally gowdy / My tirlly mirly, my towdy mowdy.” What girl could resist ?

Shakespeare knew about “qu-” words, too. (In his day the “qu-” was often pronounced as a “k.”) He must have been punning on “condom” when he had Hector in *Troilus and Cressida* say to Menelaus about Helen of Troy:

Your quondam wife still swears by Venus' glove.

On the surface, “quondam” here means former. But, as my learned friend Bernie reminds me, Menelaus’ quondam wife, Helen of Troy, was a Greek woman who preferred Trojans.

Let me end with a quaint, if questionable, story. In the middle of the 16th century there was a great dispute among French classicists about the correct pronunciation of classical Latin. Among other things, the sound of Latin words with “qu-” came in question. The touchstone word became “quamquam.” Should it be pronounced “quamquam” or “camcam”? As is the academic custom with matters of such great moment, the argument became hot and furious, and sometimes quite physical. Hence, they say any affair entertaining to spectators, with limbs and academic (or other) gowns flying, full of sound and fury and signifying nothing , -- any such silly business was dubbed a “quamquam” or “camcam,” and later, yes, a “cancan.”