

Auk's dimber tip to all flash coves

The Urth list — 14 messages, 7 voices, 09 Jul 2009

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/5466>

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Gwern Branwen — 09 Jul 2009, 16:58

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Hash: SHA512

So I recently began reading the Long Sun (up to _Exodus_), when I suddenly realized that some of the thieves' cant I already knew, and not from context.

After racking my brain, I finally remembered where from. Douglas Hofstadter's _Le Ton de Beau Marot_ is all about translations, and one of the pairs of poem translations is a poem by Francois Villon to his fellow ne'er-do-wells - translated once into ordinary English vernacular, and again into English using London thieves' argot. For your amusement, I present below a copy of the transcription at <http://www.fromoldbooks.org/Farmer-MusaPedestris/villons-straight-tip-to-all-cross-coves.html> (Fear not, it is public domain!):

"Villon's Straight Tip To All Cross Coves"
trans. 1887 William Ernest Henley.

Tout aux tavernes et aux filles

I

Suppose you screeve, or go cheap-jack?
Or fake the broads? or fig a nag?
Or thimble-rig? or knap a yack?
Or pitch a snide? or smash a rag?
Suppose you duff? or nose and lag?
Or get the straight, and land your pot?
How do you melt the multy swag?
Booze and the blowens cop the lot.

II

Fiddle, or fence, or mace, or mack;
Or moskeneer, or flash the drag;
Dead-lurk a crib, or do a crack;
Pad with a slang, or chuck a fag;
Bonnet, or tout, or mump and gag;
Rattle the tats, or mark the spot
You cannot bank a single stag:
Booze and the blowens cop the lot.

III

Suppose you try a different tack,
And on the square you flash your flag?
At penny-a-lining make your whack,
Or with the mummers mug and gag?
For nix, for nix the dibbs you bag
At any graft, no matter what!
Your merry goblins soon stravag:
Booze and the blowens cop the lor.

The Moral.

It's up-the-spout and Charley-Wag
With wipes and tickers and what not!
Until the squeezer nips your scrag,
Booze and the blowens cop the lot.

- - -

gwern

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Jeffrey Brent McBeth — 09 Jul 2009, 17:18 · in reply to Gwern Branwen

On Thu, Jul 09, 2009 at 12:58:49PM -0400, Gwern Branwen wrote:

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After racking my brain, I finally remembered where from. Douglas
Hofstadter's Le Ton de Beau Marot is all about translations, and one

Yet more proof I really really need to read that book.

Jeff

"The man who does not read good books has no advantage over
the man who cannot read them."
-- Mark Twain

Matthew Keeley — 10 Jul 2009, 04:23 · in reply to Gwern Branwen

On Thu, Jul 9, 2009 at 12:58 PM, Gwern Branwen<gwern0 at gmail.com> wrote:

After racking my brain, I finally remembered where from. Douglas
Hofstadter's Le Ton de Beau Marot is all about translations, and one
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fellow ne'er-do-wells - translated once into ordinary English
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gwern

That's pretty great. Makes me want to go and dig out the bilingual Villon I bought for a college French class on medieval violence.

Thieves' cant shows up in quite a few Victorian novels - There's a bit in Oliver Twist, for example. A quick Google search says that William Harrison Ainsworth's novel Rookwood is full of it. A slightly longer Google search turned up this ebook:

<http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks06/0600111.txt>

It's an 1812 dictionary of thieves' cant by an ostensibly reformed thief. Enjoy!

-Matt

Gwern Branwen — 10 Jul 2009, 12:16 · in reply to Matthew Keeley

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On Fri, Jul 10, 2009 at 12:23 AM, Matthew Keeley wrote:
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-Matt

That's a nice link too. But while we're on the topic, what's the Urth.net consensus on the cant in the Long Sun? Did Wolfe make it up, only patterning it on English thieves' argot, or have we found a source yet?

(I know it can't be that 1812 dictionary because it's missing dimber, abram, and cully just off the top of my head. I've been keeping a list as I read through, but there's no point in checking the rest if it's missing those...)

- --

gwern

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VpMANibMk/wwL4B43u7b1K6u4Lho+5Q6
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Matthew Keeley — 10 Jul 2009, 23:30 · in reply to Gwern Branwen

On Fri, Jul 10, 2009 at 8:16 AM, Gwern Branwen<gwern0 at gmail.com> wrote:

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- --

gwern

How about this 1811 dictionary? It has all three.

<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/5402>

-Matt

Gwern Branwen — 11 Jul 2009, 02:53 · in reply to Matthew Keeley

On Fri, Jul 10, 2009 at 7:30 PM, Matthew Keeley<matthew.keeley.1 at gmail.com> wrote:
How about this 1811 dictionary? It has all three.

<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/5402>

That's certainly better; it has a few others - bob cull, 'scavey' (Wolfe spells it 'scavy'), cank, to twig, mort (but does Wolfe use mort just for women?), cits (but just in the preface, what good is that...)

But not limer, mews, hornboy, hoppy, or bucky. Guess we need a few more dictionaries...

gwern

Dave Lebling — 12 Jul 2009, 21:51 · in reply to Gwern Branwen

My recollection is that "hoppy" was from the green uniforms of the Vironese police (by analogy with frogs).

