



## ARTICLES

### THE ETYMOLOGY OF THE WORD *FAGGOT*

by Warren Johansson

[Editor's Note: As a service to our readers we are printing the following remarks, which were originally embodied in a private letter written in December 1975; the letter has become something of an underground classic. Dr. Johansson has supplied an appendix, updating his original points, which we print also.]

The question of the origin of the word *faggot* as an epithet applied to homosexuals is of more than etymological interest because of a myth that has gained a tenacious foothold in our movement. To quote one recent source: "During the Spanish Inquisition when heretics were burned at the stake, presumed male homosexuals were considered the only thing low enough to help kindle the fires. Bundled up with faggots of wood, they were tied to the base of the stake at which the heretic was to die. Some say that the same procedure was used during the witch burnings at Salem, Massachusetts." The putative origins of this entirely fictional notion are sometimes referred back to the high or even early middle ages.

The persistence of this myth in our midst is phenomenal and disturbing. Homosexuals have endured enough real hardships and persecutions in Christian society without there being any need to invent new ones. The continued fostering of this myth does no credit either to our pride or our devotion to scholarship.]

With reference to the etymology of *faggot* in the meaning "effeminate homosexual", I shall in the following pages set forth my arguments for deriving it from the dialectal word *faggot* as a contemptuous term for a fat, slovenly woman.

As to the ultimate origin of French *fagot*/English *faggot*, I agree with the brief note by Ferdinand Holt-hausen, *Germanisch-romanische Monatsschrift*, 20: 67 (1932), who derives both from the Norwegian dialect word *fagg* "heap, bundle" alongside Modern Icelandic *föggur* "luggage, traps" (cf. the English designation of a woman as "baggage").

There are three forms of the English word: *faggot*, attested by the OED from circa 1300; *fadge*, attested from 1588; and *faggald*, which the *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* (vol. 2, p. 385) first records from 1375. Of these three only *faggot* and *fadge* develop the secondary meaning "woman", and only *faggot* has the tertiary meaning "homosexual". None of the three overlaps with *fag* in any of its known meanings before the pair *faggot/fag* make their appearance in the 1920s.

John S. Farmer and W. E. Henley, in *Slang and its Analogues Past and Present*, vol. 2 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1891), pp. 366-367, have for the word *faggot* the following meanings:

subs. 1. A term of opprobrium applied to woman; a 'baggage'.

Verb. 2 (venery).—To copulate; also to frequent the company of loose women.

Joseph Wright, in *The English Dialect Dictionary*, vol. 2 (London: Henry Frowde, 1900), p. 278, records the word *faggot* in many dialects as "A term of contempt or reproach applied to women and children; a slattern, a worthless woman".

Thus we see that the homosexual sense of the term was unknown in England even at the close of the last century; it appears for the first time in America in Louis E. Jackson and C. R. Hellyer, *A Vocabulary of Criminal Slang with some examples of common usages* (Portland, Oregon: Modern Printing Co., 1914), p. 30 s. v. drag, Noun:

Amongst female impersonators on the stage and men of dual sex instincts "drag" denotes female attire donned by a male. Example: "All the fagots (sissies) will be dressed in drag at the ball tonight."

This quotation, which is particularly valuable as there is no separate entry in the work for *faggot*, precedes by nine years the earliest attestation of *fag*, which occurs in Nels Anderson, *The Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man* (Chicago: At the University Press, 1923), p. 103:

Fairies or Fags are men or boys who exploit sex for profit.

This establishes for *fag* the meaning of "hustler" in the hobo milieu of the early 1920s.

Now my principal argument for considering *fag* secondary to *faggot* is that *-ot* is a diminutive suffix in Romance and in all dialects of Old French, but not in Germanic and even less in Modern English; on this point see Bengt Hasselrot, *Etudes sur la formation diminutive dans les langues romanes*, Uppsala Universitets Arsskrift, 1957: 11, pp. 103-118, 170. On the other hand, the creation of new monosyllabic words by apocope is a characteristic of American slang. My authority for this is an article on "Americanisms" by Ernest Weekley, *Adjectives—And Other Words* (London: John Murray, 1930), p. 182:

But brevity is perhaps the chief feature. This is attained by apocope, as in *vamp* for *vampire*, *mutt* for *muttonhead*, *fan* for *fanatic*, (apparently), etc., or by the substitution of an expressive monosyllable or compound of monosyllables for a longer word or description. It is here that American slang has made a real and useful contribution to colloquial English.

