

CHAPTER 8

Insults

This book teaches how to speak like a pirate. William Fly taught how to die like one.

After being taken prisoner by the resourceful William Atkinson (see Chapter 7), Fly was tried, convicted, and sentenced to hang. The next days of his life were likely the most principled he ever lived. In prison awaiting execution, Fly refused to eat. He insisted on New England rum instead.

Invited to Sunday church services before the execution, Fly's three condemned comrades accepted with eleventh-hour contrition. But Fly declined. No need to die a villain *and* a hypocrite. Arriving at the gallows, Fly sported a small bouquet of flowers, as if at a light social occasion, smiling and greeting breezily the young ladies in attendance. He leapt nimbly up the scaffold steps, like a schoolboy on holiday.

And when Fly looked up at the noose dangling above, he did not bite his lip in terror, or bleat out miserable expressions of regret, or attempt thoughtful pronouncements on the sinuous path his life had taken. Fly instead told the hangman he did not understand his trade, then fixed the knot himself and died with his own handiwork bearing him up. (*General History of the Pyrates* 606–13; *Pirates of the New England Coast* 328–37; *Villains of All Nations* 1–4; *Under the Black Flag* 239)

Sometimes an insult is the best last word.

What's the difference between an insult and an epithet (Chapter 9)? They are the same in that both identify something bad about the addressee. They are different in that insults are statements, whereas epithets are just name-calling. For example, one might call another a bad sailor by using an insult ("tailor is yer trade") or by using an epithet ("yer a lubber"). The insult is substantive and often observational. The epithet is quick and cookie-cutter.

Below is a list of insults. Definitions and explanations are provided only where meaning is not otherwise apparent. As the size of their respective lists in the *Primer* reflects, threats and curses are much more often deployed in pirate talk than insults for the purpose of antagonizing others. Why? One reason may be that insults depend in some part for their effectiveness on the speaker's knowledge of the addressee. When the speaker does not know the addressee well, an insult might ring hollow, but a threat or curse will still fly. (Another reason may be that sharp insults are simply harder to write well and therefore find themselves less often in the mouths of fictional characters.)

See Chapter 11: Retorts for standard methods of answering insults.



Beezelbub himself could hardly desire better company [Bezzel-barrb/boohb 'im-seff cood 'ahrrd/'ard/hahrrd-ly der-zyee-arr/err be'er'gooder cahm/carrm/coohm-p'ny]

Used to describe someone as profoundly evil or objectionable.

"For my part, I don't know and I don't care what the Gospel does to them, but I know that when any o' the islands chance to get it, trade goes all smooth and easy; but where they ha'nt got it, **Beezelbub himself could hardly desire better company.**" (pirate, *The Coral Island* 213–14)

the blood in your veins is (skim) milk [t' bloohd/blut i/'n ya/yarr/ye/yer/yere/yore vayeens be (skem) melk]

"I weep because I am woman, after all, but in my heart I hate you and with my soul I despise you, for you are but a mock man, —**the blood in your veins skim milk!**" (Captain Jo, *Martin Conisby's Vengeance* 33)

do you call that a head on your shoulders or a blessed dead eye? [d'/does 'ee/ya/ye/yer cawrl tharrt a 'ead/hayd arrn/o' ya/yarr/ye/yer/yere/yore sho'/shool-ders arr a blass-erd/ert/ett dayd eye'ee?]

< "And what was he saying to you?" "I don't rightly know, sir." "**Do you call that a head on your shoulders, or a blessed dead eye?** Don't rightly know,

don't you!> (Long John Silver & Tom Morgan, *Treasure Island* 44, Chap. 8)

here's fine stuff for the gallows ['ee'arr/'ee'err/'ere/hee'arr/hee'err is\be fawn/fyeene starf/stoohf farr/fer t' gallwoos]

