

# The dirty end of the stick

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## THE DIRTY END OF THE STICK

Among John Orr's many original contributions to our understanding of the history of French vocabulary and idiom, one of the most characteristic is the group of studies which he liked to call 'étymologies scabreuses' or 'douteuses'. In one of these<sup>1</sup>, as prolegomenon to the etymologies which he was proposing for Old French *escharnir*, French *moquer*, *berner*, *bernique* and (indirectly) *mâchefer*, he drew attention to the fondness of peasant communities for scatological jokes and tricks, and the widespread association in various languages between the notions of befouling (especially with excrement), exposing to ridicule, and deceiving or cheating. For the French words in question he suggested the semantic development :

'barbouiller d'immondices' une victime (en déjouant ses efforts pour échapper à cette souillure), 'en faire un objet de dérision' (au moyen d'une souillure), puis, par 'généralisation' d'une part, 'circonvenir', 'tromper', de l'autre, 'moquer', 'berner'.

Whether or not all Orr's specific etymologies are accepted, the reality of this general association of senses is established for French by the evidence cited in his article, and for German by the note which it called forth from Professor Keith Spalding<sup>2</sup>. However, the group of expressions they cite containing French *bâton*, English *stick* and German *Stecken* deserves further examination, not only because in this case the semantic evolution appears to be more complex and more varied than that outlined by Orr, but also because the history of these expressions excellently illustrates certain recurrent tendencies in the evolution of proverbial and metaphorical locutions in general.

1. 'Autres étymologies scabreuses', *Archivum Linguisticum* 9 (1957), 28, reprinted in *Essais d'étymologie et de philologie françaises* (Paris, 1963), p. 36.

2. 'A note on German *Dreck am Stecken*', *Archivum Linguisticum* 10 (1958), 43. All German quotations and references are taken from this article, which is summarised in K. Spalding, *An Historical Dictionary of German Figurative Usage*, fasc. 11 (Oxford, 1960), s. v. *Dreck*.

It is highly probable that Orr is right in suggesting that the expressions in question originated as allusions to 'quelque jeu où le divertissement aurait consisté à faire saisir par l'un des participants soit un « bâton merdeux » soit le « mauvais bout » de celui-ci'. Though no direct description of such a practice seems to have come to light in medieval texts<sup>1</sup>, its existence in France in the Middle Ages may reasonably be deduced from the two passages quoted by Orr from Tobler-Lommatzsch:

ele se pensoit que, se Marques eschapoit, ele en porteroit le conchié del baston  
(*Marques de Rome*, ed. Alton, 93 c 1),

and, with ellipsis of the words *del baston*.

au partir, ice croi gié,  
En avra il le cunchié  
(*Roman de Renart, Supplément*, éd. Chabaille, 255).

Since the verb *honir* 'to dishonour', no doubt as a result of the double sense of *conchier* 'to befoul (with excrement)' and 'to dishonour' possessed in Old French the additional specific sense of 'to befoul (with mud, excrement etc.)'<sup>2</sup>, it too can appear in the expression with *baston*; Tobler-Lommatzsch quotes (I, 865 and IV, 1139):

qui la [sc. Nostre Dame] sert de cuer, il a bon guerredon ;  
Mais qui sert l'ennemi, qui ne fait se mal non,  
Il en a en la fin le honni du baston  
(Jubinal, *Nouveau Recueil...*, I, 143).

These fairly explicit locutions may have subsequently disappeared from recorded French; but they are closely paralleled by certain usages in modern German and English. *Den Stecken am dreckigen Ort nehmen* is attested in regional (e. g. Swiss) German of the mid-nineteenth century; Spalding cites from 'Jeremias Gotthelf':

1. Nor is there anything very similar among the Carnival practices of modern times described by A. van Gennep, *Manuel de folklore français contemporain*, I, 3 (Paris, 1947), 925-7, cited by Orr and Spalding; in some of the areas there referred to, onlookers are daubed with excrement which in the Metz region may be on the end of a stick, but the essential element of deception is lacking. A closer analogue is found, according to the same work (p. 1109), in certain villages of the Hérault, where a victim is inveigled into putting his hand into a bucket containing excrement concealed under bran; but here there is no stick.

