

CAROLYN HAX

Adapted from a recent on-line discussion.

Dear Carolyn:

How do I gently tell my mom that her constant questions about my love life are really making me feel stressed out and bad about myself? My relationship is just starting, and I'm not sure where it's going, if anywhere. My mom is anxious and constantly asking about it, along with the "you're not getting any younger" line. My mom is not a native English speaker, so I am not even sure whether she understands my side of the discussion.

Anon

The problem is not that the discussion isn't comprehensible, it's that there's a discussion at all. You may say you don't want the barrage of questions, but when you take the time to respond to them — even if it's just to detail why you don't like responding to them — then you're sending the message that her questions will be answered. And so, she keeps asking. It sounds as if you've tried to explain your position/boundary to her, and it hasn't worked. Please try again, plainly: "Please stop asking, it upsets me."

If even that fails, then it's time to stop explaining and start demonstrating that you won't have this discussion. Example:

She: "How's your relationship going?"

You: "Great, thanks."

She: "Really? How often do you see him, is this serious...?"

You: "It's all fine. So, Mom, how is [something about her life]?"

She: "You're not answering me. This is important, you're not getting any younger."

You: "I know, thanks for your concern. Is [someone you both know] still [something you know about that person]?"

She: "[presses relationship issue]."

You: "Okay, Mom, gotta go. I'll see/talk to you [time in the near future, to show you and she are still close, you're just not talking about your love life with her today]." Click. Repeat.

This isn't a script, it's just an example, but it's an example of not yielding an inch of turf — thereby letting the others know, lovingly, they need to step back off said turf. Plug in the words that suit your style, and hold that ground.

Dear Carolyn:

Are there "rules of etiquette" when you've been dumped by a friend? A pal who lives across the street stopped returning phone calls and e-mails several months ago. By the time I realized I'd been cut out (new-parent insanity), it was too late to politely ask, "Is there something wrong?" Plus, I was kind of glad for the distance.

Still, my ego is bruised and I wish she'd at least have opted for a more casual friendship over nothing at all. Do I have to do more than nod and smile when I see her on the street? Is it okay to avoid her if I see her coming my way?

Syracuse, N.Y.

If you're happy not to be friends anymore, and if it's just your curiosity/ego being denied satisfaction, then override both impulses and take the high road. When you see her, nod/say hello but don't approach.

It would be a different answer if instead you missed her and were really worried that you'd done something to hurt her. Then you ask, no matter how much time has passed. Nothing might come of it, except a sign that you valued the friendship and intended no harm.

Read the whole transcript or join the discussion live at noon Fridays on www.washingtonpost.com/discussions.

Write to Tell Me About It, Style, 1150 15th St. NW, Washington, D.C. 20071, or tellme@washpost.com.



BY NICK GALIFIANAKIS FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

The Style Invitational »

REPORT FROM WEEK 831

in which we sought items that might be on well-known people's "bucket lists" of things to achieve before they died: And as promised, we offer some overflow from two earlier contests.



THE WINNER OF THE INKER On Lassie's bucket list: To poop without someone yelling "CUT!" (Rick Haynes, Potomac)

- 2 the winner of the finger-bone replica pen: Will Rogers: To meet Donald Trump. (Russell Beland, Fairfax)
3 Bernie Madoff: To steal a million cigarettes. (Cy Gardner, Arlington)
4 Sarah Brady: To pry Charlton Heston's gun out of his cold, dead hands. (Jon Graft, Centerville)

PAILS IN COMPARISON: HONORABLE MENTIONS

Martha Stewart: Do it on mismatched sheets. (Kevin Dopart, Washington)

Sigmund Freud: Tell Mom how much I love her. (Judy Blanchard, Novi, Mich., a First Offender; Ira Allen, Bethesda)

Neil Armstrong: Go back and find my car keys. (Jim Noble, Lexington Park)

Michael Phelps: Swim faster, stronger, higher. (Kevin Dopart)

Hugh Hefner: Octuplets. (Art Grinath, Takoma Park)

Stephen Hawking: 1. Determine the origins of the universe; 2. Demystify the complexities of black holes; 3. Complete the mathematical modeling of

antimatter; 4. Scratch that itch on the end of my nose. (Jim Noble)

Captain Ahab: Spend an afternoon going after sunfish with worms and a bamboo pole. (G. Smith, New York)

Pete Rose: Win the pool on when I'll be allowed into the Hall of Fame. (Chuck Koelbel, Houston)

Barry Manilow: Get that stupid "I Write the Songs" tune out of my head. (Chuck Koelbel)

Eric Burdon: Get out of this place. (Jeff Contompass, Ashburn)

Martin Luther: Finally finish Nos. 96-100. (Eric Cline, Chevy Chase, a First Offender)

Kato Kaelin: Get 15 more minutes of fame. Okay, eight. (Chuck Koelbel)

Popeye: Eat off a plate. (Marty McCullen, Gettysburg, Pa.)

