

QUOTIDIAN

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A WORD OR TWO

I am most pleased to announce that the first issue went off without a hitch. The jury is still out on what people thought of my efforts, but so long as most people took a moment to go “ahh,” I cannot be disappointed. I have no doubt you will enjoy the content of this week’s issue, as I continue to shed light on the mysteries of Christmas and the holiday season. A pity we do not understand the rich traditions of why we do the things we do—much of it has become so distorted that it is not really a tradition at all, but a routine.

QUOTE OF THE WEEK

“Education: that which reveals to the wise—and conceals from the stupid—the vast limits of their knowledge.”
—Mark Twain

THIS WEEK IN HISTORY

DEC. 13, 1642: Dutch navigator Abel Tasman becomes the first European explorer to sight the South Pacific island group now known as New Zealand. In Tasman’s sole attempt to land, several of his crew were killed by warriors from a South Island tribe, who interpreted the Europeans’ exchange of trumpet signals as a prelude to battle. A few weeks earlier, Tasman discovered Tasmania, the island off the southeast coast of Australia. Tasman had named the island Van Diemen’s Land, but it was later renamed Tasmania in his honor (as was the Tasman Sea between Australia and New Zealand).

Van Diemen, the source of the island’s original name, was a colonial governor of the Dutch East Indies who is best known for his efforts to foster exploration of the areas around Australia. He sent Tasman in 1642, so Tasman decided to name the island after his sponsor. The name stuck for quite some time, and became a byword for horror in England due to the severity of Van Diemen’s Land’s convict settlements. The name Van Diemen’s Land eventually became so repugnant that when the island became a self-governing colony in 1855, one of the first things the legislature did was change its name to Tasmania. The old name stuck for a while, however; Tasmanians were referred to as Vandemonians until the turn of the century.

New Zealand, named after the Dutch province of Zeeland, did not attract much additional European attention until the late 18th century, when English explorer Captain James Cook traveled through the area and wrote detailed accounts of the islands. It is interesting to note that the province of Zeeland is in the southwest portion of the Netherlands, directly near the sea; it should therefore not be surprising that Zeeland is Dutch for “Sealand.” Sources: www.wikipedia.org and www.historychannel.com.

3 WORDS

Memorize these by week’s end and you shall quickly develop an enviable lexicon.

trenchant *adjective*

1. keen; vigorously effective and articulate (A trenchant analysis)
2. caustic (His trenchant remarks were quite upsetting)
3. clear-cut and distinct (There are trenchant divisions between right and wrong)

sapphic (SAF-ik) *adjective*

1. *capitalized*: of or relating to the Greek poet Sappho
2. lesbian (The inclusion of a sapphic romantic subplot lent the play an unusual allure)

callipygian (cal-i-PIJ-i-en) *adj.*

1. pertaining to or having shapely buttocks (The gym was full of men on a quest for the callipygian ideal)

TRIVIAL TIDBIT

* * The word Christmas originally entered the English language as *Christes mæsse*, meaning “Christ’s mass” or “festival of Christ” in Old English.



ETYMOLOGY 101

Interesting words for the week, no? The second is derived from the name of a Greek lyric poetess, Sappho, who lived on the isle of Lesbos somewhere around 600 B.C. Sappho was best known for writing erotic and romantic poems in her own meter (called *Sapphic meter*); often, the themes of these poems dealt with eroticism between women, and so she developed a reputation for lesbianism. **The word lesbian is derived from the island's name**—*lesbios* in Greek means “of Lesbos”—hence, the inhabitants of Lesbos were called Lesbians. Today, the island's name is Lesvos (and hence its inhabitants are Lesvoniens, rather than Lesbians), and is a popular destination for lesbian couples.

