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A Female Dog

A bitch, as most people already know, is a female dog.

That *bitch* is a double entendre with an innocent literal meaning of “female dog” but also an offensive metaphorical one is often exploited for comedic value. In an episode of *The Simpsons*, ten-year-old Bart Simpson complains bitterly that his dog Santa’s Little Helper has found a female companion: “He never wants to play fetch anymore, since his bitch moved in.” Horrified, his mother Marge scolds him, “Don’t ever say that word again!” Bart replies in his defense, “That’s what she is. I looked it up.” “Well,” sniffs Marge, “I’m going to write the dictionary people and have that checked.”¹

If Marge Simpson looked up the word in the dictionary herself, she’d find that Bart is absolutely right: a bitch is defined there as “a female dog.” This literal meaning is usually listed as the main sense of the word, but as we know from Marge’s reaction, it’s not the most

common one. But it's also the very *first* use of the word. Although few people know just how far back this original meaning goes. As a trendy word we hear (and say) all the time, it might be tempting to guess that it isn't very old. But if we look up its etymology, that is the origins of the word, we discover that bitch meaning "a female dog" has a far longer pedigree that goes back over *one thousand years*. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, this earliest use dates to around 1000 CE,² although in those days the word didn't quite look the same. Bitch is an Old English word that was inherited from Germanic. Old English, or Anglo-Saxon, was the spoken and written language at the time (although most people couldn't read or write), and the word bitch would've been unrecognizable to modern readers, spelled as it was then as *bicce* and pronounced "bitch-eh."

To tell the story of bitch let's delve into the word's colorful and ever-changing history.

Where Did Bitch Come From?

To understand the origins of a word we need to consider its use in the past, which can be traced by looking at very old documents. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, which prides itself on being the definitive record of the English language, traces the earliest recorded use of bitch to the *Pharmacopoeia Medicina de Quadrupedibus*. The title translates to "Medicines from four-footed creatures," and this was a book of traditional remedies using bits and pieces of animals. The text was written in Latin and translated into Old English in the eleventh century. In this medieval manuscript there are two examples of bitch, meaning a female dog. The first reference was a cure for teething pains using "bitch's milk": *Biccean meolc gif ðu gelome cilda toðreoman mid smyrest & æthrinest, butan sare hy wexað*.³ This translates to "If you frequently smear and touch a child's gums with bitch's milk, the teeth grow without pain." In folk medicine of the time, dogs were valued for the medicinal and magical properties that their body parts were thought to have. Apparently, "bitch's urine" had therapeutic benefits

too, as a treatment for corns and warts: *Wearras & weartan onweg to donne, nim wulle & wæt mid biccean hlondre, wrið on þa weartan & on þa wearras*. This means “To do away with corns and warts, take wool and wet it with bitch’s urine, bind it to the warts and corns.”

The first thing that leaps out at us is that these examples look like they’re written in a foreign language. Old English, or Anglo-Saxon, is a West Germanic language, which the Angles and Saxons brought with them from northern Germany and southern Denmark when they settled in Britain in the fifth century. As mentioned in the introduction, the epic poem *Beowulf* was penned in Old English, by an anonymous scribe. Old English was used around 450–1150, and it is the ancestor of the English language we know today, although the two bear little resemblance. As we’ve seen, Old English bitch was usually written as *bicce*, while we occasionally see examples of it spelled *bicge*. Hundreds of years later, when Old English had evolved into what we now call Middle English, the various spellings of bitch that were in use still look strange to modern eyes. Middle English was written and spoken between 1100 and 1500 or thereabouts, and for some historical context, it was the language Geoffrey Chaucer used to pen *Canterbury Tales*. An example of a different spelling of bitch from this era can be found in the *Coventry Leet Book*, which references a fifteenth-century ordinance that prohibited owners from allowing their “byches” to roam the streets, to prevent the dogs from defecating or fornicating in public. It says, *þat no man hold no grett houndes ne byches goyng in the hyghe way*.⁴ Those who broke this rule were fined a hefty sum of forty pence for every violation.

The above quotes are among the earliest *recorded* occurrences of bitch, or *bicce* and *byche* as the case may be, which were discovered in surviving documents written in English, although the word’s oral history probably goes back even further. Possible cognates (that is, relatives) of bitch from other languages may go back further still. The *Oxford English Dictionary* says that bitch is a cognate with Old Icelandic *bikkja*, Faroese *bikkja*, Old Swedish *bikia*, and Old Danish *bikke*, which all meant “a female dog” but are of unknown origin. Some sources say that the word derives from Lapp *pittja*, although

to add to the confusion, others say the opposite is equally possible. Etymology requires a lot of detective work, but it's an inexact science, and word origins are the subject of much heated debate. Other contenders for the origins of bitch include Latin *bestia* "beast," German *Petze* "female dog," and French *biche*, from Old French *bisse* meaning "female deer"; and at least these words seem to resemble bitch. But there are many stranger theories out there too. Some people think that bitch has nothing at all to do with a female dog. They say that it comes from Middle High German *bicken*, meaning to pick or peck, which is probably imitative of the noises made by birds picking up food with their beaks. Early etymologies attempted to derive bitch from *bite* or *bicker*. It has been suggested that the word has Hebrew origins. It's alternatively claimed that bitch evolved from the Hindi word *bhang* that means cannabis. Others have even linked bitch to Sanskrit *bhaga*, meaning female genitals. As tempting as these more salacious theories are, none of them are very likely.

Over the centuries, bitch underwent changes in pronunciation and spelling. In various manuscripts and books like those we've looked at so far, bitch is found written in many different ways, from *bycce* in early Middle English through to *becch*, *bichche*, *bych*, and *bytche* in later versions of the language. Scottish had some additional variations, such as *beiche* and *beitch*. These variants exist because our spelling system hadn't yet been standardized. The arrival of the printing press, introduced to England by William Caxton in the fifteenth century, froze English spelling in time (for the most part). And so it wasn't until the 1600s that we finally had our current spelling of bitch, sometimes with an -e tacked onto the end of the word. We more readily recognize examples from this era, such as this one from a book of vulgar poetry: "Nor putting Pigs t' a Bitch to nurse; To turn 'em into Mungrel-Curs."⁵ (At this time it was trendy to capitalize nouns, a convention that is retained in modern German.) The spelling of bitch has mostly stayed the same ever since, although when it comes to language, nothing is ever set in stone, as we can see with modern-day expressive variants like *biatch* and *biznatch*.

