Watch Your Language

A Brief History of the English Language

O! Hearken to the story of the English family tree

Whilst I sing the many verses of its royal pedigree:

Our Mother Tongue is Celtic and Germanic at the start

With a healthy dose of Latin in its flexographic heart.

We take you to the Firbolgs of Fifth Century A.D.

(These Firbolgs are connected to the Stonehenge mystery.)

We don’t know much about the words of Ye Olde Stonehenge town;

They must have had some dialogue, but did not write it down.

Then up from Central Europe came the mighty Celtic team—

Bigger than the Stonehenge men and stronger, and more mean;

They brought unto the British Isles their rolling brogue-isa tongue;

The wheel is one example of technology they brung.

And then in 43A.D. the Romans came to call,

They faced off with the Celtics, who were destined for a fall.

These Celts went north and westward, but some words are here to stay.

“Whiskey," “plaid,” and “slogan” are still with us to this day.

The Romans conquered Scots and Picts and planted Latin seeds,

Which grew into the fruit of many English-speaking deeds—
Their Emperor was Hadrian for whom they named a wall.

(The language that they spoke was barely English-like at all.)

And when the Romans went away the year was 4 and 10;

The English language as we know it was emerging then.

To fortify the Celtics came the Danish/German Jutes;

Then the Angles and the Saxons came to stay and put down roots.

These two Germanic tribes brought in their own linguistic Angle

As they drove away opponents in a formal knightly tangle.

The data base of English at this point began to fatten

As influenced by speakers Scandinavian and Latin.

By then it was 6th Century and as one expect

The Jutes and Anglo-Saxons spoke a Dutch-y dialect.

The monks in monasteries helped our language meet its fate

By his Mentorship King Alfred, a reformer who was Great.

The Anglo-Saxon tongue is really German at its core—

It gives us words like “man” and “wife,” “child,” “room” and “floor”—

The “son” and “moon” and “stars” that shine are Anglo-Saxon too.

We’re speaking German all the time in everything we do.

They told of Fearsome Beowulf, whose author is unknown—

In this great saga, idioms of Olde English are shown,

With words like “yrre” and “baer” and “de” and letters strange to see,

It is a mighty epic of what English used to be.

And then in 1014 the Danish King Canute was crowned.

The Vikings left the language with a Norsey kind of sound.

If you scratch the “skin” that’s how you name your “husband” and your “sister,”

And when you “call” your “leg” your “leg,” you’re speaking Danish, Mister!

We all remember ’66 when Normans off the coast

Crossed the narrow channel bringing thence their royal host;

In the period to follow they spoke French-ly in the courts,

And we still *parlez-vous-francais* when judging civil torts.

The William, as above referred, was Viking in disguise

But he in fact was rightful heir, in many scholars’ eyes;

It seems he was related to Unready Ethelred

And took his place upon the throne when Harold was shot dead.

French became the lingo of the British upper class;

So English was considered rather gauche and even crass—

For more than twenty decades English wasn’t very chic—

Its speakers were the lowlifes; its inheritors were meek.

And when at last the Normans lost their influence in France,

They looked anew at English and allowed it half a chance.

For the next three hundred years, until the Middle Ages end,

English in the Middle is a French and English blend.

That explains why many words have synonyms today;

We speak a double language in so much of what we say—

“Power,” “cur,” “disease” and “old” have been by French inspired;

And when we want to want, we sometimes use the verb “desired.”

Now in the 1300s when the Ages they were Dark

Chaucer told a tale which in the Canterbury spark;

A nun, a priest, and parson all recite in in turn their spiel.

We learn some Middle English in this literary deal.

Along came Gutenberg, who was the vanguard of his type,

Which gave our English language buffs publicity and hype,

Before this great invention, printed books were rare and few.

Most were writ in Latin, and they cost a fortune, too.

And then came William Caxton who was with us for a spell;

(This man is often known as Lexicographer from Hell.)

He plotted diabolically to set the letters down.

And that is why our language is the toughest game in town.

When the 1500s came our words were bold and brassy—

Greece and Rome were looked up to as influences classy—

This “eclectic” style was in “chaos,” so to speak—

And when we “criticize” ourselves, we’re doing so in Greek.

The educated upper classmen always spoke like Latins.

The monks did too at vespers time and also in the matins.

Cicero and Vergil kept the Latin language King;

But later in the Renaissance, they changed it all to Eng.

You “celebrate” in Latin if you want to be “polite”—

If your “fertile” mind is “nervous” read some Ovid just for spite.

