

00:11

First, a warning. As far as offensive words go, you are now entering a hard-hat area. We're going to be unabashed in this, I am talking to you about a very particular word, a very powerful word, a very "see you next Tuesday" word. A word that is still so offensive that the funders of this event would only let me talk about it if we censored it on the slides,

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(Laughter)

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which rather proves my point, don't you think? I love this word. Oh, my God, I love everything about this word, not just what it signifies, but the actual sound of it, the fact that the C and the T just cushion that "nnn" sound into this monosyllabic that you can just spit like a bullet or you can extend it out and roll it round your mouth, "cuunt."

01:10

I love its dexterity. I love the fact that in Scotland it's a term of endearment, but in America it's horrendously offensive. I love it means something different with your friends than it does if you said it to your boss, it would probably cost you your job. I do not recommend it. I love this word.

01:29

(Laughter)

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I love the fact that the first three letters are still the same chalice shape, all rolling through the word until they're stopped in that plosive T at the end. I think the thing that I love most about it is its status as the nastiest of all the nasty words. Although that title is under some contention now. There are other obvious heavyweight contenders for the most offensive word. The N-word, for example. But here's what I would say to you. I know why that word is offensive. I can look at the history, that word enabled the brutalization and racial genocide of an entire group of people. It played its part in dehumanizing Black people. What did "cunt" do?

02:15

(Laughter)

02:16

Does it not strike anyone else as odd that a word that just means the vulva could even be regarded in the same league of offense as the N-word? Are we saying that vulvas are that offensive? Surely not.

02:34

But what I want to talk to you today about is how did we get here? Has it always been this offensive and how did it come to be so? The answer is no, it was not. But let's look at the history of it first of all. Where in the cunt does "cunt" come from?

02:50

(Laughter)

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It's one of those words that's so old, etymologists and linguists, they lose sight of it eventually. It's the oldest word for the vulva that we have in the English language. It might even be the oldest in the world. There are some theories. There are also similar cognitions in Germanic languages all across Europe. The Vikings would be talking about "kuntas," the Germans had "kuntō," Dutch, "kont," Germanic "kott," and I think at one point we had "kott," which I think may be due for a revival.

03:23

After that, it gets a bit confusing as to what this word actually means. One of the leading theories is that it shares this root, this Proto-Indo-European root with this "gen" sound, which you also see in "genetics," "gene," and that means "to create." Another theory is that it comes from this sound, "gune," which gives us "woman," gynecology. "Create," "woman."

03:49

But what really fascinates linguists is this sound, the "cuu" sound, because that gave us "cunt" also it gave us "cunning." "Cunning" originally didn't mean "sneaky." It meant you knew something. Cunning folk, cunning women were wise women. And in Scotland still today, if you can something, it means you know something. "I ken this." It also gave us "queen" and "cow," slightly bizarre, which is slightly less highbrow, but -- It turns up again in the Middle Ages in "quaint," which means "knowledge" and also means "cunt." It has a Latin variation as well,

"cunnis," which also means "cunt," which turns up all over the Roman world, including in graffiti in Pompeii. Some of my favorite Roman graffiti from the city of Pompeii I won't try and do the Latin, but it's translated to be "A hairy cunt is better fucked than a smooth one."

04:47

(Laughter)

04:48

"It wants cock and holds in steam."

04:51

(Laughter)

04:52

There you go. However, I put it to you that the word "cunt," as offensive as it may be today, stems from a root that means "woman," "knowledge," "create," "cow." Has it always been this offensive? No.

05:13

But we'll talk about this. So when we talk about these words, "vulva," "vagina," trying to offer more palatable alternatives to "cunt," "vagina," the word turns up in the 17th century. It's taken directly from Latin and it means a scabbard. It means something that a sword goes into. "Vulva" doesn't do much better. That appears in the 14th century, and it means "womb," but some people suggest it comes from the French and means "wrapper." Both these words derive their meaning and their import from the penis, basically. That's what a vagina is. It's something a sword goes into. I say that these words aren't as feminist as "cunt," which comes from a word that means "queen," "create," "wisdom," "cow."

06:01

But when did it first start being used in English as we recognize it today? Gropecunte Lane, this is the first recorded incident in the Oxford English Dictionary, it turns up in 1230, a street name in London called Gropecunte Lane, which was exactly what it sounds like, this was in the red-light district of Southwark, it was a lane for groping cunts. And there wasn't just one in London,

there was one in Bristol, there was one in York. It appears all over the British Isles. Here it is, the one in Bristol. Sorry, Oxford, there it is just in blue.

06:31

But whereas Glaswegians might be calling each other and their friends "cunts," it seems that medieval people were calling their children "cunts" because it turns up in a number of names, bizarrely enough. Godwin Clawecunte is recorded in 1066, Gunoka Cuntles in 1219, John Fillecunt in 1246, Robert Clevecunt, 1302, and a Miss Bele Wydecunthe turns up in the Norfolk subsidiary role. We don't know if these are aliases or if they're jokes, but we do have a lot of fun with medieval names. In fact, originally the word "fuck" did not mean what it means today. It means to strike something to hit, which gives us the fabulous name of a dairy farmer in 1290 who's known as Simon Fuckebotere.