Bitch changed in the way it sounded and looked, while, more importantly to its story, the word also changed in meaning. As time went by, bitch evolved to mean much more than just a female dog. Its meaning extended to also refer to other female, four-legged, furry canines, including foxes and wolves. These animals have more user-friendly synonyms too, like *vixen*, *wolfess* or *she-wolf* respectively. Unlike bitch, these names now have positive connotations for female humans, referring to sexy or sensual women. In the past, dog also had the comparable female terms *she-dog* and *doggess*, with parallels to gender-specific nouns like actor and actress. (These literal senses are now archaic, although the words are still around as insults.) It is lesser known that bitch later referred to other carnivorous mammals too, including female bears, seals, otters, and even ferrets. It was not uncommon to have different words for the male and female of different species and many of these pairings are still in use today. Cattle are bulls and cows, horses are stallions and mares, and pigs are boars and sows. (It doesn't escape our attention that many names for the female animals double as insults for women.) When it comes to dogs, the name for the male of the species is unmarked; a male dog is simply called a dog, unless we're a breeder talking about sires and studs. (It doesn't escape our attention that these names for male dogs double as compliments for men.) Whereas the female of the species received an entirely different name: a bitch.

As many readers know, this original and literal sense of bitch as "the female of the canine kind" still exists today as a relic of the past, especially in the specialized contexts of zoology, veterinarian science, and breeding. As a technical term, you might overhear the phrase "bitch spay" when you take your dog to the vet, while a dog breeder might talk about a "breeding bitch." Some specialists might be aware the term is controversial and favor more euphemistic alternatives like lady, girl, the puppy's mother ... or just a female dog. The clinical sense of bitch has fallen out of fashion with the general public, while some aren't familiar with the literal term at all, like Marge Simpson. To their ears, the word may sound like an insult, implying that the dog in

question is not a pleasant dog. And just like Marge, not everyone feels comfortable saying or hearing the word, even in this benign context.

Why is this so? Because when most people hear this word, they don't usually think about its inoffensive sense; they tend to think about its *offensive* one. Hundreds of years ago, bitch expanded from just meaning a female dog to becoming an insult for a person too, and especially a woman. (Interestingly, Old Icelandic *bikkja* was also used as a slur.⁶) This kind of semantic change happens a lot in language. New words appear, old words disappear, meanings evolve, and different dimensions of meanings emerge. Language can be unpredictable. But this changeability of the meaning of words is a gradual process. It happens very slowly, so gradually that we often don't notice it in real time. As an example, *girl* originally referred to a child of either sex during the Middle Ages. (Back then it was spelled as *gyrle*.) Over many centuries the word narrowed to mean less than it once did, to refer to a female girl specifically. Bitch went the other way, in which it broadened to mean much more than it once did. Most sources place the appearance of the insult at the fourteenth or fifteenth century; although there is some evidence to show that this shift occurred even earlier than that. (We'll discover that changes in language usually happen much earlier than we might think.) Among the many words for animals that double as insults, *bitch* and its more general meaning, *dog*, have the longest history of them all.

Man's Best Friend

We can't talk about bitch without also talking about dog. Long before *bitch* became an insult, *dog* was already an insult. The practice of referring to women as dogs is much older than the English language; it can be traced back as far as Ancient Greece and Rome. In Act 5 of *Curculio*, the Roman dramatist Plautus describes a heated argument between a man and a woman over a ring in which she ends up being called a dog: *ut eum eriperet, manum arripuit mordicus. vix foras me abripui atque effugi. apage istanc caniculam*; "To get it away from me, she

seized my hand with her teeth. With difficulty I fled out of doors and escaped. Away with this dog of yours.”⁷ By biting the man, the woman was clearly behaving like a dog. The insult was also associated with lewdness. In Homer’s *The Odyssey*, Helen of Troy regrets committing adultery, which sparked the Trojan War. Regarded as the most beautiful woman in the world, she berates herself as “dog-faced”: ὄτ’ ἐμείο κυνώπιδος εἶνεκ’ Ἀχαιοὶ ἤλθεθ’ ὑπὸ Τροίην, πόλεμον θρασύν ὀρμαίνοντες; “... when the Achaeans went down to Troy on account of dog-faced me, raising up their audacious war.”⁸ This slur also played on Ancient Greek associations between women and dogs; both were expected to be loyal and obedient.

Men were also insulted as dogs in ancient societies; however, the implications were a little different. Dog usually implied that a woman was disobedient, immodest, or shameless, but when aimed at a man, dog referred to human vices such as greed, arrogance, and cowardice. In Homer’s epic poem *The Iliad*, the demi-god Achilles implies that Agamemnon is fainthearted when he insults him as: οἶνοβαρές, κυνὸς ὄμματ’ ἔχων, κραδίην δ’ ἐλάφοιο; “Wine-sod! Dog-eyes! You have the heart of a deer!”⁹ This sense of a dog as a wretched, debased, or cowardly man made its way into English too. Shakespeare had a talent for put-downs, and his numerous animal-related insults included references to toads, worms, weasels, and dogs. He mentions dogs hundreds of times in his many works, which were often portrayed as “thievish,” “mangy,” “unmanner’d,” and “cowardly.” In *Henry VI: Part One*, dog is wielded to mean lacking in courage when Charles, the King of France, complains about his soldiers, “What men haue I? Dogges, Cowards, Dastards.”¹⁰ (A *dastard* was a kind of coward who was also dishonorable or despicable. It’s a term preserved in the name of Dick Dastardly, the super-villain in the Hanna-Barbera cartoon.) This use of dog as a coward has mostly dropped out of usage, although a few years ago when ISIS founder Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi died in a raid by US commandos, then President Donald Trump remarked, “He died like a dog. He died like a coward” and referred to the leader’s men as “frightened puppies.”¹¹ Nowadays, *pussy* has overtaken dog as the popular insult for a man who is considered to be weak or cowardly.

There are many positive stereotypes about dogs. We talk about them as being faithful, loyal, and obedient pets; they are man's best friend. But just like Shakespeare's criticisms of dogs, there are many negative stereotypes about them too. Bad dogs might be seen as aggressive, dirty, sly, or oversexed. When applied toward people, "dog" usually had negative connotations with a wide range of offensive meanings. By the twelfth century, a dog, then called a *hund* ("hound") in early English, also referred contemptuously to a man who was "a mean, worthless fellow, a currish, sneaking scoundrel."¹² A *cur* was a type of dog once used by cattle drovers in England; the breed is now extinct, and the term came to mean a ferocious dog or a mongrel. It also meant a man who was mean or cowardly. Over time, dog has become somewhat less offensive when applied to a man. By the 1600s, dog was often a playful, affectionate term for a mischievous, rakish fellow who had sex with lots of women. This evolved to our modern sense of a dog as a man with a reputation for chasing women, a playboy, or a player. In modern African American Vernacular English, a *dawg* is a friendly term akin to "brother" or "dude" that's used between boys and men. But for women, dog became no less offensive over time. While dog once referred to a disloyal woman with loose sexual morals, by the early 1900s it grew to mean an unattractive girl or woman.