2. Tobler-Lommatzsch IV, 1140, 1141-2. This sense is still given by Cotgrave, who describes it as Picard.

ein Mal muss der Gläubiger den Stecken am dreckigen Ort nehmen, das andere Mal der Schuldner (*Erlebnisse eines Schuldenbauers*, p. 355);

and *to get the dirty end of the stick* can have similar implications in contemporary English :

Belcher's luck [the words form the title of a play under discussion] is to have no luck at all — to get the dirty end of the stick (only he wouldn't say 'dirty' and the squeamish are hereby forewarned) (Philip Hope-Wallace in *The Guardian*, 18 November 1966) <sup>1</sup>.

It may be noted that the figurative sense expressed in these examples by *avoir (or porter) le conchié (or le boni) du bâton, den Stecken am dreckigen Ort nehmen, to get the dirty end of the stick* does not correspond exactly to any of the semantic stages listed by Orr; though the notion of 'being circumvented, deceived' may sometimes be present, the essential meaning is rather 'to have the worst of it', 'to be the loser, to be defeated' or even 'to be punished'. This is, however, a sense easily derived from the original image.

The same sense is also expressed by medieval and modern English locutions with *staff* and later *stick* which, although they refer merely to the *worse end* or the *wrong end* and not specifically to the *dirty end*, are surely of the same origin. Examples in the *O. D. E. P.* <sup>2</sup> (s. *End of the staff*) include, from the sixteenth century,

As we halfe proverbially saie in'englishe, to geve one the worse ende of the staffe (Udall, *Flowers for Latin Speaking*, S 6), and

He schal be sure, asse God me save,  
Eyver the worse yend of the staffe to have  
*Two Coventry C. C. Plays* (E. E. T. S) 45 (A)),

and as early as the fourteenth century, with ellipsis of the words of *the staff*,

Men of that side schal have the wors ende  
(Trevisa, *Higden* (Rolls) II, 29).

Correspondingly, 'to have the best of it', 'to be the winner', comes to

1. Professor Spalding informs me that the cruder form of the locution (with *shit-end*) is known to an informant of his, together with the euphemistic form *to get (or to get held of) the golden end of the sceptre*.

2. *The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs*, compiled by W. G. Smith; 2nd ed. rev. by Sir Paul Harvey (Oxford, 1948). Spellings of medieval quotations from this source have been modernised by the introduction of *th* and *v*.

be expressed by *to get the better end of the staff*<sup>1</sup> or later *the right end of the stick*, as in the seventeenth-century examples :

He having gotten (as wee say) the better end of the staffe, did wrest our wills at his pleasure (Jackson, *Creed*, VIII, viii, 71 in *O. D. E. P.*, ib.),

and, without mention of the staff,

We have rather cheated the devil, than he us ; and have gotten the better end of him (Sanderson, *Serm.*, II, 97, in *O. E. D.* s. v. *end* sb. 24).

It therefore seems probable that various idiomatic expressions in French containing the word *bout*<sup>2</sup> (without *du baston*) go back ultimately to the same source, e. g. :

Mathieu fut un de ceux eslus d'y aller... et ce bout lui dona Jean Lyon [Jean Lyon lui joua ce tour] (Froissart, éd. Buchon, II, ii, 53 in Littré s. v. *bout* Hist.);

En Bourgogne se faisoit la guerre tousjours, et n'en pouvoit avoir le roi le bout, pource que les Allemands faisoient quelque peu de faveur au prince d'Orenge (Commynes, éd. Calmette, II, 260);

Tenir le bon bout de son côté. C'est conserver toujours l'avantage de la possession de quelque chose (P.-J. Le Roux, *Dictionnaire comique...* (Lyon, 1752), s. v. *bout*).

It is also possible that it was the 'trick of the dirty stick' that was originally alluded to in the locution *le tour du baston*<sup>3</sup>. All the examples of

1. A variant form, perhaps of independent origin, is found in 'He has the better end of the string, he has the advantage in this case', cited by *O. D. E. P.* (s. *Better end*) from J. Kelly, *A Complete Collection of Scottish Proverbs* (1721).