07:17

(Laughter)

07:19

So was it this offensive to medieval people? No, it wasn't. "Cunts" turn up all over medieval culture and medieval literature. And they are certainly not offensive, it's just a descriptive term. Here's some examples. The "Proverbs of Hendyng" from 1325 advises women to "give your cunt cunningly and make your demands later," i.e. get a ring on it first before you give it up. There's a Welsh poet called Gwerful Mechain from the 15th century, and she advises male poets to celebrate the fine bright curtain of a cunt that flaps in place of greeting. It might surprise us that medieval culture was this open about cunts, but the truth was, they were more sexually liberated than we actually give them credit for. This idea of them being in a tower with a chastity belt on is largely a hatchet job on their reputation done by the Victorians. Now, it wasn't a sexually liberated utopia. They had their own hang-ups, but they weren't that offended by sex. What will get you in trouble, swearwords in the Middle Ages, was religious ones, blasphemous ones. If you said something like, "God's wounds" or "God's teeth," that's what you'd say if you caught your soft and danglies in your fly.

08:29

One medieval poet who dropped the C-bomb with the precision of a military drone is this chap, Geoffrey Chaucer, who turns up in GCSEs and A-levels syllabuses, although his cunt jokes are generally not dwelled upon. He doesn't use the word "cunt," he uses the word "queynte" here, which again means "knowledge" and it means "cunt." So this is his joke, "As the clerkes ben ful

subtile and ful queynte, And prively he caughte hire by the queynte.” A rough translation means "the clerk was really cunning and he caught her by the cunt."

09:00

Shakespeare. It's been suggestion that he uses that play, a quaint - queynte - cunt, in his Sonnet number 20. Here he is. It certainly turns up in a lot of his work. It's a lot ruder than we often give him credit for. In Hamlet, act three, scene two, Hamlet says to Ophelia, he says, "Shall I lie in your lap?" And she says, "Oh, no, my Lord." And then he says, "Do you think I meant country matters?" When David Tennant played that part, he paused "Do you think I meant count-ry matters?" to try and really drive it home. Another one, "Twelfth Night," Malvolio says of his mistress's handwriting, "There be her Cs, her Us, her Ts and thus she makes the very great Ps," punning on "cunt" and "piss" simultaneously. The immortal Bard's status as a smut peddler is often swept under the cultural rug. In 1807, Thomas Bowdler published "The Family Shakespeare," where he edited out all of these jokes, all of the rude bits, and made it a completely cunt-free affair.

10:01

It's no surprise that about this time we start to get the first libel laws in Britain, the first banning of seditious and offensive pamphlets with the rise of Puritanism. For Shakespeare to be veiling his cunt jokes in kind of cheeky double entendres suggests that it's not quite as free and open as Gunoka Cuntles and Gropecunte Lane would once have had.

10:24

The Puritans repressed sexuality, we know this, and language is extremely important battleground for sexual liberation. How do you talk about your bodies if the very words you're trying to use are considered to be offensive? How do you do that? And by the time we get to the Restoration period, the early modern period, "cunt" is most certainly offensive. And this chap here, John Wilmot Earl of Rochester, is the absolute poster boy of "fuck you." If the Puritans tried to dam up sexuality, this guy surfed to notoriety on a wave of sexual repression that was unleashed when the plug was pulled on the Puritan rule. He uses "cunt" a lot and he's very naughty about it. He wrote this poem about his mistress and how jealous he was of her other lovers.

11:10

"When your lewd cunt came spewing home Drenched with the seed of half the town, My dram of sperm was supped up after For the digestive surfeit water. Full gorged at another time With a

vast meal of slime Which your devouring cunt had drawn From porters' backs and footmen's brawn."

11:28

Sorry, everyone. He uses that word to shock, and it's easy to look at his work and think that he's sexually liberated, but he's actually quite angry at cunts and their owners and that goes all the way through it. From here on out, cunt is an offensive, naughty word.

11:44

Georgian cunts, here we go.

11:46

(Laughter)

11:48

I'll just let that settle. So what happens about the 18th century is the print industry really explodes. And of course, we being humans, we didn't just want to publish nice books. We published porn, yay. There's a huge proliferation of porn that comes out of the 18th century. But oddly enough, most of it shies away from using that word "cunt." In 1785, Francis Grose published his book, "A Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue," which is basically a dictionary of slang. And he defined "cunt" as a "nasty name for a nasty thing." Such modesty from someone who also uses the word "buccaneer's boot," "lobster pot," "skut" and "Mrs. Frub's parlor" for the vulva.

12:33

This book here, "Harris's List," this is an almanac, it's a directory of sex workers in London at the time, who were selling sex. And it lists not only their address and their prices, but very, very intimate descriptions of what they do and their vulvas. But it doesn't use "cunt" very much. This one here, this is an illustration, fabulous illustration from "Fanny Hill," what's often called the first pornographic novel, which was published in 1749 by John Cleland, who famously boasted that he did it without writing any rude words at all. These texts tend to use expressions like "mossy grot," "cupid's coal hole," "Venus's mound," but we shy away from "cunt."