Like bitch, dog underwent semantic change in English too. In Old English, *hund* was the everyday term for a canine. At that time, *docga* was a rare name for a powerful, fierce type of dog.¹³ We only have one example of its use that comes from a Latin to English translation, and the word's origin and history remain one of the greatest mysteries of English etymology. (We might also remember that *bicge* was a rare spelling of bitch, while we can guess the modern descendants of other Old English words like *frocga* and *stacga*.) By Middle English the spelling became *dogge* or *dog* (or even *doge* and *doke*) and the word had broadened in meaning to be the all-purpose name for *any* type of dog. It was even picked up by other languages, including Danish *dogge* and German *Dogge*. Dog forced out *hund*, which narrowed in

scope, and now only refers to a dog that's used for hunting. Many of these hunting breeds still have the word in their name, like bloodhounds; a large scent hound originally bred for hunting deer, wild boar, and even used for tracking people. We could say that all hounds are dogs, but not all dogs are hounds. (Case in point: Chihuahuas aren't hounds.) Hundreds of years ago there was also a specific term for a female hound used for hunting, a *brach*, which was borrowed from French. And yes, brach was used as an insult too. In *Wuthering Heights*, the cruel and wicked Heathcliff marries Isabella Linton as an act of revenge, and after killing her pet dog out of spite, he says, "Now, was it not the depth of absurdity—of genuine idiocy—for that pitiful, slavish, mean-minded brach to dream that I could love her?"¹⁴

Another animal insult that was contemporaneous with dog and bitch was *shrew*. A shrew was originally a name for a small, mole-like mammal that looked like a mouse, as suggested by the Old English term *screawa* "shrew-mouse"¹⁵ (but they are not actually rodents). By the 1300s, shrew became an insult for a spiteful man or woman. The animal itself was held in superstitious dread, because it was thought that it had a venomous bite deadly to humans (which is not true, although they can kill frogs, mice, and other small creatures). Over the centuries, the slur narrowed to refer to women specifically. Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* is a comedy about the foul-tempered, sharp-tongued Kate, who is the "shrew." She marries Petruchio, who behaves like a shrew himself to give her a dose of her own medicine. Using reverse psychology on Kate has the effect of reforming her or "taming the shrew." In Samuel Johnson's seminal *Dictionary of the English Language* he defined a shrew as a "peevish, malignant, clamorous, spiteful, vexatious, turbulent woman."¹⁶ As a term for an argumentative, nagging woman, shrew is similar to the older use of *scold* as a noun, which was an insult for an angry woman. *Shrew* has survived as an insult for a bad-tempered woman, especially an older one, but it sounds a bit old-fashioned today. Shrew, dog, and bitch were once on a par with each other as insults for women, although the latter two have clearly won out in the popularity stakes.

A Promiscuous Woman

When bitch originally shifted in meaning from “female dog” to a slur, it didn’t mean an unpleasant woman. Instead, a bitch was a promiscuous woman, just like the earlier meaning of “dog” when used toward a woman. A twelfth-century Catholic sermon written by the monk Aelfric railed against such lewd women: *ða fulan forliras, and ða fulan horan and byccan ðe acwellað heora cild ær þan ðe hit cuð beo mannum*; “The foul fornicators and the foul whores and bitches who kill their children before they can become adults.”¹⁷ This suggests that when bitch was first used against women in the English language it was comparable to *prostitute*. This use was still around hundreds of years later in 1610 when the poem “Westminster Whore” describes a woman as: “A damned lascivious bitch who fucks for halfe a crown.”¹⁸ In those days, bitch showed disapproval of a woman’s sexual behavior. It was a metaphor that compared her to a female dog in its estrous cycle, that is, a “bitch in heat.” (In terms of reproductive behavior, female dogs may show a preference for certain mates or have multiple mating partners, but technically, they are not promiscuous. Conversely, male dogs are sexually active year-round.¹⁹) Bitch was also an allusion to the fact that female dogs have so many puppies. (In another dog/cat analogy, the modern term *alley cat* refers to a prostitute or promiscuous woman.) In the past, bitch was also comparable to modern-day *slut*. In William Percy’s play *The cuck-queanes and cuckolds errants*, the character Pearle berates his wife for losing a precious silver bowl when he abuses her as: “Hore, Hare, Harlot, Bitch, Fellatrice, Witch, Bawde, Ribaud, Tribade.”²⁰ Among this list of archaic epithets, *fellatrice* was a woman who performed fellatio, *tribade* was a term for a lesbian, while here in this older sense, *bitch* meant slut.

So if bitch used to mean slut, what did slut mean? During the days of Middle English, slut coexisted with bitch, but it didn’t mean a sexually promiscuous woman like it does today. Instead, *slutte* meant “a dirty, untidy, or slovenly woman.”²¹ Slut was related to *slattern*, an insult for a woman who was disheveled in her dress or who kept an untidy household. We find an early example of slut in the fourteenth century

when Geoffrey Chaucer used the word in the Prologue to the “Canon Yeoman’s Tale”: “Why is the lord so sluttish, I thee pray.”²² That’s right; by its context we can tell that Chaucer was using the word about a *man*, not a woman. But he wasn’t referring to sex at all; he was talking about the lord’s messy appearance, which was at odds with his noble social status. Later use of slut appears almost exclusively with women. Like bitch, slut has shape-shifted a lot, and by the fifteenth century it referred to a kitchen maid who did menial work, such as emptying the chamber pots. (She was often called a “drudge” too, from which we get the word *drudgery*, meaning work that is hard or boring.) The famous diarist Samuel Pepys meant this sense of slut when he wrote enthusiastically about his new maidservant: “Our little girl Susan is a most admirable slut, and pleases us mightily.”²³ Over time, slut shifted again to mean a woman of low or loose character, although the sexual aspect wasn’t entirely clear yet. By the 1700s, Dr. Johnson defined a slut as “a dirty woman” in its literal, not sexual, sense and he noted the word was only “of slight contempt”²⁴ (to him anyway). Surprisingly, it wasn’t until the twentieth century that slut developed its modern meaning, condemning a woman who has many sexual partners. (We’ll talk some more about this word soon.)