Paul McCartney: 1. Rent a cottage in the Isle of Wight. 2. Buy the Isle of Wight. (Jon Graft)

Lou Dobbs: Find a landscaper who'll return my calls. (Larry Yungk, Arlington)

James Bond: Make love to an average-looking chubby woman. (Rick Haynes)

And Last: Russell Beland: Win enough honorable-mention prizes to alter magnetic north. (Russell Beland)

OLD NEWS: MORE 'BANK HEADS' FROM WEEK 830

More of last week's "bank heads" attached to actual Post headlines:

Cell Service to Expand on Metro More Subway Cars to Relieve Prison Overcrowding (Dave Zarrow, Reston)

Cooperative Being Pushed as an Alternative to a Government Plan 'Find Us a Cooperative Being and We'll Think About It,' House Leaders Say (Cy Gardner)

Nearly 30 Species May Get Protections New Technology Enables Manufacture of Tiny Condoms (Craig Dykstra, Centerville)

Ch&#225;vez Tide Ebbs Venezuelans Don't Like New Accent Mark in President's Name (Russell Beland)

Compact Crossover Is GM's Ticket to Renewal Ailing Auto Giant Hires Chaz Bono as Spokes... person (Christopher Lamora, Arlington)

A Harsh Lesson in College Math 0.7 = 50 Hours (Ira Allen, Bethesda)

Credit Card Companies Step Up the Swipe Quota for Rewards Programs Employees Get Bonuses for Increased Customer Biking (Cy Gardner, Russ Taylor, Vienna)

ANCIENT QUOTES: 'INSIDE WORDS' FROM WEEK 826 C'att'an: A garment with ample trunk space. (Elwood Fitzner, Valley City, N.D.)

Ma'cad'am: Hit the road, Jack. (Jan Brandstetter, Mechanicsville, Md.)

Nau'seat': To look under the chairs at a movie theater. (Erik Wennstrom, Bloomington, Ind.)

S'hamas': An exploding candle installed in a menorah. (Gary Pasternack, Baltimore, a First Offender)

T'her mom'eter: If you think my girlfriend is hot, you should see... (Craig Dykstra)

S'urge'ry: Drastic punishment for sex offenders. (Lois Douthitt, Arlington)

'Fib'romyalgia: An excuse to call in sick. (Tom Witte, Montgomery Village)

Tambo'urine': The instrument you're given to play when you're [past] poor at everything else. (Brendan Beary, Great Mills)

B'rightest': Alberto Gonzales's Justice Department hires. (Pam Sweeney, St. Paul, Minn.)

Next Week: Clue Us In, or Cross Straining

ON WASHINGTONPOST.COM Have a question for the Empress or want to talk to some real Losers? Join the Style Conversational discussion at washingtonpost.com/styleconversational.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



BY BOB STAKE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Week 835: Tour de Fours VI

Notre Ham: A college where the pigskin is king. Caterthriller: "Pupa Transformers II."

Against all odds and perhaps better judgment, the Empress marks her 300th Style Invitational contest this week. In commemoration (if you stretch it), we'll take a turn with this annual contest, part of our Late Summer Neologism Marathon: Coin and define a humorous word that includes — with no other letters between them, but in any order — the letters T, H, R and E, as in the examples above. It has to be a new word (or two-word phrase), not a new definition for a well-known



Mollusk Kitsch of the unrefined variety: Shells Playing Poker.

existing word. You may add a hyphen for clarity.

Winner gets the Inker, the official Style Invitational trophy. Second place gets one of the finer examples of Mollusk Kitsch we've seen lately, discourtesy of 13-time Loser Cheryl Davis: a tiny sculpture of, well, Shells Playing Poker.

