

The Joy of Vex

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By John Derbyshire

Timon: Why dost thou seek me out?

Apemantus: To vex thee.

— *Timon of Athens*, 4.iii

A friend of mine did a tour of duty as a speechwriter for George W. Bush in the recent election campaign. I offered him the following morsel, just to add a dash of vigor to the candidate's utterances. Alas, vigor is not much in demand in the polled, prepped, packaged political arena of today. I did not see any evidence the Bush people had taken up my suggestion, supposing my friend thought it worth presenting to them. I therefore offer it to the world, gratis, in a spirit of magnanimity and desire for general enlightenment.

The whole thing came to mind as follows. A few months ago a colleague came into my office as I was frowning in silent thought. "What's up, John?" he inquired. "Well," I said, "I'm vexed." He stared at me. "You're *what*?" In pretty short order he was dragging other colleagues into my office to hear me say it. "Go on," he prompted me, chortling, "Say it again. What you said to me. You're . . . ?" I never thought a single word could cause so much merriment.

The principles according to which words fall into and out of usage are very mysterious. Here is a plain English word of very respectable ancestry (from Latin *vexare*, to shake, first English citation 1426) that nobody uses in speech any more— to the degree that a group of well-educated office workers think it a curiosity to hear it uttered. If the mechanics of language count for anything, "vex" should be a winner. It is short and punchy. That initial labio-dental can be drawn out,

buzzed, for extra force. It can't be mistaken for any other word. All current synonyms are either clumsy ("ticked off") or indelicate ("p-d") or dictionary-dull ("annoyed"). "Vex" has color, it has zip, it has point; and it is, of course, terrific for Scrabble and headlines.

Those of us who enjoyed, or endured, an English childhood have an extra connotation to savor: the voice of the late Stanley Holloway (Audrey Hepburn's father in the movie of *My Fair Lady*) reading Marriott Edgar's "The Lion and Albert". In this little classic, recited on English vaudeville stages as an unaccompanied poem and immortalized thus on disc by Holloway, the Ramsbottom family— Ma, Pa and little Albert— take a trip to the zoo. While his parents' backs are turned, little Albert teases the lion by pushing a stick into its ear. The lion responds by swallowing Albert whole. The sorry tale proceeds:

"Then Pa, who had seen the occurrence,
And didn't know what to do next,
Said 'Mother! Yon lion's 'et Albert,'
And Mother said 'Well, I am vexed!'"

. . . a stirring example of British *sang-froid*. Nowadays, of course, the Ramsbottoms would have got lawyered up in no time. Edgar's denouement is much more restrained:

"The Magistrate gave his opinion
That no one was really to blame
And he said that he hoped the Ramsbottoms
Would have further sons to their name.

"At that Mother got proper blazing,
'And thank you, sir, kindly,' said she.
'What, waste all our lives raising children
To feed ruddy lions? Not me!'"

Plainly she was still vexed.

It cannot be very long ago that “vex” slipped out of common spoken usage. I can recall people of my parents’ generation—speakers of standard British English in the 1960s—unselfconsciously saying “vex”. And the word lingers on in writing: the New York Public Library periodicals database gives ten occurrences in text for the first quarter of 2001. “Wage gap continues to vex women,” reports Lisa Girion, writing about male-female wage differentials in the *Los Angeles Times*. *USA Today* seems particularly fond of “vex”, with eight citations since January 1999— an average of better than one a quarter. (This includes “vexed”, “vexing” and “vexatious”. I can dream, but I cannot realistically hope, of reviving the older form “vext”.) This is not a dead word. It’s just that nobody says it any more.

I hope some imaginative political speechwriter or TV newscaster will take up the cause of “vex”. We need more short, crisp, plain words to pierce the numbing drizzle of psycho-socio-babble that makes up so much of our public discourse: “compassion”, “diversity”, “choice” and so on. There are some splendid precedents to draw from. When Fort Hudson, the last Confederate position on the Mississippi, struck its colors a few days after the battle of Vicksburg, Abraham Lincoln reported to Congress that “The Father of Waters again goes unvexed to the sea.” In Lincoln’s time, and at least as far further back as Shakespeare’s (56 occurrences in the *Complete Works*), “vex” was a conversational commonplace. In their memorable joust of May 2, 1783, Boswell and Johnson swat it back and forth like a shuttlecock, seven times in four exchanges. (*Johnson*: “Publick affairs vex no man.” *Boswell*: “Have they not vexed yourself a little, Sir?” . . .)

If we can get “vex” refloated there are other gaps in our speech that could be plugged by good, strong, old words. I once made some brief experiments with “intercourse”, as in: “Have you spoken to so-and-so about it?” “No, I’ve had no

intercourse with him recently.” This was not a success and I fear that particular cause is lost for good, though again this is an honest word with a precise meaning and no equally precise equivalent. Well, let us set our sights on “vex”. I call on my journalist colleagues to get the ball rolling. “Mr President, have you been vexed by reports of your environmental policy being in disarray? . . .”