In the days when a bitch was a promiscuous woman, *bitchery* referred to prostitution. *A Caveat for Common Cursetors* estimates that a particular prostitute “would weekly be worth six or seven shillings with her begging and bitchery.”²⁵ This use comes from a pamphlet that aimed to reveal the tricks that vagabonds (and prostitutes) used to deceive and steal money from gullible victims, otherwise known as “gulls.” At the time, to *go bitching* meant to have sexual intercourse, especially with a prostitute, while a *bitch hunter* was a lecher, a man who went in pursuit of women for sex. The use of bitch meaning a sex worker was most prevalent in England, although it crossed the pond to the United States too. An 1830 issue of New York’s *The Owl* reported the story of a man who “frequents a certain house in Orange Street, occupied by several black and white bitches. He must be void of shame and decency.”²⁶ In some instances, bitch was used interchangeably with whore, harlot, or strumpet.

Over the centuries, bitch lost its explicitly sexual connotations, although this sense has never entirely gone away. In fact, it has experienced a resurgence, especially in modern African American Vernacular English. *Green's Dictionary of Slang* defines "bitch" as "a prostitute" and this use is still common in some parts of the US.²⁷ In an episode of *Chappelle's Show*, Wayne Brady plays a pimp who introduces his prostitutes to Dave Chappelle with "Hoes, Dave. Dave, Hoes." Dave attempts politeness with his incongruous reply, "Good evening, bitches."²⁸ This use of bitch as whore or hooker has spawned other phrases too. In American pimp culture, a *bottom bitch* is a sex worker who is at the top of the hierarchy of those working for a particular pimp, and who wields power and status over the other women. Bitch meaning whore is occasionally used for men too, especially in a humorous way. In the movie *Deuce Bigalow: Male Gigolo*, Deuce's pimp calls him a "man-whore" and a "he-bitch."²⁹

An Unpleasant Woman

Over time, bitch developed the derogatory meaning of an "unpleasant woman" that we're most familiar with today. As we've seen, the original insult disapproved of a woman's sexuality, while later on it focused on her personality. It's difficult to know just when this meaning first appeared in use. It was evident in manuscripts and books by the 1500s, but it probably emerged in speech much earlier still. One early written example comes from the comedy *Gammer Gurton's Needle*. In this story, alehouse owner Dame Chat has been accused of stealing Dame Gurton's sewing needle. In turn, Dame Chat accuses Dame Gurton of stealing her rooster, then beckons her with, "Come out, thou hungry nedy bytche."³⁰ Bitch had become a catchall insult for a disliked woman, who was described variously as disagreeable, despicable, annoying, nagging, spiteful, or malicious; especially in the eyes of a man. For example, in the eighteenth-century satire *Law Is a Bottomless Pit*, the character John Bull (who was an English version of Uncle Sam) has a wife who enjoys the finer things in life, and she is

slammed as “an extravagant Bitch.”³¹ It was around this time that the insult became increasingly taboo. References to the word were often censored, even in the tabloids that usually enjoyed a bit of smut. In the scandal sheet *The Female Tatler*, the *TMZ* of its day, the author recounts a conversation in which it was said to her, “Mrs Crackenthorpe. You are a dirty, confounded, impudent B—ch of a Harridan.”³² A *harridan* was yet another word for an unpleasant woman, especially an older one who was strict and bossy, although, unlike bitch, apparently it wasn’t offensive enough to be censored.

By 1785, bitch was considered to be so improper that Captain Francis Grose, who compiled a book of obscene slang, declared the slur to be “the most offensive appellation that can be given to an English woman—even more provoking than that of whore.”³³ Grose’s *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* is the perfect dictionary for those who like to look up rude words. In fact, the book included some 9,000 words that had been omitted by Dr. Johnson in his famous *Dictionary of the English Language*, some of which the lexicographer denounced as “low bad words.” Johnson *did* include bitch in his dictionary, possibly with the intention of recording its innocuous literal sense, which Grose described as “A she dog or doggess.” Johnson defined a bitch as: “1. The female of the canine kind; as the wolf, the dog, the fox, the otter. 2. A name of reproach for a woman.”³⁴ It may also have been the case that Johnson hadn’t been exposed to many of the “vulgar” words faithfully recorded by Grose. Grose was a committed field researcher, along with his companion Tom Cocking, and the pair made regular trips into the slums, streets, docks, and drinking dens of London to pick up the latest slang terms. There they discovered St. Giles’ Greek, a secret language spoken by beggars and thieves. And it was in this part of town that they encountered the street riposte “I may be a whore, but can’t be a bitch,” which was roughly equivalent to the modern, “I may be drunk, but you’re ugly.”³⁵ At this point in time it was better to be a prostitute, who was at least paid for her services, than it was to be a bitch.

Despite being considered a vulgar word in polite company, bitch survived, presumably through the efforts of enough vulgar people.

In the nineteenth century and beyond, a myriad of other meanings sprang to life, which we will explore throughout this book. Bitch expanded from just a noun to also being used as a verb and adjective. In the past, the word appeared in a few phrases too, but surprisingly, not all of them were offensive. Grose also noted the term to *stand bitch*, which simply meant “to make tea, or do the honours of the tea-table.” This task wasn’t always servile work but could be an honor that was bestowed upon an esteemed guest. This use is preserved in the Irish memoir *A Real Paddy*, “At breakfast the doctor insisted upon Sally standing bitch in his place, and making tea, to which she agreed and did the honours of the table handsomely.”³⁶

Standing bitch evolved into the quaint phrase “to bitch the pot,” that is, to preside as hostess at a tea party. Hosting a tea party in the 1800s was a big deal for ladies; it was an important domestic ritual because they were excluded from coffeehouses. The Starbucks of their day, coffeehouses were places where elite gentlemen congregated to drink coffee, hold conversations, and conduct business, without women around. Tea was the preferred beverage of a lady. It was made fashionable among aristocratic women and it defined respectability. In terms of alcoholic beverages, champagne was considered to be an appropriate drink for women. Described as “pretty,” “elegant,” and “sparkling,” champagne reflected views of femininity and feminine allure. And if we remember that a bitch was once a prostitute, *bitch’s wine* was an indelicate name for champagne, a popular drink among sex workers and their clients in Victorian brothels, because of its association with wealth and prestige.