That is to say, *fag* must be a secondary formation from *faggot* just as *vamp* is from *vampire* for the simple reason that the latter (a French loan word in the first instance, a Macedonian one in the second) cannot by any process of derivation be obtained from the former. Added to this is the fact that *faggot* makes its first appearance in a milieu as far removed, socially and geographically, from the world of the English public school of the Edwardian era as could well be imagined. Your hypothesis would be valid if it could be shown that *fag* acquired the meaning "homosexual" in England and in circles that could be expected to have familiarity with the practice of "fagging"; but this is simply not the case.

It should also be noted that the meaning "woman" or "homosexual" is totally unknown to French *fagot*, as witnessed by the entry in the *Dictionnaire universel* of Antoine Furetière at the end of the seventeenth century s. v. *Fagot*:

On dit qu'il y a bien de la difference entre une femme & un *fagot*, en parlant de deux choses fort dissemblables; mais la plus grande difference que l'on y trouve, c'est qu'une femme toujours parle, & un *fagot* ne dit mot.

That is to say, if either of the two meanings inhered ever so faintly to the French word, the saying would be absurd or comic. The same is true of a quotation in OED for the word *ingle*, which has two meanings, "fire, house-fire" and "catamite". Under the first the entry reads:

1820 Keats *Fancy* 16

Sit thee by the *ingle*, when  
The sear *faggot* blazes bright.

All these texts and references establish *faggot* in the meaning "homosexual" as an Americanism of the twentieth century, and *fag* as an apocopated derivative. The derivations of *faggot* "homosexual" from the Medieval practice of burning heretics and sodomites at the stake can safely be relegated to folk etymology.

#### ADDENDUM

In my letter of 1975 I set forth my reasons for doubting that the words *faggot* and *fag* derived from the use of *fag* "lowerclassman performing menial services for an upperclassman" in the British public schools, and for rejecting the folk etymology that associates *faggot* with the presumed burning of witches and sodomites on a common pyre in the Middle Ages.

Subsequent reflection and research have deepened my understanding of the etymological problems posed by this pair of words, so I am presenting my newest findings. *Faggot*, as the reader will remember, has three meanings: 1) "bundle of sticks of wood", 2) "fat, slovenly woman", and 3) "effeminate homosexual"; and to explain the rise of the tertiary meaning I must first delve into the primary and secondary ones.

Late Middle English borrowed the word *fagot* from Old French, where it was in turn a loan word from Germanic, the nearest identifiable source being the Norwegian dialect term *fagg* "bundle, heap". Cognates of the letter within Indo-European are Slovenian *pāz* "wall of boards set upright" and Classical Greek *antipēx*, *antipēgos* "box or basket, probably of wickerwork", a technical term of the woodworking craft. These words have been studied by Rudolf Meringer, "Wörter und Sachen", *Indogermanische Forschungen*, 21: 312 (1907), and by Leif Bergson, "Zur Bedeutung von *antipēx* bei Euripides", *Eranos*, 58: 12-19 (1960). In Old French *fagot* belongs to a set of expressions linked to forestry that were borrowed into Romance from Germanic in the Middle Ages, as Eugen Lerch showed in "Germanische Wörter in romanischen Sprachräumen", *Zeitschrift für Geopolitik*, 19: 19, 22-23 (1942).

What has thrown all previous investigators off the track is the circumstance that the dialect words *faggot/fadge* "fat, slovenly woman" have a wholly distinct etymon within Germanic, one akin to Norwegian *bagge* "obese, clumsy creature (chiefly of animals)", which is recorded by Ivar Aasen, *Norsk Ordbog med dansk Forklaring* (Christiania: P. T.

Mallings Boghandel, 1873), p. 37. The distant relatives of the word group are Greek *pēgós* "well-built, solid" and Sanskrit *pajrāh* "firm, solid, fat", to which I would add the English adjective *puddy* "short and plump", with yet another variation on the initial labial; it made its way from the autochthonous dialects into the literary language only in the second quarter of the nineteenth century.

It so happens that Norwegian *bagge* and its cognates have been discussed at length in the literature of historical linguistics, in particular by Otto von Friesen, *Om de germanska mediageminatorna med särskild hänsyn til de nordiska språken*, Upsala universitets Årsskrift 1897, 2, pp. 97-99; by Friedrich Kauffmann in a review of the dissertation in *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie*, 32: 255-56 (1900); and by Elof Hellquist, "Några anmärkningar om de germanska kort- och smeknamnen samt de germanska mediageminatorna", *Nordisk Tidsskrift för Filologi*, 3rd ser., 12: 52-54 (1903). The essence of their findings was that the doubling of the medial consonant in such words as *fagg* and *bagge* had a diminutive and hypocoristic nuance, which is reiterated in Romance borrowings like *fagot* with the Old French diminutive ending, and also in another set of words that is unquestionably derived from *bagge*: French *bagasse*, Catalan *bagassa*, Spanish *bagasa*, Portuguese *bagaxa*, and Italian *bagascia*, all designations for "prostitute" with a strongly perjorative accent. It is interesting that the verb—which is unknown to American English—to *faggot* "to frequent the company of loose women" matches Catalan *bagassejar* in exactly the same meaning. Also, in Swedish dialects *bagge* means "boy, youngster", while in the Portuguese dialect of Vila Real *bagôcho* is a word for "little boy", see A. Gomes Pereira, *Revista Lusitana*, 15: 333 (1912). Last of all, the *Trésor de la langue française*, IV, 11, mentions the Provençal oath *bougre de bagasse!*