Other runners-up win their choice of a coveted Style Invitational Loser T-shirt or yearned-for Loser Mug. Honorable Mentions get one of the Justed-after Style Invitational Magnets. One prize per entrant per week. Send your entries by e-mail to losers@washpost.com or by fax to 202-334-4312. Deadline is Tuesday, Sept. 29. Put "Week 835" in the subject line of your e-mail, or it risks being ignored as spam. Include your name, postal address and phone number with your entry. Contests are judged on the basis of humor and originality. All entries become the property of The Washington Post. Entries may be edited for taste or content. Results will be published Oct. 17. No purchase required for entry. Employees of The Washington Post, and their immediate relatives, are not eligible for prizes. Pseudonymous entries will be disqualified. The revised title for next week's results is by Beverly Sharp; this week's Honorable Mentions name was sent by too many people to credit.

A Queen Who Loses Her Regal Bearings

THEATER, From Page C1

breathless fascination, as the tumblers click in the minds of these actors, and they consider their characters' next moves in this play of plots and dodges. In the surprising pedal-to-the-metal acceleration of Tyzack's performance, you discover step by methodical step the depth of Oenone's resourcefulness. In the delicate yet grounded countenance of Ruth Negga's comely Aricia, the imprisoned princess whom Hippolytus loves, one feels the measured pulse of a true survivor.

And in Mirren, swathed in flowing purple gowns and robes, you're always kept entertained by the war in Phèdre's nature, between an urge to surrender to the embittering blackness of her thwarted desires and the better impulse, to try to live with them. This queen in torment is no downer. At the pivotal moment, when her volatile husband, Theseus (Stanley Townsend, looking like a marauding relation of Tony Soprano's), stuns her with the revelation of Hippolytus's feelings for Aricia, Mirren's Phèdre cocks her head ever so warily. A giggle arises from the audience: In such small gestures can enormous alarm bells seem to go off.

Modern filters have been applied to the original Euripides drama, and they allow "Phèdre" to be tantalizingly up-to-date; the mostly earth-tone costumes — like the amazing set, both designed by Bob Crowley — are vaguely contemporary. Racine composed his 17th-century version in 12-syllable rhymed couplets, but Hytner uses a free-verse translation by the late English poet Ted Hughes that exudes musicality and accessibility. A tension-enabling sound score by Adam Cork supplies rumbles and other ominous noises that suggest that trouble is brewing.

The disturbance has to do with the impatience in a massive villa in the coastal city of Troezen — where Phèdre and her sons are the guests of Hippolytus — over the disappearance at sea of Theseus. Prompted by a false report of the king's death, Oenone plants in the ear of Phèdre, so racked with desire for Hippolytus she wants to do herself in, the notion of confessing her love to him.

In Theseus's unexpected return, Oenone's self-serving scheming becomes tragic overreaching. And when she acts preemptively again, lying to the king that it was Hippolytus who attempted to seduce the queen, the foundation of destruction is fully laid.

"Phèdre" conveys the idea of thoughts having elemental power,

that they do speak as loudly as actions. Although the transgressions in the play are mere acts of confession and accusation — no more concrete than the whispers of distant thunder — the consequences could not be more terrible. In one of the evening's most effective speeches, John Shrapnel's Thérémène, a close adviser to Hippolytus, recounts for Theseus the gut-wrenching story of the horrible fate that befalls Hippolytus. And all because Theseus rashly uttered his own unforgivable wish.

Townsend's brute of a Theseus arrives as a bit of a shock to us as well as to the other characters: Towering over the actors, speaking in the rough-hewn accent of the North of England, he seems less a king than a pirate. Then again, he's a man of war, accustomed to earthier concepts of strategy, and out of his league with the sly intriguing by the likes of Oenone.

He seems, too, an unlikely match for Mirren's regal Phèdre — which

may be why she's drawn with such violent need to the more self-contained son (even if his mother was an Amazon). In any case, the moment at which she finally touches Hippolytus evokes nothing so much as sadness, although to the young man it's an encounter so revolting he has to rush to a fountain to cleanse himself of it.

Or maybe, he was a little turned on? This fast-moving production does not merely engage the imagination, it ignites it.

Phèdre, by Racine, translated by Ted Hughes. Directed by Nicholas Hytner. Sets and costumes, Bob Crowley; lighting, Paule Constable; company voice work, Jeannette Nelson and Kate Godfrey. With Wendy Morgan, Chippo Chung, Ian Pedersen, Portia Booroff, Alexander D'Andrea, Tristram Wymark, Elizabeth Nestor. About two hours. Through Sept. 26 at Sidney Harman Hall, 610 F St. NW. The entire run is sold out.

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