

## We're Number One

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oing with the flow brings us to our very next topic—**pissing** (17thC). **Pissing** (17thC) derives from the French **pisser** via Old French and vulgar Latin. It was Standard English until around 1760, as in “He would not once turn one for a kisse. Every night he riseth for to **pisse**” (Hazlitt). About the same time it became a popular expression in the United States, a nation with few “pe-ons” and a highly energetic pioneer stock **full of piss and vinegar**.

**Pissing** has been received differently depending on the culture. It was anything but **number one** (nursery term, 19thC) to the followers of Mohammed, who were so repelled by it they chose to squat in the act rather than let a single drop fall on their person. The Hottentots, on the other hand, couldn't seem to get enough of it. The high point of their marriage ceremony came when the priest **urinated** (c. 1599) upon the bride and the groom.

Here in the West we are generally more **pissed off** than **pissed upon**. When you **piss people off**, you get them angry. President Lyndon Johnson was one who got **pissed off** frequently. But even he could be selective about it. Queried once as to the reason he retained the difficult J. Edgar Hoover as Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, he explained: “I'd much rather have that fellow inside my tent *pissing* out than outside my tent **pissing** in.”

There have, however, been a few exceptions where **piss** has been welcome. In the seventeenth century we used **piss** as a facial cleanser and to remove birthmarks and freckles. Today, it's the critical ingredient in the kinky activity known as **water sports**.<sup>1</sup>

Though **pissing** is a universal phenomenon, not everyone can **piss** well. Some people are notoriously **piss-poor**. Clemenceau, the French Prime Minister during World War I, **pissed and moaned** about his prostate, lamenting enviously of Lloyd George, his British counterpart, “Ah, si je pouvais pisser comme il parle.” (“If only I could **piss** like he can talk.”)

*When Nature is calling, plain speaking is out  
When ladies, God bless 'em, are milling about,  
You make water, wee-wee, or empty the glass;  
You can powder your nose; “Excuse me” may pass;  
Shake the dew off the lily; see a man 'bout a dog;  
Or when everyone's soused, it's condensing the fog.  
But be pleased to consider and remember just this—  
That only in Shakespeare do characters piss!*

—“Ode to Those Four-Letter Words”