At this time, *to bitch* didn’t always have the same meaning that it does nowadays, it might just mean to make a pot of tea, while a *bitch party* was a tea party. The pastime was associated with women and gossip, and tea became known as “chatter broth” and “scandal broth.” This is the forerunner of the social knitting groups of today called “Stitch ‘n’ Bitch,” where people, mainly women, meet to knit, stitch, and talk. (Those who choose to crochet instead are called “happy hookers.”) The phrase “to bitch the pot” had some staying power, lasting as it did well into Victorian times. Part of its enduring popularity may lie with

the fact that it was co-opted by university students, who were all male in those days. Women weren't allowed to attend tertiary institutions back then, much like the coffeehouses. Among a tea-drinking party of men one lucky man might be invited to be "old bitch," that is, the one to brew the tea. It was asked, "Who'll bitch the pot?" meaning who will pour out the tea? And if the gentleman did so gracefully, he was praised as an "excellent bitch." Although these phrases could be applied to both women and men, at their core there was gender bias because the bitch referred to a person catering to the needs of others, like a woman 'should' do, and performing what was perceived as "a female role." And we'll delve into gender issues a lot more soon.

An Unpleasant Man

The use of bitch toward men is not exclusively modern. While bitch has been invoked to insult women throughout history, it has also long been used as a derogatory term for men, just like *dog*. In fact, bitch has probably been used against men for as long as it's been used against women. One of the earliest recorded examples of a man being called a bitch comes from the Chester Mystery Plays, a series of productions based on Bible stories that were performed in the town of Chester, England, during the fifteenth century. (In more recent decades, this tradition has been revived and these plays are now staged every five years.) *The Slaughter of the Innocents* enacts the Massacre of the Holy Innocents, the nativity narrative of the Gospel of Matthew in which King Herod of Judea sends his soldiers to Bethlehem to execute all of the baby boys in an attempt to kill the newborn Jesus Christ. In one scene, a mother refuses to give up her infant son to a soldier. In his anger he insults her as a "quean." The forerunner of *queen*, this was yet another word for a prostitute, although in Old English it simply meant "woman" or "wife." In reply to the soldier, the mother retaliates bravely with, "Whom callest thou quean, scabd bitch?"³⁷ "Scabbed" was a reference to the pus-oozing sores, scabs, and scars from syphilis, known as "the pox," which was rampant during the Middle Ages.

Another early example of a male bitch that also comes from the fifteenth century is in the children's fairy tale *The Friar and The Boy*. In this story, the merry-hearted and mischievous Jack is accused of sorcery by his wicked stepmother: *Be God he ys a schrewd byche, In fayth, y trow, he be a Wyche.*³⁸ This meant "By God, he is a shrewd bitch. In faith, I know, he is a witch." (Presumably, she wanted to get rid of him. "Witch" was a dangerous accusation during the days of witch hunts and witch trials.) As we can see, calling a man or boy a bitch was a harsh insult in Middle English. This use probably dates back even further in spoken language. And as we know, it has survived to modern times. Just like today, to call a man a bitch in the past was to insult him by comparing him to a "bad" kind of woman, like the wicked stepmother branding her stepson a "witch." In the Middle Ages, *witch* was a common insult for a disagreeable older woman, along with the related slur *crone*. Alternatively, *white witch* and *crone* were names for wise women, cunning folk, and healers, who were typically older women. In more recent decades, *witch* and *crone* have been somewhat reclaimed in feminism and neo-paganism as symbols of mature female wisdom and power.

In early use toward men, *bitch* could also have connotations of promiscuity, just like it could for women. In 1542, the Catholic critic Henry Brinklow referred to a group of bishops as being: *as chast as a sawt bytch*, that is, "as pure as a randy bitch."³⁹ This book was written during the Reformation, when Catholic leaders were accused of various corruptions, particularly when it came to failing to uphold their vows of chastity. Brinklow likened these holy men to whores, and in applying feminine words to men, their very femaleness was part of the insult. Older sexual slang terms labeled promiscuous women in negative terms, as bitches, harlots, or whores, whereas promiscuous men were often portrayed in a more positive light as swaggering, romantic characters from history or novels, Casanovas, Lotharios, or Don Juans, depicting them as sexual conquerors and heroes. Calling a man a bitch, a derogatory word for a woman, therefore questioned his manhood and masculinity.

When used toward men, *bitch* was an insult that could mean many different things, but it always referred back to women in a negative

way. Bitch could mean that the man was weak, timid, or delicate, just like a woman. In the 1840 novel *Border Beagles*, Mr. Bull offers his companions a swig of his strong peach brandy, “Here, you b—hes,” he cried aloud —“here’s stuff enough, and sorts enough, if your stomachs not too swingy proud for an honest liquor.”⁴⁰ A male bitch might be seen as effeminate and girly, just like a woman. In the 1853 novel *Mr. Sponge’s Sporting Tour*, Jack Spraggon and his sidekick Lord Scamperdale find a letter written on fancy “thick cream-laid” stationery paper: “That must be from a woman,” observed Jack, squinting ardently at the writing. “Not far wrong,” replied his lordship. “From a bitch of a fellow, at all events.”⁴¹ Alternatively, a man who’s a bitch might be criticized as domineering and bossy, just like a woman. In the 1797 bawdy *Burlesque Homer* appears the line, “That bullying, noisy, scolding bitch, Call’d Diomed.”⁴² The King of Argos and a hero in Greek mythology, Diomedes is here reduced to being an overbearing, nagging woman.

Bitch could compare a man to an unpleasant woman, while it could also insult a man by way of his beloved mother. The modern *son of a bitch* goes all the way back to Middle English where it was written as *biche-sonne*, meaning “bitch’s son.” (Old Icelandic also had the comparable insult *bikkju-sonnr*.) The earliest example is found in the tale of *Arthur & Merlin* written around the year 1330: *Abide þou þef malicious! Biche-sonne þou drawest amis!* This meant “Stop you wicked thief! You son of a bitch, you draw wrongly!”⁴³ Son of a bitch, like *bastard*, while applied to a man ultimately insults a characteristic of a man’s mother, not the man himself. By implication, it is the woman who is “the bitch.” A related phrase was *of bicces lines*, meaning “of the lineage of bitches,” that insulted a man’s parentage, in particular, his mother and female relatives. To find the earliest example of son of a bitch in its current form we return to master insulter Shakespeare, who wielded the phrase in *King Lear*. In the play, the Earl of Kent attacks Oswald for his poor treatment of Lear and calls him “nothing but the composition of a knave, beggar, coward, pandar, and the son and heir of a mongrel bitch.”⁴⁴ Shakespeare also liked using the phrases *whoreson* and *bitch-wolf’s son*. These were all scathing insults at the time. They were the

kind of crass and vulgar language that playwrights and actors heard used in the taverns of London's underbelly; that Francis Grose would eventually collect over a century later.