"I' faith! **Here's fine stuff for the gallows!**" (Adam Penfeather, looking over the twelve new men in his company, *Black Bartlemy's Treasure* 111)

hold your tongue and your whinin' for them that's at your beck and call, because I ain't [hol'/hoold/ho'oold/'ol/'old ya/yarr/ye/yer/yere/yore toohngue an/'n' ya/yarr/ye/yer/yere/yore a-wawn/wyeen-in' farr/fer dem/'em/te'm\dose/those/t'ose\dey/they tharrt's a/hat ya/yarr/ye/yer/yere/yore back an/'n' cawrl, b'-carrse/cawrse l'ee aren't/bain't/ben't/hain't/i'n't]

"Now you **hold your tongue and your whinin' for them that's at your beck and call, because I ain't.**" (Purity Pinker, replying hotly to the supercilious Lady Harwood and her abusive comments, "The Adventures of Long John Silver: Dead Reckoning" 20:57)

I leave it to fancy where your mothers was that let you come to sea [l'ee leaf ett/'n/'t t'/ta/ter fancy wayarr/wayerr/wharr ya/yarr/ye/yer/yere/yore maaht/mo'/mudd-ers warss\warr/were tharrt laaht/le' 'ee/ya/ye/yer cahm/carrm/coohm t'/ta/ter sea]

A brilliantly concise insult that indicts both the addressee's competence as a seaman and his mother's virtue (by its suggestion that she may have been where she should not have).

"You've neither sense nor memory, and **I leave it to fancy where your mothers was that let you come to sea.**" (Long John Silver, denouncing George Merry and his colleagues, *Treasure Island* 164, Chap. 29)

I were wiser to have no truck with __, so I take my leave of you [l'ee warr\warss/was waw/wyee-ser t'/ta/ter 'aff/'ave/ha'/haff no'oo troohk weth/wi'/wiff/witt __, so'oo l'ee tayeek me/myee leaf o'\on 'ee/ya/ye/yer]

To have truck with is to have any dealings or involvement with. The speaker fills in the blank by specifying a denigrating quality, characteristic, or phenomenon, then equates leaving the addressee's presence with ridiculing himself of it.

"**I were wiser to have no truck with Iniquity. So, I take my leave of you, Sir Roguery!**" (Adam Penfeather, *Adam Penfeather, Buccaneer* 279)

I've seen street-walkers more womanly [l'eev seen street-warrkers marr/moor womern/wom'n-ly]

Used to deride a woman for ill-mannered behavior or some other lack of propriety.

"What are you? A woman? Od's blood, ma'am, in London Town I've seen **poor street-walkers** cawrl that were more womanly." (Peter Blood, *The Fortunes of Captain Blood* 100)

leave ships to men as can handle them [leaf sheps t'/ta/ter men as cayn/kin 'andle dem/'em/t'em\dey/they]

"Faith, Doctor, ye were best to get back to your cupping and bleeding, and **leave ships to men as can handle them.**" (Captain Easterling, *Captain Blood Returns* 28–29)

the smell of you alone is enough to wrinkle the noses of pigs [t' smaaht o'\on 'ee/ya/

ye/yer aloone/alo'oone be enarrff/enow/'nough t'/ta/ter wrenkle t' noo/no'oo-sers o'\on pegs]

"Why, **the smell of you alone is enough to wrinkle the noses of pigs.**" (Purity Pinker, "Long John Silver's Return to Treasure Island" 34:18)

tailor is your trade [tayee-larr be ya/yarr/ye/yer/yere/yore trayeede] you're not fit to be seaman or pirate

"Sea! Gentlemen o' fortune! I reckon **tailors is your trade.**" (Long John Silver, denouncing George Merry and his colleagues, *Treasure Island* 164, Chap. 29)

that's not the only kind of fool you are [tharrt's narrt t' on'y kin-da/der foo'ell 'ee/ya/ye/yer be]

Used after a criticism or insult to introduce additional ones.

