

## The Sound and the Fury (the little f)

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n act 3 of *The Comedy of Errors*, Dromio of Ephesus remarks to Dromio of Syracuse, “A man may break a word with you, sir, and words are but wind, Aye, and break it in your face, so he break it not behind.”

**Breaking wind** (c. 1852) is a task of herculean dimensions; **farting** is so simple even a child can do it. Yet most folks would rather die than **fart**.

If death must come as often as breath departs  
Then he must die, who often farts;  
And if to die be to lose one's breath  
Then death's a fart; and so a fart is death.

—*The Erotic Muse* (1735)

There are those who consider it one of the most offensive and repugnant words in the English language. Some think it may even give the **Big F** a run for its money. Closer study, however, reveals that the fear of the **fart** is blown far out of proportion. Admittedly not the most genteel of words, it does have a playful dimension. Though hard to imagine, it also has legitimate roots. They can be found in the old Sanskrit word *pardate*, “he **breaks the wind**.” There is also a clear line from the Old English *feortan* to the Middle English *farten* to today's **fart**. The **fart**'s been around for quite a while. According to the OED, its first documented use occurred around 1250. Chaucer used it in 1386 in *The Summoner's Tale* and in his *Miller's Tale*, where he wrote, “He was *somdel squaymous of farting*.” He then relates an incident in which Nicholas plays a cruel joke on poor Absolon by **farting** in his face. Not particularly pleased by the act, Absolon retaliates, applying a hot poker to Nicholas' **ass**.

Since Chaucer's time, the word has been a favorite of many English satirists. Ben Jonson and others used it freely. Samuel Johnson's dictionary of 1751 included it, citing a quotation from Jonathan Swift to illustrate its use: “So from my Lord his passion broke. He **farted** first and then he spoke.”

When your dinners are hearty with onions and  
beans,  
With garlic and claret and bacon and greens  
Your bowels get so busy distilling a gas  
That Nature insists you permit it to pass.  
You are very polite, and you try to exhale  
Without noise or order—you frequently fail—  
Expecting a zephyr, you carefully start  
But even a deaf one would call it a fart!

—“Ode to Those Four-Letter Words”