But bad-mannered commoners weren't the only ones to use *son of a bitch*; even some noblemen used it, at least implicitly. In Lord Byron's *Don Juan*, the poet writes, "Like lap-dogs, the least civil sons of b-----s."⁴⁵ But at least Byron (or his publisher) had the decency to censor the offending word. Dr. Johnson, who we might remember didn't like "bad words," alluded to the phrase when he recounted an anecdote to his friend the diarist Hester Thrale: "I did not respect my mother, though I loved her; and one day, when in anger she called me a puppy, I asked her if she knew what they called a puppy's mother."⁴⁶ *Son of a bitch* finally made its way to the US in the late 1700s, where in the lusty and crude novel *The Adventures of Jonathan Corncob*, the hero says to Mr. Squeeze, "Why I beg your pardon, but you are a Judas, and a d---d son of a b-----."⁴⁷ America would truly embrace the phrase as its own and there's a lot more to unpack with modern-day *son of a bitch*, so we'll return to it later on.

Further to the idea that a bitch was an effeminate man, the insult might also question his sexuality. While bitch gained currency in the twentieth century as an inclusive term inside the gay community, it was still a strong slur outside of the group (which will be discussed in future chapters). Some sources suggest that bitch meaning a "homosexual man" dates back to the eighteenth century. In 1726, the proceedings of the Old Bailey, London's central criminal court, show that Thomas Wright was charged for committing sexual offenses with Thomas Newton at a Molly House, a secret meeting place for men in London's gay subculture. On the night in question, a group of men were "dancing in obscene Postures," "Singing bawdy Songs," "talking leudly," and "Acting a great many Indecencies."⁴⁸ The men "threatned that they'd Massacre any body that betray'd them." Despite this threat, fellow reveler Mark Partridge "blabbed something of the Secret" to others. This led to the arrest of the "Mollies" (a "Molly" was a slur for an effeminate gay man). They denounced the informant as a "treacherous, blowing-up Mollying Bitch." Sadly, on the basis of this

testimony Wright and Newton were indicted for committing sodomy and buggery, and both men were sentenced to death. With this early use of bitch, there is a clear overlap between homophobia and misogyny. A gay man is the target of contempt, because he supposedly takes on the submissive role of a woman.

In a contrasting use that will sound familiar to modern readers, bitch could also have a positive use between men as a part of friendly banter. In an issue of the eighteenth-century *Chester Chronicle* we find the quote, “He comes up to me and says, ‘Daffer, you b—h, what brings you here?’”⁴⁹ This kind of use wasn’t intended to insult but to show familiarity. A nineteenth-century example from *The Rockhampton Bulletin* in Australia shows that even back then men could playfully tease each other with good-humored insults: “It was but a simple and primitive society when men caled each other Addlehead, Baldhead, Barebones, Bitch, Chisels, Dolt, Fogey, Gander, Maggot, Mangy, Muff, Muzzy.”⁵⁰ This jocular use is similar to the modern-day one in which men jokingly call each other “cunt,” “asshole,” or “dick,” among other insults, to signify friendship.

From emasculating insult to banter, these many different examples show that when it comes to calling a man a “bitch,” not much has changed in hundreds of years.

A Bitch of a Thing

What’s becoming clear is that *bitch* has meant many different things over a very long period of time. And while bitch usually referred to an animal or *someone*, it could also refer to *something*, and usually a thing or situation that was difficult or unpleasant. This use goes back at least as far as the Middle Ages. *The Castle of Perseverance* is a fifteenth-century mystery play about humankind’s constant struggle between good and evil. In the story, the Seven Deadly Sins have foul mouths and constantly abuse the Seven Virtues as “bitches.” At one point, the sin of Wrath calls Dame Patience: *Þou bycche blak as kole*, meaning, “You bitch black as coal.”⁵¹ The virtue of Patience is personified as a

woman, a “Dame,” and one who is difficult and unpleasant, likening her to a bitch. This kind of personification of bad things as bitches was the forerunner of modern idioms like *life’s a bitch, and then you die*.

At this same time in history, people were terrified of a night-time visit from the “bitch daughter” or “bitch clout.” This was a female demon who was believed to sit on her victim’s chest while they were sleeping and suffocate them. The common expression was to be “ridden by the bitch daughter,” who might be a succubus that had sex with a man while he was asleep. (Nowadays, we understand these nightmare assaults as episodes of sleep paralysis, a kind of nocturnal hallucination.) An early English to Latin dictionary defines this frightening creature as: “*Þe Bychdow3hter: Epialtis, Epialta, Noxa*”; which translates to “The bitch daughter is an elf, sprite, or spirit.”⁵² This demon was often represented as an elderly woman, who was also known as the *old hag*. Medieval folk searched for rocks with holes in them and hung these “hag-stones” on strings from the ceilings of their cottages to ward off the nightmare hag. *Hag* was also a slur for a wizened old woman, a character found in folklore and children’s tales such as “Hansel and Gretel.” As yet another term for a disagreeable woman, hag is related to bitch and other insulting terms for older women like witch and crone. Following on from the idea of a bitch daughter as an evil entity, something that was *bitched* was cursed, wicked, or damned. In Chaucer’s “Pardoner’s Tale,” the pardoner preaches against vices like drinking, swearing, and gambling, and he refers to a pair of unlucky dice as the “biced bones.”⁵³ (During the Medieval period, dice were usually made out of the bones of sheep or deer.)

We’ve seen that bitch could have a positive meaning, to show familiarity between people, much like today, and in the early modern period *bitch* referred fondly to an inanimate object, especially something like a boat. In *Tom Cringle’s Log*, a crew of sailors bid farewell to their beloved ship: “‘There she goes, the dear old beauty,’ said one of her crew. ‘There goes the blessed old black b----h.’”⁵⁴ This use is similar to the modern practice of referring to ships and cars as “she” or “her.” The English language probably borrowed this practice from Latin, in which words have gender and the word for ship, *navis*, is feminine.