The third word is derived from the name of a famous statue of Aphrodite, *Aphrodite Kallipygos*, which shows the goddess' well proportioned rear end (and other things as well). From the Greek “kallos” (beauty) + “pyge” (buttocks). It is interesting to note that biologists have discovered a gene in sheep that causes them to develop unusually large, muscular bottoms, since the food they eat is converted to muscle instead of fat. The name of the gene? Aphrodite Kallipygos.

An English imitation of Sapphic meter, entitled *Sapphics*

Saw the white implacable Aphrodite,
Saw the hair unbound and the feet unsandalled
Shine as fire of sunset on western waters;
Saw the reluctant...

—*Algernon Charles Swinburne*

ETYMOLOGY 201

Now for some words that are actually *related* to the season in which we find ourselves. Ever wonder where the synonym “yuletide” comes from, and why we seem to use it interchangeably with “holiday?” Once again...probably not. But I did, and here's why.

“Yule” is derived from the Old English *geol*, which in turn comes from the Old Norse *jól*. The last bit is contested, but is perhaps derived from the Old Norse *hjól*, or “wheel.” Yule may be derived from *hjól* since the “wheel” of the year (a never-ending circle that repeats its cycle annually) is at its low point at the winter solstice (Dec. 21), and thereafter rises to the summer solstice. Some linguists, however, find this connection fortuitous. After Christianity converted the winter celebrations for Christmas, Yule was confined to the 12-day feast of the Nativity, which begins December 25.

The word holiday finds its roots in Old English: “halig” (holy) + “dæg” (day). “Halig” may be connected with the Old High German word “heil,” which is used as a salutation and means “salvation,” “health,” and “happiness.”



Sappho

A most fitting poem, given our discussion of Sappho:

ANACREONTIC

Old Poets sing the Dame, to Stone
Converted by Jove's radiant Son:
How Progne builds her clayey Cell
In Chimneys, where she once did dwell.
For me, (did Fate permit to use,
Whatever Form our Fancies choose)
I'd be my lovely Sylvia's Glass,
Still to reflect her beauteous Face;
I'd be the pure and limpid Wave,
In which my Fair delights to lave;
I'd be her Garment, still to hide
Her snowy Limbs, with decent Pride;
I'd be the Girdle, to embrace
The gradual Taper of her Waist;
I'd be her Tippet, still to press
The snowy Velvet of her Breast;
But if the rigid Fates denied
Such Ornaments of Grace and Pride,
I'd be her very Shoe, that she
With scornful Tread might Trample me.

— *William Dawson (1704-1752)*



NEAT-O

WHY RED AND GREEN ARE THE OFFICIAL COLORS OF XMAS

Most people don't even think about why red and green are the designated colors of the holiday season; indeed, the colors are hardly ever associated with anything else. The most widely accepted explanation has its roots in the 14th and 15th centuries, when the Church held "Miracle Plays," or plays which depicted stories from the Bible. Since illiteracy in Europe was high, an oral and visual depiction was the most effective means of getting the Church's message out to the people.

One of the days on which Miracle Plays were performed was December 24, which was then known as Adam and Eve's Day. On this day, the Church staged the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. Naturally, the play required some props, one of them being an apple tree. It was rather difficult to find foliated apple trees at that time of year, so someone came up with the idea of using an evergreen as a stand-in and hanging it with apples.

This tradition first started in Germany, where the trees became known as *Paradiesbäume*, or Paradise Trees. Germans set up *Paradiesbäume* in their homes to teach their children the lessons of the Bible, and the practice continued long after the Miracle Plays were no longer performed. The idea of a Christmas Tree is therefore one distinctly German (recall that Martin Luther came up with the idea of placing candles on the tree—*Quotidian vol. 1 no. 1*).

The color of the evergreen (green) and that of the apples (red) therefore became associated with Christmas.

WHEREFORE POINSETTIA?

The poinsettia is synonymous with the holidays these days, but why? **The flower is actually native to Mexico, and was not brought to the United States until 1828.** The first U.S. ambassador to Mexico, Joel Roberts Poinsett, found the plant growing aside a road on one of his visits, and sent specimens back to his home in South Carolina.