2. The locution *se mettre* (or *se tenir*) *sur le bon* (or *le beau*) *bout*, attested from the fifteenth century on, may well be of different origin : see (s. v. *bout* in each case) Godefroy, *Complément* : 'se mettre dans une situation favorable' ; Huguet : '(se mettre) dans une situation, un état favorable, avantageux, où l'on brille, mener une vie agréable' ; Cotgrave : 'To stand upon his good parts, behavior, or birth' ; Le Roux : 'Le porter beau, se porter proprement, faire de la dépense en habits, faire figure' ; Littré : 'se mettre sur un bon pied, faire plus de dépenses'.

3. The origin of the modern French locution *le tour du bâton* 'illicit secret profit' has been much discussed ; the *bâton* in question has been variously explained as a weapon skilfully used in combat, a staff thrown and caught by a juggler, or the wand of a conjurer performing a vanishing trick. It is noteworthy that Cotgrave distinguishes between *le tour du baston* 'the tricks and sleights of the world' and *le tour du baston* 'the fees, or vailes, comming in to an officer, over and besides his ordinarie wages', i. e. profits or perquisites, without any implication of secrecy or abuse. The modern French usage may therefore be due to a conflation of two distinct locutions of different origins. The problem is further complicated, however, by the varied senses of the locution *le ru du baston* : see Godefroy, s. v. *ru* 2.

*savoir* (or *entendre*) *le tour du* (or *de son*) *baston*, *bailler du tour du baston* cited from texts of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries by Littré (s. vv. *bâton*, Hist. and *tour*, Hist.) and Godefroy (*Complément*, s. v. *tourn*) appear to express the notion of getting the better of an opponent by deception; and this is perhaps confirmed by the entry in Cotgrave (1632 ed., s. v. *tour*; similarly also s. v. *baston*):

Il sçait bien le tour du baston. Hee is a craftie, subtile or cunning fellow; hee knowes well enough the trickes, and sleights of the world.

In a second group of locutions deriving from the image of the 'dirty stick', still represented in modern French, the stick itself becomes a metaphorical allusion to personal character. The use of *bâton merdeux* in reference to a person of difficult disposition who 'needs careful handling' goes back at least to the beginning of the nineteenth century; Lorédan Larchey<sup>1</sup> cites from D'Hautel's *Dictionnaire du bas-langage ou des manières de parler usitées parmi le peuple* (1808):

*Bâton merdeux*, homme brusque qui repousse tous ceux qui s'adressent à lui.

Littré (s. v. *merdeux*) gives as current:

C'est un bâton merdeux, on ne sait par quel bout le prendre, c'est un homme difficultueux, peu traitable;

and similar entries are found in various more recent dictionaries, though some of these give preference to the euphemistic variant *bâton épineux*, e. g. Robert (s. v. *bâton*):

Cet homme est un bâton épineux (vulg. merdeux): on ne sait par quel bout le prendre.

It seems probable that the same image is responsible for locutions without specific reference to the stick such as *ne pas savoir par quel bout prendre quelqu'un* (used in the last two definitions above) and *prendre quelqu'un* (also *quelque chose*) *par le bon bout*, which are attested at a much earlier date; Littré cites inter alia (s. v. *bout*, Hist. and 3<sup>o</sup>):

Il est à avoir par beau et par humilité; et pris par le bon bout, c'est le meilleur des bons (G. Chastellain, *Chron.*, ed. Buchon, I, ch. 25).

Et son coeur, croyez-moi, n'est point roche, après tout,  
A quiconque la sait prendre par le bon bout,

(Molière, *l'Étourdi*, III, ii).

1. *Dictionnaire... de l'argot parisien* (Paris, 1872), s. v. *Bâton*.

It is also possible that the same allusion, with a euphemistic alteration of a cruder adjective, lies behind the English use of *crooked stick* in the sense of 'a perverse, cross-grained person'<sup>1</sup>; for *crooked* as applied figuratively to persons usually means not 'ill-tempered, difficult' but 'dishonest'.