Another theory says that this tradition relates to the idea of a mother or goddess guiding and protecting a ship's crew. On the other hand, *bitch* could be an expression of frustration at a boat or other object that was broken or an animal that was injured, in particular, a horse. In the 1832 *Book of Sports*, Bob advises his friend against borrowing a 'lame' horse when he says, "She's a stumbling bitch. You should not have her, Dick, unless I desir'd to see you laid dead in a ditch."⁵⁵

Related to the idea of *bitch* as an expression of exasperation is its use to refer to anything that was unpleasant, difficult, or problematic. While fortune can be a "lady" she could also be a "bitch" when it came to gambling, according to *The Life of Richard Nash*: "That damned bitch fortune, no later than last night, tricked me out of 500 (guineas)."⁵⁶ And yes, this particular use dating back to the 1700s is related to the one we're familiar with today. This is the verb *to bitch* meaning to complain, which comes from the metaphor of a complaining, nagging woman. It's been suggested that *to bitch*, *bitching*, and *bitchy*, all allude to a feral mother dog protecting her young with her snarling, growling, barking, and biting, in order to keep people away. Another real-life example from the 1700s appears in a shocking tell-all memoir: "A Leaden-hall Butcher would be bitching his Wife, for not only opening her Placket, but her Pocket Apron to his Rogue of a Journeyman, and expensively treating the young strong back'd Rascal at the *Ship Tavern* whilst himself was entering his Puppy at the *Bear Garden*."⁵⁷ This colorful and long-winded sentence tells of a husband who complained because his wife was having an affair. Hypocritically, he was engaging in extramarital sex too. Bear gardens were blood sports arenas for the cruel practice of bear baiting, although the phrase was also slang for "vagina," while puppy meant "penis."

Such historical instances of *bitch* meaning to complain are rare, and it wouldn't be until the twentieth century that this use would truly flourish. But there were other verbs around that we don't use anymore. In Grose's *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, he notes a sense that goes back to a *bitch* being a coward. The act of *bitching* was "to yield, or give up an attempt through fear."⁵⁸ To *bitch* something could be to spoil, ruin, or botch it. In 1823, the muckraking newspaper *The Satirist*

lamponed the new King George IV: “Crocky, my boy, what do you think of the King, now?’ – ‘Vell, then,’ quoth Crocky, ‘I thinks as how he has bitched the business.’”⁵⁹ The unpopular monarch had a reputation for womanizing, gambling, and gluttony – he was once nicknamed the “Prince of Whales” – and George IV is generally regarded as one of the worst rulers in British history. This use of bitch is somewhat similar to the modern phrase “to fuck up.”

Harkening back to the meaning of bitch as slut, many older uses referring to objects had allusions to sex. Bitch was once an old mining term in which the “bitch” was a receiving tool used to recover rods from a bored hole. This is similar to today’s naming convention for electrical cords and sockets, where the female connector receives and holds the male connector; a linking that is often called “mating.” In the United States during the 1900s, a *bitch* was a makeshift lamp made with a twist of rag dipped in lard or fat that was stuffed into a tin can; the cloth wick crammed into the can hinted at sexual intercourse. There is a reference to this kind of lamp in the fishing and hunting magazine *Forest and Stream*: “Our light was furnished by a bacon grease lamp (called ‘bitch’ for short.)”⁶⁰ Predating the term, in Colonial America this was also known as a *slut lamp*. Other varieties of English have their own terms for these homemade lamps. In Caribbean English this kind of portable lamp is called a *cowgut* or a *kitchen bitch*. In the West Indies, the latter phrase can also refer to a person assigned to menial tasks in a restaurant’s kitchen or a man who hangs around the kitchen, cooking and cleaning, instead of going out and doing “manly things.”

Bitch morphed into some other miscellaneous meanings too that illustrate its broad usage. We might remember that Scottish had some unique variant forms of bitch. From Scottish English comes the term *bitch-fou* or “full as a bitch,” meaning very drunk. Scotland’s national bard Robert Burns, who was known for liking a drink himself, once wrote: “I’ve been at drunken writers’ feasts. Nay, been bitch-fou ’mang godly priests.”⁶¹ In other assorted uses, the female character in tabletop games like chess might get branded a bitch too. The chessboard’s most powerful and versatile piece, the queen, is often referred to as “The Bitch.” In a deck of cards, the Queen of Spades is

called “The Bitch” too. (In another similarity between bitch and slut, the queen has also been named “The Slut.”) Alternatively, to have the “bitch end” of a hand of poker is to have the weaker version of the same hand as another player. In both the games of chess and cards, the queen is the only female character. She’s a powerful woman who can use her influence to destroy a player, drawing parallels to a bitch. Meanwhile, in chess and cards, the king is never called a “bastard.”

In the wide range of uses of the word, Bitch has been a name too. It’s a place name for topographical features like Bitch Mountain, a summit in Chesterfield, New York. Bitch Creek is a stream in Wyoming that crosses into Idaho; the name is said to be derived from the French word *biche*, meaning “doe.” (This is often used as a term of endearment in France, akin to “darling” or “love.”) There’s a village called Bitchfield in Lincolnshire, England. Some think it once referred to a field of female dogs or unpleasant women, but according to the Domesday Book, the name described an area of open land that once belonged to a man named Bills-felt, which later morphed into its present-day form.⁶² Also in the UK, hundreds of years ago there was a Bitch Hill in Nottingham. This place *did* have a literal meaning; the name referred to a hill where hounds were bred. This was also the name of a town in Knaresborough that was changed to Beech Hill when bitch became offensive. In other countries, there’s a village in Valais, Switzerland, called Bitsch. In a promotional stunt by Pornhub, the online pornography site once offered the 900 residents of Bitsch a free lifetime subscription to its service. The locals laughed it off. After being profiled in videos by influencers on Instagram and Tik Tok, the village keeps losing its road signs. There’s also a town called Bitche in France that has suffered a lot of grief because of its risqué meaning in English. (But more on this later.)

Bitch was once a family name too. Church records, electoral registers, and censuses show that the name was introduced to Anglophone countries by immigrant families in the 1700s. For example, the 1911 Census of Canada shows that Frederick Bitch and his family, formerly of Russia, lived in the district of Medicine Hat, Alberta.⁶³ Use of the name died out by the early 1900s, because of the increasingly negative

connotations of the word in English. Immigrants with the last name Bitch began to modify the spelling to something similar, like Birch, or they changed their name entirely to avoid the stigma associated with the word. Frederick Bitch's last name is spelled elsewhere as Bitsch, and then later changed altogether to Ditch. As a family name, Bitch is still found in other countries, including Argentina and Brazil, although it's rare. Names that look or sound similar to bitch are common in other languages, although they pose problems for immigrants in English-speaking countries. The popular Vietnamese first names *Phúc* ("blessing") and *Bích* ("emerald") are often mispronounced in English as "fuck" and "bitch" respectively. For this reason, some people with these names choose to adopt Western names as a cultural adaptation. In the *New Yorker* article "America Ruined My Name for Me," author Bích Minh Nguyen recounts how she was mocked incessantly because her first name looks similar to "bitch," although it's actually pronounced as "Bic."⁶⁴ Nowadays, Nguyen goes by the Anglicized name "Beth" instead.

How Do Good Words Turn Bad?