I forget where "limer" and "mews" are used but they are perfectly good (if obscure) words. Limers are mentioned in books about the English underclass (Kellow Chesney's "The Victorian Underworld" is a good one -- Neil Gaiman recommends it and it's fascinating), where the word refers to people who catch birds using birdlime. "Hornboy" and "bucky" are not even completely obsolete today, if I twig their meanings ("catamite" and "buddy" respectively).

-- Dave Lebling, aka vizcacha

Gwern Branwen wrote:
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Gwern Branwen — 19 Jul 2009, 07:43 · in reply to Dave Lebling

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On Sun, Jul 12, 2009 at 5:51 PM, Dave Lebling wrote:

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Hm. I didn't catch the roots for limer or bucky. Maybe a Lexicon Urthus is in order for the Long Sun/Short Sun books?

- --

gwern

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Roy C. Lackey — 19 Jul 2009, 20:01 · in reply to Gwern Branwen

Gwern Branwen quoted and wrote:

On Sun, Jul 12, 2009 at 5:51 PM, Dave Lebling wrote:

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Hm. I didn't catch the roots for limer or bucky. Maybe a Lexicon Urthus is in order for the Long Sun/Short Sun books?

As Dave said, "mews" and "limer" are just obscure words. I recall that the mews of a stable near the Inn of Lost Loves was where the ostler Trudo kept his belongings and may have slept: "Trudo's gone, cook says. She was out fetchin' water water 'cause the girl was gone, and seen him runnin' off, and his things is gone from the mews too." (SHADOW, chap. XXVI)

Also, Wolfe had a limer as a character in "Our Neighbour by David Copperfield" (ENDANGERED SPECIES) who talked about how lime was used to catch birds: "But I liked him and I used to set by him, and it was him that taught me how to lime the birds."

-Roy

James Wynn — 20 Jul 2009, 14:27 · in reply to Gwern Branwen

Gwern Branwen says:

That's a nice link too. But while we're on the topic, what's the Urth.net consensus on the cant in the Long Sun? Did Wolfe make it up, only patterning it on English thieves' argot, or have we found a source yet? (I know it can't be that 1812 dictionary because it's missing dimber, abram, and cully just off the top of my head. I've been keeping a list as I read through, but there's no point in checking the rest if it's missing those...)

Nathan Bailey's "Canting Dictionary" (1737) contains all three of those words:
<http://www.fromoldbooks.org/NathanBailey-CantingDictionary/transcription.html>

Gwern Branwen — 25 Jul 2009, 19:04 · in reply to James Wynn

On Mon, Jul 20, 2009 at 10:27 AM, James Wynn<crushtv at gmail.com> wrote:

Nathan Bailey's "Canting Dictionary" (1737) contains all three of those words:
<http://www.fromoldbooks.org/NathanBailey-CantingDictionary/transcription.html>

That's a pretty good dictionary indeed. But I'm starting to think there may be no one dictionary Wolfe used - that one doesn't include 'hanger', 'queer' (as in 'queer it'), 'coypun', 'hacking', 'skittlepin', 'scavy', 'coaming', 'bucky', 'hornboy' etc. at least a few of which I'm sure are thieves' cant in the Long Sun.

gwern

Gwern Branwen — 25 Jul 2009, 19:07 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

On Sun, Jul 19, 2009 at 4:01 PM, Roy C. Lackey<rclackey at stic.net> wrote:
As Dave said, "mews" and "limer" are just obscure words. I recall that the mews of a stable near the Inn of Lost Loves was where the ostler Trudo kept his belongings and may have slept: "Trudo's gone, cook says. She was out fetchin' water water 'cause the girl was gone, and seen him runnin' off, and his things is gone from the mews too." (SHADOW, chap. XXVI)

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-Roy

By token of their obscurity, aren't they appropriate for such a lexicon?

(But looking mews and limes up in my newly arrived _Lexicon Urthus_ 2nd edition, I see no entries. How disappointing!)

gwern

Matthew Keeley — 26 Jul 2009, 16:32 · in reply to Gwern Branwen

On Sat, Jul 25, 2009 at 3:07 PM, Gwern Branwen<gwern0 at gmail.com> wrote:

By token of their obscurity, aren't they appropriate for such a lexicon?

(But looking mews and limes up in my newly arrived _Lexicon Urthus_ 2nd edition, I see no entries. How disappointing!)

--

gwern

I think "mews" is much less obscure in other parts of the world. In Ireland at least there were lots of places with "mews" in the name and lots of very nice converted stables called "mews." If I were writing a lexicon, I'd probably leave it out. This would be a mistake.

The stuff about limers is definitely more obscure though. Unless you've read lots of Victorian fiction.

-Matt

Jenny Blackford — 26 Jul 2009, 23:28 · in reply to Gwern Branwen

A note from an Australian lurker (and Wolfe reviewer now and then):

The word "mews" isn't obscure in British English, though it's not often used in Australia. It's used quite commonly as an architectural description in British novels even now, and presumably also in speech. I remember not knowing exactly it meant, as a kid reading Agatha Christie, but assuming it was a form of housing and not bothering to check the dictionary.

The word "cove" is now pretty much obsolete in Australian English, but still used by old people. My father will still refer to men as "coves", as in "some silly old cove down at the golf club". The word "flash" was in common use when I was at school as an alternative to "flashy", as in "that's a flash car", and is still understood. I don't know whether kids use it.

----- Original Message -----

From: "Gwern Branwen" <gwern0 at gmail.com>