A last group of 'dirty stick' locutions, attested in modern French and modern German, derives not (as in the cases so far considered) from the notion of the choice, or imposition, of one or the other end of the stick, seen from the point of view of the two participants in the 'game', but from the notion of the evil intentions of the person who conceals the filth from the victim. So in the French proverbial locution registered by various lexicographers such as Littré (s. v. *merde* 1°) :

Il y a de la merde au bâton, au bout du bâton, se dit d'une affaire où il y a quelque chose de honteux.

For German, Spalding cites from Weigand's *Deutsches Wörterbuch* (1857)<sup>2</sup> :

Es ist Dreck am Stecken : es sind böse Absichten dahinter verborgen,

and a similar sense is recorded in later dictionaries down to Trübner, II (1940), 82 :

Er hat Dreck am Stecken, sagt man von einem Heuchler, der böse Absichten... hat.

Many of the applications that we have so far seen of the locutions derived from the image of the 'dirty stick' show an evolution of sense that is quite familiar in the history of proverbial and metaphorical locutions : the average speaker gradually ceased to be aware of the existence of rustic tricks played upon the unwary with a stick dipped in filth, and continued to use the locutions as abstract or at least unmotivated idioms. This is no doubt the status, for most contemporary speakers and writers of French and English, of *tenir le bon bout*, glossed by, e. g., the *Dictionnaire Général* (s. v. *tenir* 1°) 'avoir la position la plus avantageuse'; of *prendre une affaire, une personne par le bon bout*, glossed (ib. s. v. *bout* 1°) 'le côté par lequel il faut prendre un objet'; of *to have (or get) the right (or the wrong) end of the stick*, glossed by the *O. E. D.* (s. v. *stick* sb. 1 14) 'to have the advantage or

1. *O. E. D.*, s. v. *stick* sb. 1 12. But there may be no need to look further for its source than the image of a crooked stick which will not easily fit into a faggot.

2. Spalding also cites an earlier mention, '*Drek am Steken haben* (Volksmund)', given without gloss by J. Eiselein, *Die Sprichwörter und Sinnreden...* (1838).

the contrary in a bargain or a contest'. In other cases, however, a new verbal association has arisen, or a new concrete motivation has been sought; and this has sometimes led to remarkable changes in the use and interpretation of the locutions.

Thus *tenir le bon bout* is sometimes equated with *tenir le haut bout*<sup>1</sup>, which originally referred to 'the upper end of the table, the place of honour', and therefore had a perceptibly different figurative sense; on the other hand, at least one reputable lexicographer places *tenir le bon bout* immediately after the nautical *bon bout* 'hauling end of a rope', apparently implying that this is its origin<sup>2</sup>. In contemporary English, *to get* (or more usually *to have got* or *to have got hold of*) *the wrong end of the stick* is used predominantly in the sense of 'to have got a story wrong, not know the facts of the case' (*O. E. D.*, s. v. *stick* sb.<sup>1</sup> 14)<sup>3</sup>, perhaps through association with other proverbial expressions such as *to take the wrong way to the wood*, *to have* (or *get* or *take*) *the wrong sow by the ear* 'to get hold of, hit upon, the wrong person or thing; to take an incorrect view; to arrive at a wrong conclusion, solution, etc.' (*O. E. D.*, s. v. *sow* sb.<sup>1</sup>). Some lexicographers of French attribute to the locution *bâton merdeux* not only the traditional sense of 'personnage désagréable, ayant mauvais caractère, qu'on ne sait par quel bout prendre', but also that of 'personnage méprisable ou méprisé', in which it becomes a synonym of *merdeux* used as a noun without *bâton*<sup>4</sup>. The most striking sense-developments, however, are those of *Dreck am Stecken haben* in modern German, according to the authorities cited by Spalding. The *Ergänzungs-Wörterbuch* (1885) to the dictionary of D. Sanders glosses *hast du Dreck am Stecken* by 'klebst

1. E. g. 'Tenir le haut (or bon) bout, to have the whip hand, to rule the roost', L. E. Kastner and J. Marks, *A Glossary of Colloquial and Popular French* (London, 1929), s. v. *bout* 17. The confusion between the two locutions perhaps goes back as far as Cotgrave, who ascribes the senses of both to *gagner le haut bout*: 'Gagner le haut bout. To take, or set himself in, the highest place of a table; also, (in contentions, or trials) to get the upper hand, carry away the best prize, win the spurres' (s. v. *bout*; similarly s. v. *gagner* with the two senses in the reverse order).