The poinsettia was known as *Euphorbia pulcherrima* until it became so popular that historian William Prescott was asked to rename it. Prescott had just written a book entitled *Conquest of Mexico*, in which he detailed J.R. Poinsett's discovery of the plant, and so chose to name it after him.

The poinsettia's first connection to the holidays came in 17th century Mexico, when Franciscan priests near Taxco used it in a Nativity feast. As Mexican legend has it, a poor girl and her brother were on their way to Christmas Eve services, but had nothing to offer at the Nativity scene. They stopped along the way to gather some weeds from the roadside, but were ashamed for having such a poor gift to offer. Nonetheless, the little girl placed the weeds at the foot of the Nativity scene, where they were transformed into beautiful red poinsettias. The



Christmas miracle all had witnessed earned the flowers the name *Flores de Noche Santo*, or "Flowers of the Holy Night."

The plant was also prized by the Aztecs for its medicinal properties and brilliant red color, which went rather well with the Aztecs' bloody, sacrificial ceremonies. Christians later associated the red of the poinsettia leaves with the blood of Christ, and in this way approved it as a yuletide plant.

The poinsettia's modern connection with the holidays is twofold. First of all, the plant has the appropriate combination of colors: green leaves and red *bracts* (modified leaves). Second: the poinsettia blooms in winter, around the holiday season. Because of this, a pioneering man from California, Paul Ecke, decided to mass market and sell poinsettias as the "official" flower of the holidays. Prior to Ecke's idea (circa 1920s), poinsettias were not widely popular in the U.S. Ecke's strategy of growing them in mass numbers and selling them at roadside stands soon caught on; by the 1960s, the Ecke Ranch in Encinitas, California, was distributing poinsettia cuttings by air to all parts of the world.

Today, the vast majority of poinsettias come from this ranch; in fact, chances are very good the ones sitting in your home spent a moment or two under ol' Paul's care. After a 175 year journey from its humble roots in Mexico, **the familiar red and green poinsettia is now the best selling potted plant in the United States.**

LITERARY GENIUS

This week's segment features one of Hans' Christian Andersen's more familiar works, and it most ably reminds us that we should not take what we have for granted.

THE LITTLE MATCH GIRL
by Hans Christian Andersen



IT WAS DREADFULLY COLD; it was snowing fast, and was almost dark, as evening came on—the last evening of the year. In the cold and the darkness, there went along the street a poor little girl, bareheaded and with naked feet. When she left home she had slippers on, it is true; but they were much too large for her feet—slippers her mother had used till then, and the poor little girl lost them in running across the street when two carriages were passing terribly fast. When she looked for them, one was not to be found, and a boy seized the other and ran away with it, saying he would use it for a cradle some day, when he had children of his own.

So on the little girl went with her bare feet, which were red and blue with cold. In an old apron that she wore were bundles of matches, and she carried a bundle also in her hand. No one had bought so much as a bunch all the long day, and no one had given her even a penny.

Poor little girl! Shivering with cold and hunger she crept along, a perfect picture of misery.

The snowflakes fell on her long flaxen hair, which hung in pretty curls about her throat; but she thought not of her beauty nor of the cold. Lights gleamed in every window, and there came to her the savory smell of roast goose, for it was New Year's Eve. And it was this of which she thought.

In a corner formed by two houses, one of which projected beyond the other, she sat cowering down. She had drawn under her little feet, but still she grew colder and colder; yet she dared not go home, for she had sold no matches and could not bring a penny of money. Her father would certainly beat her; and, besides, it was cold enough at home, for they had only the house roof above them, and though the largest holes had been stopped with straw and rags, there were left many through which the cold wind could whistle.

