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Etymologicon

Written by Mark Forsyth

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Parenthetical Codpieces

Your computer keyboard contains two pictures of codpieces, and it's all the fault of the ancient Gauls, the original inhabitants of France. Gauls spoke Gaulish until Julius Caesar came and cut them all into three parts. One of the Gaulish words that the Gauls used to speak was *braca* meaning trousers. The Romans didn't have a word for trousers because they all wore togas, and that's why the Gaulish term survived.

From *braca* came the early French *brague* meaning trousers, and when they wanted a word for a codpiece they decided to call it a *braguette* or *little trousers*. This is not to be confused with *baguette*, meaning stick. In fact a Frenchman might brag that his baguette was too big for his braguettes, but then Frenchmen will claim anything. They're *braggarts* (literally *one who shows off his codpiece*).

Braguettes were much more important in the olden days, especially in armour. On the medieval battlefield, with arrows flying hither and thither, a knight knew where he wanted the most protection. Henry VIII's codpiece, for example, was a gargantuan combination of efficiency and obscenity. It was big enough and shiny enough to frighten any enemy into disorganised retreat. It bulged out from the royal groin and stretched up to a metal plate that protected the royal belly.

And that is significant. What do you call the bit of stone that bulges out from a pillar to support a balcony or a roof? Until the sixteenth century nobody had been certain what to call them; but one day somebody must have been gazing at a cathedral wall and, in a moment of sudden clarity, realised

that the architectural supports looked like nothing so much as Henry VIII's groin.

And so such architectural structures came to be known as *braggets*, and that brings us to Pocahontas.

Pocahontas was a princess of the Powhatan tribe, which lived in Virginia. Of course, the Powhatan tribe didn't *know* they lived in Virginia. They thought they lived in Tenakomakah, and so the English thoughtfully came with guns to explain their mistake. But the Powhatan tribe were obstinate and went so far as to take one of the Englishmen prisoner. They were planning to kill him until Pocahontas intervened with her father and Captain John Smith was freed. The story goes that she had fallen madly in love with him and that they had a passionate affair, but as Pocahontas was only ten years old at the time, we should probably move swiftly on.

Of course, it may not have happened exactly that way. The story has been improved beyond repair. But there definitely *was* a Pocahontas and there definitely *was* a Captain John Smith, and they seem to have been rather fond of each other. Then he had an accident with one of his guns and had to return to England. The cruel colonists told Pocahontas that John Smith was dead, and she pined away in tears thinking that he was lost for ever. In fact, he wasn't dead, he was writing a dictionary.

The Sea-Man's Grammar and Dictionary: Explaining all the Difficult Terms of Navigation hit the bookstands in 1627. It had all sorts of nautical jargon for the aspiring sailor to learn. But, for our story, the important thing is that Captain Smith spelt *braggets* as *brackets*, and the spelling stuck.

The original architectural device was called a bragget/bracket, because it looked like a codpiece. But what about a double bracket, which connects two horizontals to a vertical? An architectural double bracket looks like this: [

Look around you: there's probably one on the nearest bookshelf. And just as a physical bracket got its name because it resembled a codpiece, so the punctuation bracket got its name because it resembled the structural component.

In 1711 a man called William Whiston published a book called *Primitive Christianity Revived*. The book often quotes from Greek sources and when it does, it gives both Whiston's translation *and* the original in what he was the first man to call [brackets].

And that's why, if you look at the top right-hand corner of your computer keyboard, you will see two little codpieces [] lingering obscenely beside the letter P for *pants*.

Suffering for my Underwear

Once upon a time there was a chap who probably didn't exist and who probably wasn't called Pantaleon. Legend has it that he was personal physician to Emperor Maximianus. When the emperor discovered that his doctor was a Christian he got terribly upset and decreed that the doctor should die.

The execution went badly. They tried to burn him alive, but the fire went out. They threw him into molten lead but it turned out to be cold. They lashed a stone to him and chucked him into the sea, but the stone floated. They threw him to wild beasts, which were tamed. They tried to hang him and the rope

broke. They tried to chop his head off but the sword bent and he forgave the executioner.

This last kindness was what earned the doctor the name *Pantaleon*, which means *All-Compassionate*.

In the end they got Pantaleon's head off and he died, thus becoming one of the *megalomartyrs* (the great martyrs) of Greece. By the tenth century Saint Pantaleon had become the patron saint of Venice. *Pantalon* therefore became a popular Venetian name and the Venetians themselves were often called the *Pantalonis*.

Then, in the sixteenth century, came the *Commedia Dell'Arte*: short comic plays performed by travelling troupes and always involving the same stock characters like Harlequin and Scaramouch.

In these plays Pantalone was the stereotypical Venetian. He was a merchant and a miser and a lustful old man, and he wore one-piece breeches, like Venetians did. These long breeches therefore became known as *pantaloons*. Pantaloons were shortened to *pants* and the English (though not the Americans) called their underwear *underpants*. *Underpants* were again shortened to *pants*, which is what I am now wearing.

Pants are all-compassionate. Pants are saints. This means that my underwear is named after an early Christian martyr.

Pans

So *pants* and *panties* come from Saint Pantaleon and your undies are all-compassionate and your small-clothes are martyred.

St Pantaleon was therefore a linguistic relation of St Pancras (who *held everything*) and Pandora, who was *given everything* in a box that she really shouldn't have opened.

Pan is one of those elements that gets everywhere. It's pan-present. For example, when a film camera *pans* across from one face to another, that *pan* comes from the same Greek word that you'll find in your underpants. Cinematic *panning* is short for the *Panoramic Camera*, which was patented back in 1868 and so called because a *panorama* is where you see everything.

A *panacea* cures absolutely everything, which is useful if you're in the middle of a *pandemic*, which is one up from an *epidemic*. An epidemic is only *among the people*, whereas a pandemic means *all the peoples of the world* are infected.

Pan also gives you all sorts of terribly useful words that for some reason loiter in dark and musty corners of the dictionary. *Pantophobia*, for example, is the granddaddy of all phobias as it means *a morbid fear of absolutely everything*. Pantophobia is the inevitable outcome of *pandiabolism* – the belief that the Devil runs the world – and, in its milder forms, is a *panpathy*, or *one of those feelings that everybody has now and then*.

However, not all *pans* mean *all*. It's one of the great problems of etymology that there are no hard and fast rules: nothing is panapplicable. The pans and pots in your kitchen have nothing whatsoever to do with panoramas and pan-Africanism. Panic is not a fear of everything; it is, in fact, the terror that the Greek god Pan, who rules the forests, is able to induce in anybody who takes a walk in the woods after dark. And the Greek god Pan is not panipotent. Nobody knows where his name comes from – all we're sure of is that he played the pan-pipes.