That the two words *fagg* and *bagge* retained a certain association even in their Romance environment is shown by the phrase *faguotz e bagatge* that occurs in an Old Provençal *Histoire de la guerre des albigeois* published in the *Histoire générale de Languedoc*, nouvelle édition, vol. 8 (Toulouse: Édouard Privat, 1879), col. 33. Also, *fagot* is paralleled in the French argot by the form *bagots* for *bagages*.

Hence we should not be surprised that the two words fell together sometime during the Late Middle or Early Modern English period, yielding *faggot/fadge* in their primary and secondary meanings. As for the tertiary meaning, my hypothesis is that in American English *faggot* usurped the semantic role of *bugger* (Old French *bougre*) in British usage. Edward Sagarin, for example, wrote in the book *The Homosexual in America* (1951), p. 104:

My English friends tell me that in England the word *bugger* has an extremely hostile connotation, comparable to the worst terms used in the United States.

On p. 105 of the same work he asserted that the word *fag*

is particularly humiliating. The evil that it carries can only be compared . . . to some of

the worst terms that America's dominant culture has used to humiliate and suppress racial groups.

The similarity in the phonetic and orthographic shape of the two words must have facilitated the transition. It is worthy of mention that although Noah Webster discarded the second *g* in *fagot* as early as his *Compendious Dictionary of the English Language* of 1806, the British spelling has reasserted itself and is in the usage of movement writers since 1969 unquestionably the standard one, in contrast with *wagon* which has totally displaced the British form in America.

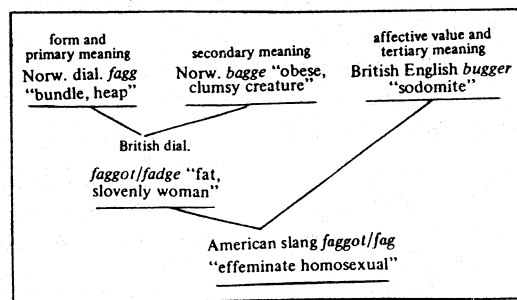
As for the British use of *fag* in the public schools, it should be noted that the practice of *fagging* never existed in American schools founded on the English model, with the exception of St. Mark's, which had a mere 22 graduates in the Class of 1914, so that any possible impact on American criminal slang may be excluded forthwith. On this see *A Handbook of the Best Private Schools* for 1915, pp. 272-73 and Dixon Wecter, *The Saga of American Society* (New York: Scribner, 1937), p. 241.

From the purely linguistic side, the American slang word *fag* has a British counterpart, and it was right to look for one; but the term in question is *sod*, defined by Farmer and Henley, *op. cit.*, vol. 6 (1903), p. 293 as "A sodomist, hence a violent term of abuse", and hence matching Sagarin's specifications. But the word *faggery* is unknown to American speech, which has instead created the derivative *faggotry* from the basic form. By a curious parallel the French of Belgium, in the early years of this century, still had the word *fagoterie* "enterprise where faggots are sold", as mentioned by Comte Amédée de Caix de Saint-Aymour, "Belgicisms", *Revue hebdomadaire*, 20<sup>e</sup> année, tome 8 (August 12, 1911), p. 261.

In conclusion, I would concede that the independent existence of *faggot* and *fag* as terms denoting persons facilitated the reception of the complementary pair *faggot/fag* in the meaning "effeminate homosexual" in American English slang in the second and third decades of this century; but I maintain that the starting point for the whole development was the British dialect word *faggot* "fat, slovenly woman", cognate with Norwegian *bagge* and French *bagasse*.

My findings may be summarized in the table herewith:

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Clearly this is a problem beyond the competence of the layman to solve, even if the folk etymology could have been discredited by a mere glance into the lawbooks that would have informed any investigator that the penalty for both witchcraft and buggery in England was death by *hanging*. But during the first decade of its public existence our movement was burdened with a multitude of incompetent and irresponsible individuals whose chief talent was for self-promotion clothed in ill-founded rhetoric.

The heroic period of the gay movement in America is now ended; and it will never return. The advances of the 1980s and the decades to follow will in all likelihood be achieved by the experts and specialists quietly and unobtrusively serving the cause to which they are devoted and true.