And now her little hands were nearly frozen with cold. Alas! a single match might do her good if she might only draw it from the bundle, rub it against the wall, and warm her fingers by it. So at last she drew one out. Whisht! How it blazed and burned! It gave out a warm, bright flame like a little candle, as she held her hands over it. A wonderful little light it was. It really seemed to the little girl as if she sat before a great iron stove with polished brass feet and brass shovel and tongs. So blessedly it burned that the little maiden stretched out her feet to warm them also. How comfortable she was! But lo! the flame went out, the stove vanished, and nothing remained but the little burned match in her hand.

She rubbed another match against the wall. It burned brightly, and where the light fell upon the wall it became transparent like a veil, so that she could see through it into the room. A snow-white cloth was spread upon the table, on which was a beautiful china dinner service, while a roast goose, stuffed with apples and prunes, steamed famously and sent forth a most savory smell. And what was more delightful still, and wonderful, the goose jumped from the dish, with knife and fork still in its breast, and waddled along the floor straight to the little girl.

But the match went out then, and nothing was left to her but the thick, damp wall.

She lighted another match. And now she was under a most beautiful Christmas tree, larger and more prettily trimmed than the one she had seen through the glass doors at the rich merchant's. Hundreds of wax tapers were burning on the green branches, and gay figures, such as she had seen in shop windows, looked down upon her. The child stretched out her hands to them; then the match went out.

Still the lights of the Christmas tree rose higher and higher. She saw them now as stars in heaven, and one of them fell, forming a long trail of fire.

"Now someone is dying," murmured the child softly; for her grandmother, the only person who had loved her, and who was now dead, had told her that whenever a star falls a soul mounts up to God.

She struck yet another match against the wall, and again it was light; and in the brightness there appeared before her the dear old grandmother, bright and radiant, yet sweet and mild, and happy as she had never looked on earth.

"Oh, grandmother," cried the child, "take me with you. I know you will go away when the match burns out. You, too, will vanish, like the warm stove, the splendid New Year's feast, the beautiful Christmas tree." And lest her grandmother should disappear, she rubbed the whole bundle of matches against the wall.

And the matches burned with such a brilliant light that it became brighter than noonday. Her grandmother had never before looked so grand and beautiful. She took the little girl into her arms, and both flew together, joyously and gloriously, mounting higher and higher, far above the earth; and for them there was neither hunger, nor cold, nor care—they were with God.

But in the corner, at the dawn of day, sat the poor girl, leaning against the wall, with red cheeks and smiling mouth—frozen to death on the last evening of the old year. Stiff and cold she sat, with the matches, one bundle of which was burned.

"She wanted to warm herself, poor little thing," people said. No one imagined what sweet visions she had had, or how gloriously she had gone with her grandmother to enter upon the joys of a new year.

MORE LITERARY GENIUS

Ok, so I ran over a little and suddenly had all of this extra space to fill. The plus side is it gave me an opportunity to share some more great literature. This one is in keeping with the Greek motif of this week's issue. It is an ancient Greek myth (in poetic form) which holds that human destiny lies in the hands of three goddesses of the Fates—Clotho, who spins the thread of life, Lachesis, who measures the thread, and Atropos, who cuts the thread at death.

THE LOOM OF TIME

Man's life is laid in the loom of time
To a pattern he does not see,
While the weavers work and the shuttles fly
Till the dawn of eternity.

Some shuttles are filled with silver threads
And some with threads of gold,
While often but the darker hues
Are all that they may hold.

But the weaver watches with skillful eye
Each shuttle fly to and fro,
And sees the pattern so deftly wrought
As the loom moves sure and slow.

God surely planned the pattern:
Each thread, the dark and fair,
Is chosen by His master skill
And placed in the web with care.

He only knows its beauty,
And guides the shuttles which hold
The threads so unattractive,
As well as the threads of gold.

Not till each loom is silent,
And the shuttles cease to fly,
Shall God reveal the pattern
And explain the reason why

The dark threads were as needful
In the weaver's skillful hand
As the threads of gold and silver
For the pattern which He planned.