13:16

Victorians; so despite their reputation for being sexually prudish, pornography flowed underneath Victoria upper-crust society like a river of slime in "Ghostbusters II." They had pornography all over the place, visual and literary, and they had a lot of fun with "cunt."

13:34

One of their pornographic magazines "The Pearl" was published from 1879 to 1880. and it published in it "nursery rhymes" every month. I've got some here for you to have a look at. "There was a young lady of Hitchin, Who was scrotching her cunt in the kitchen; Her father said, 'Rose, It's the crabs, I suppose.' 'You're right, pa, the buggers are itching.'" "There was a young man of Bombay Who fashioned a cunt out of clay; But the heat of his prick Turned it into a brick, And (it) chafed all his foreskin away."

14:01

(Laughter)

14:04

Yeah, well done, Victorians, well done. Interestingly, it's also in the 19th century that we get the first recorded use of "cunt" being used as an insult. As an actual, "You are a cunt." That's the first time that it's used in the 19th century. In the 17th century, it started being used as a kind of a derogatory collective noun for women. Samuel Pepys writes about this aphrodisiac that's going to make all the "cunts" chase after him. Charming. That's when they weren't stabbing him with pins for being too sexually aggressive.

14:31

Anyway, the Victorians liked a well-placed "cunt." One of the most important "cunt" moments in history is this. Is the publication and the subsequent obscenity trial of "Lady Chatterley's Lover." This book contained 14 "cunts" and 40 "fucks," and it was banned and it had to go on trial in order to be published. And it was shocking, not just because of the graphic scenes of sex and the language used, but because it smashes down class boundaries. If you're not familiar with this, it's about Lady Constance Chatterley, a married woman who embarks on affair with with Sean Bean here but with Mellors the gamekeeper. And the idea is that it doesn't matter all her heirs and graces and titles, she's got a cunt, she's a sexual woman and that levels them. But one of the pivotal scenes is where Mellors tries to tell her what "cunt" means. I won't do the accent. "Nay nay! Fuck's only what animals do, but cunt's a lot more than that. It's thee, dost see: there's a lot more beside an animal, aren't ter? Even ter fuck? Cunt! Eh, that's the beauty of thee lass!" "Cunt.

That's the beauty of thee, lass!" I love that. Now, despite a jury that agreed a work stuffed full of cunts does have artistic merit and they allowed it to be published, and you can see the pictures of the people queuing around the streets to get their hands on this book once it was, "cunt" never really made it back into the mainstream.

15:53

Feminists have maintained a rather uneasy relationship with "cunt." This is Judy Chicago. She led what was called The Cunt Art Movement of the 1970s. It first turned up in a film, a mainstream cinema in 1971 in "Carnal Knowledge" with Jack Nicholson, who screamed at a woman that she is a ball-busting son of a cunt bitch, or words to that effect. And in "The Exorcist" as well. It appears in "The Vagina Monologues," 1996, I think it was, with Eve Ensler when she talks about reclaiming "cunt." But it's still not off the linguistic naughty step, despite all of this work.

16:29

Cunts today.

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(Laughter)

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It was it was finally admitted to the Oxford English Dictionary, despite having been around for thousands of years, in the '70s. And then in 2014, they relented a little bit more and they added "cunty," "cuntish," "cunted" and "cunting." So we all know exactly what that means.

16:51

The Ofcom, the regulator for UK TV censorship in 2016 released a poll of what they regarded to be the most offensive words and "cunt" was bang up there. It was on top. It is still regarded as a horrendously offensive word.

17:07

But here's what I want to leave you with. What do you call yours? Because as far as I can see, words for vulva or cunts fall into a few categories. We've got child-like: a tuppence, a Twinkie, a



foof, a minky, a Mary. Very medical: a vulva, pudendum, vagina. Slightly detached: down there, it's down there.

17:31

(Laughter)

17:32

Bits, special area. Violent: axe wound, penis flytrap, gash or a growler. The taxi driver on my way in told me that Glaswegian slang for cunnilingus is "growling at the badger," which --

17:48

(Laughter)

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I'll leave that with you. Or they just tend to be unpleasant, horrible images of fish and meat and general putrescence, fish taco, bacon sandwich, badly stuffed kebab, bearded clam, etc. Are these better alternatives to "cunt?"

18:09

But I think the reason that we're not prepared and we can't handle "cunt" is because we can't handle cunts generally. While it's been linguistically sanitized, culturally, the only cunts we seem to be OK with are the ones that have been plucked and buffed and waxed and glued and covered in glitter. So, vajazzled by the way. The vaginoplasty business is booming. You can have your labia cut off, you can have your hymen rebuilt, you can have your pelvic floor resprung. Are we this uncomfortable with the cunt actually as it is? It's a seat of enormous and awesome power. It can eat a penis and push out a baby, it's not a twinkle.

18:46

(Laughter)

18:49

It is an old word. It's an offensive word. But it's an ancient and honest one, and this is the thing. This is the original word, everything else came after. So welcome to Team Cunt.

19:01

(Applause)