

ICON OF THE MONTH

Here is a mystery: a word that is in every sense common, which yet has retained its power to affront for over 500 years. The dictionaries, which from 1795 until 1965 generally declined to include it, can record its offensiveness but cannot explain it.

Its curious quality is apparent if you substitute for it any of the 32 literal synonyms listed in *Roget's Thesaurus*. Tell someone to 'copulate off' and you will generate only amusement.

Certainly, no one will get the hump.

Some of its impact, of course, is derived from its expressive combination of a short vowel between a fricative 'f' and a plosive 'k'. A less percussive sound might never have achieved its pre-eminence as the most frowned-upon word in the world.

Then again, there are plenty of similar words, from 'cack' to 'pig', which have little or no such effect. Even sexual terms that are violent in meaning and not just in sound go off (one might say) with less of a bang.

So precise is the phonetic chemistry that Father Ted could say 'feck' as much as he liked and somehow never turn the air blue. And other nearly-but-not-quite phrases such as 'hacked off' or 'muck up' seem only innocent or (if the euphemism is detected) a bit limp.

The F word has become, in the proper sense of the term, a fetish: a construct in which we have chosen to invest some mystical energy. It isn't the sound *per se* that delivers the charge, but the fact that our culture has declared it unspeakable. Its capacity to shock lies in our will to be shocked.

And not only the sound: the very combination of letters is similarly taboo. We can cope with the ellipses 'f***' and 'f—' on the page, though they represent unequivocally exactly the same word as the letters 'fuck'. Yet even printed thus, without context or



Icon of the Month

No 30: The F word

feeling, it has the power to provoke us.

Even an anagram can excite us, as French Connection UK famously found with its knowing acronym. Even an initial makes *TFI Friday* look cool.

Such status does this modern *tetragrammaton* enjoy that it has established an all but exclusive right to

the term 'four-letter word', though most of the vocabulary we use every day is four letters long – including some of our best Anglo-Saxon, such as 'life', 'love' and 'hope'.

Not that the F word is Anglo-Saxon at all. It was probably imported from Germany or Holland, from a loose group of words suggesting 'to strike' or 'to thrust'. No use of it is recorded before 1475 – maybe because it was considered too rude in the Middle Ages to write down. No one knows why it should have been singled out for this special dishonour. Shakespeare toys with it in several plays, but never as boldly as the C word in *Hamlet* III.ii.

D H Lawrence attempted to reclaim it in 1928 as a good, earthy, impolite word for a good, earthy, impolite act, with limited success; but the edge it retained has since been dulled by over-use. Its residual force is exploited to diminishing effect by would-be rebels and comics and scriptwriters looking for a short cut to *verité*.

In a postmodern culture, such a monolithic taboo is anyway hard to sustain. In different circles, the F word has very different values. For many, it is hardly more than a mild intensifier, though little boys still consider it daring. Billy Connolly uses it merely as sonic punctuation.

For some, it remains an 'obscenity', a source of more outrage than the arms trade or Third World debt. But small transgressions were always a useful distraction from bigger ones. One wonders, to be honest, whether God gives a fig. **Huw Spinner**