2. *Harrap's Standard French and English Dictionary*, ed. J. E. Mansion, I French-English, s. v. *bout* 2.

3. So apparently already in the seventeenth century in the form with *staff*; *O. E. D.* quotes (s. v. *staff* sb.<sup>1</sup> 5) 'And though the Rule be but obscure, they are apt to take the staff by the wrong end, and apply it to their own pleasures' (Foulis, *Rom. Treasons*, 82).

4. E. g. H. Bauche, *Le Langage populaire*, 4<sup>e</sup> éd. (Paris, 1946), and *Harrap's Standard French and English Dictionary*, I (both s. v. *merdeux*).



an der Pfanne', i. e. 'you have had to pay for your sins, you have suffered punishment'. A variant of this sense, fairly widely attested in literary texts and in dictionaries, and given by Trübner in addition to that mentioned above, is 'to have something on one's conscience', to be guilty oneself (and therefore in no position to reproach others)<sup>1</sup>. These modifications may have been made possible in the first instance by the increasing tendency to understand *Dreck* in the more general and less repugnant sense of 'dirt' wherever the context does not positively impose the sense of 'excrement', and the increasing obsolescence of *Stecken* in ordinary speech; the locution *Dreck am Stecken haben*, having lost contact with its original concrete basis, may then have come to be associated with other locutions referring to dirt or stains, such as *einen Flecken auf der Ehre haben*, *keine reine Weste haben* and perhaps particularly *Dreck am Ärmel haben*, and therefore to be used in somewhat similar contexts. This in turn permitted an entirely new interpretation of the concrete elements in *Dreck am Stecken haben*: *Dreck* was taken as 'mud' and *Stecken* as 'walking-stick'. Hence the explanation of the locution advanced in Trübner and in H. Küpfer's *Wörterbuch der deutschen Umgangssprache*, I (1955; 3rd ed. 1963): the image is stated to be that of a person who attempts to conceal the fact that he has walked through mud (e. g. by cleaning his shoes), but is betrayed by the dirt on the end of his walking-stick.

It is probably impossible, on the basis of the data at present available, to determine whether the 'dirty stick' locutions represent historically a case of polygenesis or of diffusion — whether they arose independently, as a result of similar rustic practices, in the different speech-communities, or were borrowed from French by English and German<sup>2</sup>. The changes that have taken place in their use and interpretation in all three languages, however, are characteristic of the evolution of many proverbial and metaphorical expressions<sup>3</sup>. The fundamental condition for such linguistic changes is no doubt some change, ultimately social in character, affecting the objective reference, the 'vehicle' of the metaphor. An idiom thus cut off from its concrete origins is particularly liable to be caught

1. Spalding also notes that in the *Wörterbuch der elsässischen Mundarten* of E. Martin and H. Lienhart (1899) the meaning of *er hat Dreck am Stecken* is recorded for the village of Dürrenenzen as 'er hat Unglück, Pech', a sense not attested elsewhere.

2. Cf. Spalding, *art. cit.*, p. 47.

3. See, for example, the present writer's article 'L'Heure du berger' in *Studies... presented to John Orr* (Manchester, 1953), p. 245.

up in the orbit of other idioms containing an at least superficially similar vehicle, and consequently to be provided — at any rate in the minds of some speakers — with a new (though historically spurious) motivation. This in turn may lead to a change in the application of the locution, the ‘tenor’ of the metaphor. The case is in many respects parallel to that of the associative or ‘popular’ etymologies that may come to be imposed on individual words as a consequence of homonymic attraction, a phenomenon of which so many interesting examples have been studied by John Orr<sup>1</sup>.

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1. See especially ‘On Homonymics’ in *Studies... presented to Mildred K. Pope* (Manchester, 1939), p. 253, reprinted in *Words and Sounds in English and French* (Oxford, 1953), p. 91 and in *Three Studies in Homonymics* (Edinburgh, 1962), p. 1.