"Ye can't be much of a hand at a bargain; and **that's not the only kind of fool you are.** How long did you think you'd live to enjoy the money?" (Peter Blood, *The Fortunes of Captain Blood* 166)

there is more fire in a small, dead fish than in all your slow body [tharr/theyarr/theyerr be marr/moor farr/fyarr i/'n a smawrl, dayd fesh 'n/thayn\ nor i/'n awrl ya/yarr/ye/yer/yere/yore slowoo bah'ee/barrdy]

"Oh, verily **there is more life, more fire and passion in a small, dead fish than in all thy great, slow body!**" (Captain Jo, *Martin Conisby's Vengeance* 48)

there is more of life in my little finger than in all your carcass [tharr/theyarr/theyerr be marr/moor o'\on lawf/lyeefe i/'n me/myee lil' feng/finn-er 'n/thayn\ nor i/'n awrl ya/yarr/ye/yer/yere/yore cahrr-cahss/cush/kerss]

"Ah, by God, **there is more of vigorous life in my little finger than in all your great, heavy, clod-like carcass.**" (Captain Jo, *Martin Conisby's Vengeance* 33)

what fool has broke adrift here? [wharrt foo'ell 'as brooke/bro'ooke a-dreff/dreft/driff

['ee'arr/'ee'err/'ere/hee'arr/hee'err?]) what kind of idiot are you?

This insult is particularly effective for its dismissive treatment of the addressee as a third-party subject of mocking inquiry.

“What fool has broke adrift here?” (watch aboard the *Dolphin*, losing patience after receiving nonsensical answers to his hails, *The Red Rover* 84)

yellow was never a pirate's color [yaahl-ler/lowoo warss\warr/were nebber/ne'er a py-eeret's/errt's/raah'ts cahler]]

Used to express disdain for another's show of cowardice.

“You've turned your hand against your Captain's back. **Yellow was never a pirate's color.**” (Captain Vallo, “The Crimson Pirate” 1:02:56)

you always was trouble [ya/ye/yer al-way/wayees warss\warr/were troohble]

“**You always was trouble**, blast ya.” (Mordachai Fingers, “Cutthroat Island” 34:34)

you are but a mock man [ya/ye/yer be barrt a marrk man]

“I weep because I am woman, after all, but in my heart I hate you and with my soul I despise you, for **you are but a mock man**, —the blood in your veins skim milk!” (Captain Jo, *Martin Conisby's Vengeance* 33)

you got no more brain than a sea-turtle [ya/ye/yer garrt no'oo marr/moor brayeen 'n/thayn\nor a sea-tarrtle]

“Israel, **you got no more brain than a sea-turtle.**” (Long John Silver, “Treasure Island” [1990] 46:32)

you have the head of a chicken, the heart of a yellow dog, and the bowels of a worm [ya/ye/yer 'aff/'ave/ha/'haff t' 'ead/hayd o'on a check-ern, t' 'ahr't/'eart/hahr't o'on a yaahl-ler/lowoo dahg/darrg/dorr, an/'n' t' bowoo-ells o'on a warrm]

“The man as won't take good rum **hath the head of a chicken, the heart of a yellow dog, and the bowels of a w-worm**, and bone-rot him, says I.” (Abnegation Mings, *Black Bartlemy's Treasure* 32)

you should be fed on pap and suckets [ya/ye/yer shoood be fad arrn'o' parrp an/'n' sarrk/soohk-erts] you are a child

Pap is soft baby food, and more specifically bread boiled in or softened with milk or water (though the insult arguably borrows on the fact that “pap” can also mean “nipple”). Suckets are syrupy or candied pieces of fruit, fruit peel, or vegetable.

“I am used to outfacing men, but you—ha, **you should be fed on pap and suckets**, you that are no man!” (Captain Jo, *Martin Conisby's Vengeance* 30)

you should be more of man and less of fish [ya/ye/yer shoood be marr/moor o'on man an/'n' lass o'on fesh]

Used variously to characterize another as spineless (*i.e.* weak or cowardly), slippery (*i.e.* untrustworthy or evasive or temperamental), or cold-blooded (*i.e.* without passion or mercy).