An indisputable fact about language is that it changes. Constantly. And as we can see, bitch has had a busy past. The word has changed a lot over time and has had many different meanings. Some are still around today, while many others have disappeared. But it retains its original meaning – a bitch is still a female dog. You see, when words develop a new sense, they don't instantly lose their old one(s). These rival meanings can coexist for centuries, until they eventually die out or win out. Over time, bitch has been used to label women as variously promiscuous, unpleasant, disagreeable, despicable, treacherous, nagging, spiteful, malicious, and much more. Bitch has been applied to men too, probably for as long as it's been applied to women, but it still suggests a negative attitude toward women. Calling a man a bitch, as an inherently female word, implied weakness, cowardice, and inferiority.

In modern times, the offensive sense of bitch as an insult for a woman is the dominant meaning. Even though there are many uses of the word, the insulting one has mostly muscled out these other meanings. Why did this happen? It's because of a linguistic phenomenon called "pejoration." (The name comes from *pejoratus*, the Latin word meaning "to become worse.") This is a process by which a word that once had positive or neutral connotations acquires negative ones. It's sometimes called semantic deterioration or degradation. The word "silly" is a great example of this. In Middle English, silly (then spelled "seely") meant happy or fortunate. As time went on, the definition shifted to mean someone who was innocent, holy, and pure. Then it came to mean a naïve person. By the 1500s the word became associated with its present-day connotations of something (or someone) that is foolish or ridiculous. Shakespeare used the word the same way that we use it today. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Hippolyta watches a farcically terrible performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe* and complains, "This is the silliest stuff that I ever heard."⁶⁵

Another unexpected example of pejoration is the word *discreet*. It once meant a person who was wise or judicious in avoiding mistakes or trying to be careful about what one says or does. Chaucer's "Physician's Tale" tells the story of Virginia, who is this kind of virtuous person: "Discreet she was in answerynge always."⁶⁶ Nowadays, *discreet* has become a euphemism for an illicit sexual meeting. In an article in the *Wall Street Journal* the manager of an online dating service for singles said he banned the word *discreet* from advertisements because, "it's often code for 'married and looking to fool around.'"⁶⁷ Occasionally, a word actually improves in its meaning or loses its offensiveness. In Middle English, *nice* meant foolish or simple, before it developed positive connotations in the 1800s to mean kind and friendly. When it comes to slang, negative words like *wicked*, *bad*, and *sick* have also developed positive senses. As we've seen, in some uses, both past and present, bitch has improved in meaning just like this, reversing its general trend of pejoration. The process by which bad words turn good is called amelioration, but this is far more rare than good words turning bad.

Pejoration has happened *a lot* when it comes to words associated with women.⁶⁸ *Mistress* was borrowed from French in the fourteenth century, when it meant a woman who was in charge of a household. *Mistress* was originally a respectable title, the female equivalent of *master*. But over time it came to mean the kept woman of a married man. In the thirteenth century, *wenche* simply meant a girl or young woman. *Wench* evolved to mean “servant girl” and was later used in the sense of a woman with loose morals. Similarly, *hussy* came from the innocent word *husewif* meaning “housewife” or mistress of a household. By the 1600s it developed a derogatory sense, referring to a girl or woman who behaved in an inappropriate way, while today it means a woman who has many casual sexual relationships (or is accused of doing so anyway). *Tart* was once just a shortening of *sweetheart*, but now means a prostitute or a sexually provocative woman. In this chapter we’ve seen the worsening of meaning happen to many other words related to women, like queen, shrew, slut, and, of course, bitch.

What forces prompt these changes in meaning? Word meanings change for many reasons, due to social, cultural, and psychological factors that shape our way of thinking and talking about the world around us. Meanings are directly connected to the attitudes, beliefs, and values of their time. Words can develop negative meanings because they become taboo, or they’re somehow linked to a taboo. This can occur when an inoffensive word resembles a word that has become offensive. And when a word develops a new negative meaning, this offensive sense often supersedes any other ones. We’ve seen this happen time and time again in the English language. Hundreds of years ago, *coney* was the everyday word for a hare or rabbit. But *coney* sounded too similar to *cunny* that had become a slang term for cunt. Over time, *coney* was supplanted by *rabbit*, which had once specifically meant a baby bunny. Similarly, *donkey* has replaced *ass*, while *rooster* is preferred over *cock*. Sometimes the word becomes so tarnished by association that it drops out of use entirely.

In an example from the advertising industry, Ayds appetite-suppressant candy was popular in the 1980s, until the public awareness

of AIDS as a life-threatening condition sullied the brand's name and led the company to withdraw the brand from the market. This can happen with technical terms too. In linguistics, *homophone* is used for words with different meanings that sound the same, like *pair* and *pear*, but it has become tainted because it sounds like *homosexual*, even though the words have nothing to do with each other beyond their prefix *homo-*. A few years ago, an English teacher blogged about the topic of homophones and was fired for supposedly promoting a "gay agenda" at the school.⁶⁹ By this same process, words like *denigrate*, *niggardly*, and *snigger* are on their way out because they look like the n-word, even though they are not etymologically related at all. When we hear an inoffensive word that sounds like an offensive one, or an inoffensive word that also has an offensive meaning, our minds tend to default to thinking about the naughty one, just like Marge Simpson when she heard Bart call the female dog a bitch.

Over the course of a millennium, bitch became stigmatized by its association with social taboos such as prostitution, promiscuity, "bad" women, and "unmanly" men. This led to its offensive meanings pushing out the inoffensive one. Bitch – which was once just the literal word for a female dog – eventually became what it is today, arguably one of the most insulting words in the English language. (And as we will see later on, English is not an exception.) There are thousands of unflattering words for women in English and bitch is one of, if not the most offensive of, these, along with *cunt*, *slut*, and *whore*. Linguist Deborah Tannen once said, "Bitch is the most contemptible thing you can say about a woman. Save perhaps the four-letter C word."⁷⁰ But on the other hand, bitch has developed positive uses in colloquial language and has even been reclaimed in some ways. We'll dig into all of this a lot more soon. Bitch is now an everyday word that we hear on TV and on the streets; a word we read in books, newspapers, and magazines, and see everywhere online.

But bitch might not have always been an everyday word. The many historical examples appearing in this chapter may have given us a false impression of the popularity of the word in the past. Despite a

history spanning over one thousand years, *bitch* was not necessarily a common insult in Old English, Middle English, or even Early Modern English. We lack the evidence to say either way. Surprisingly, *bitch* may have existed at a lower level of use for a very long time before social changes catapulted the word into the spotlight.

The word's popularity has really exploded in modern times, so let's now turn our attention to the next chapter of the story of *bitch*.