“Ah, **had you been more of man and less of fish**, I had made you captain of this ship ...” (Captain Jo, *Martin Conisby's Vengeance* 70)

your master is the devil [ya/yarr/ye/yer/yere/yore marrster be t' daahv/dayv/debb/div-il] you're evil

“Paddle, rogue Johnny, paddle, —for **thy master the Devil's** abroad ...” (Japhet Bly, *Winds of Chance* 273)

your mind's unhinged [ya/yarr/ye/yer/yere/yore mawnd's/min's/myeen's/myeend's arrn/hun/oohn-henged/'inged] you're crazy

“**Your mind's un'inged.**” (Long John Silver, “The Adventures of Long John Silver: The Necklace” 19:02)

your mother turns an honest woman [ya/yarr/ye/yer/yere/yore maahth/mo'/mudd-er tar-rns a hon-erst womern/wom'n]

This premise of an insult is folded easily into various constructions, *e.g.*: “I'll be tellin' ye where the gold's buried when your mother turns an honest woman.” “Faith, I believe ye. As I believe your mother's turned an honest woman, hah!”

“Out with it, then, Jack Nasty-Face. Is it that **your mother's turning into an honest woman?**” (unnamed prisoner pirate, “Captain Kidd” 16:00)

you're a bold one in a calm [ya're/yer/ye're/yore a bol'/boold/bo'oold 'un/woohn i/'n a carrm]

Used to disparage the addressee's confidence, commitment, or determination as insubstantial and likely to evaporate when tested by some actual event or circumstance.

“Ay, **he's a bold 'un in a calm.**” (hand aboard the *Dolphin*, mocking Harry Wilder, *The Red Rover* 335)

you're as bone-headed as a backwards blowfish [ya're/yer/ye're/yore as boone/bo'oone-'ead/hayd-ered as a OR azzet beck-wahrreds blowoo-fesh]

“Billy Bones, **you're as bone-headed as a backwards blowfish.**” (Long John Silver, “Treasure Island” [1998] 3:33)

you're better fitted for ___ than the sea [ya're/yer/ye're/yore be'er\gooder fettet/fi'ed farr/fer ___ 'n/thayn\nor t' sea]

“If the Spaniards on Hispaniola spare you when you land there, you can get back to your hunting and boucanning, for which ye're better fitted than the sea.” (Peter Blood, *Captain Blood Returns* 61)

you're not fit for a ___ to wipe her\his feet upon you [ya're/yer/ye're/yore narrt fett farr/fer

a __t'/ta/ter wawp/wyeepe 'er'\is feet 'parrn/'pon/uparrn 'ee/ya/ye/yer]

“What do you do here with this Yankee supercargo, **not fit for a gentlewoman to wipe her feet upon?**” (John Malyoe, *The Book of Pirates* “The Ghost of Captain Brand” 59)

you're not worth shiproom [ya're/yer/ye're/yore narrt warrth shep-roohm]

“Tush and curse it, Captain, 'tis no more than petty boy, a sickling, a lousy lad, a puling mannikin **not worth shiproom!**” (Benjamin Trigg, on seeing the slight Adam Penfeather for the first time, *Adam Penfeather, Buccaneer* 44)

you've a split tongue [ya've/ye've/yer've a splet toohngue]

The speaker characterizes the addressee as being false or duplicitous. The expression is doubly effective for evoking the image of a serpent's tongue and thereby equating the addressee implicitly with a snake.

“**You've a split tongue**, Silver.” (Israel Hands, “Long John Silver's Return to Treasure Island” 1:16:38)

you've eyes, but no more sight than a blind puppy [ya've/ye've/yer've eye'ees, barrt no'oo marr/moor sawt/sigheet 'n/thayn\nor a blawnd/blin'/blyeen'/blyeend/blyeent/blynt parr/pooh-py]

“Ye've eyes, Sam, but no more sight than a blind puppy.” (Peter Blood, *Captain Blood Returns* 151)

you've neither sense nor memory [ya've/ye've/yer've needer/nee'er/nyder/my'er saahnse narr/noor mamma/memb/mem'-ry]

“Why, I give you my word, I'm sick to speak to you. **You've neither sense nor memory ...**” (Long John Silver, dressing down George Merry and his colleagues, *Treasure Island* 164, Chap. 29)