But whether your “philosophy’s” Platonic or Socratic,

You’ll never pass the final if your English is erratic.

And in the 16th Century the Great Immortal Bard

Wrote sonnets and some comedies, in which he also starred.

Amid these tales of romance, power, greed, and human passion,

He rearranged the parts of speech in innovative fashion.

Yes, William Shakespeare brought the English language center stage;

MACBETH and JULIUS CAESAR ushered in the Modern Age;

To be or not to be with us tomorrow and tomorrow;

The winter of his discontent imparted such sweet sorrow.

He added to the lexicon inventive verbs and nouns,

Spoken deftly by the likes of jesters, rogues, and clowns;

He spiced it up with metaphor, and low but clever puns,

The beat was deca-footed and iambic just for funs.

Sixteen and eleven was the year when James was King;

His version of the Bible has a vaguely modern ring.

Although to us it seems a little dated and passe´,

The famous King James Version blazed a trail in its own day.

Upon the English language world, the sun will always rise;

In almost every nation there are words we recognize—

When other cultures cross our path, some phrases catch our eye—

That’s why words like “kangaroo” are spoken freely here.

And that is why our “badinage” has such “panache” today—

Our “chicest” “raconteurs” speak French in current “repartee”;

So if our English “persiflage” sounds charmingly “piquant,”

The “connoisseurs” in your “milieu” are speaking “au courant.”

The “gusto” of the Spanish culture brought along its “cargo,”

From West Coast “San Francisco” down to Florida’s “Key Largo.”

So if you’re bitten by “mosquitos” at the “barbecue,”

Or resting in your “hammock,” you are speaking Spanish too.

Italian words comprise the theme of this poetic “stanza”;

Musically, they play a tune in this “extravaganza.”

So if you travel “incognito” on a “carrousel,”

And singing “a cappella,” you can speak Italian well.

If it’s through the dictionary that you’re going “browsing”

You’ll “stroll” across some German words like “dumb bum” and “carousing.”

Or if you’re in the “deli” eating “wurst” and “sauerkraut,”

You’ll have a taste of German in what English is about.

The “onslaught” of these foreign words like “poppycock” and “such”

Put your favorite character, like “Santa Claus” in Dutch.

So if you go on “furlough” and you bring along your “sleigh,”

You’re speaking “Yankee” English but in Henrick Hudson’s way.

“Camel” is a Hebrew word and so is “jubilee.”

Chinese gives us “ketchup,” “yen,” “tycoon,” and “kumquat” tea.

It’s Indian “pajamas,” also “shampoo,” “loot,” and “thug.”

The “geyser” is from Norway, as is “saga,” “ski,” and “rug.”

And then we have those Yiddish words with which we are are stuck:

If you don’t know what “chutzpah” is, then you must be a “schmuck.”

From “mavens” and from “gonifs", we’ve “schnorred" a word or two:

“Schlemiels” of every walk of life are speaking Yiddish. “Nu”?

The “Bolsheviks” from Russia might be brutal and despotic,

But “tundra” people gave us words like “vodka” and “robotic.”

From Arabic there’s “admiral” and even “cotton” candy.

And “algebraic” concept words that often come in handy.

“Zebra” came from Africa and so did all that “jazz.”

Nothing gives us controversy like Black English has.

For while it’s not the language of the English books in school,

It has a certain quality that teenagers find “cool.”

In 90s slang they spoke of “yuppies” as young urban pro’s,

When acronyms became new words, that’s how the language grows.

“Scuba” is an acronym, like “Nasa” and “snafu.”

Eponyms are named for people who deserve words too.

Teenage bobby-soxers are so groovy with new fads,

What they say will always be a shock to Moms and Dads.

Their clothing may be funky and their music may sound rude,

But some of their locutions may hang with us. (Awesome, Dude.)

So network your hard copy to an Apple data base.

Computerese high tech throws megabytes into your face.

Getting with the program is now everybody’s biz.

We keyboard what we used to type, cuz that is how it is.

Sticks and stones can break your bones, but words can harm you worse.

Sharper than a serpent’s tooth can be the verbal curse.

The words that hurt us most of all, the words we can’t forget,

Are often uttered as a taunting schoolyard epithet.

And if you’re feeling grouchy, very put-upon and mean,

And you’re looking for an angry, word, the F-word reigns supreme.

‘Cause even if it’s used in ways grammatically absurd,

It still remains America’s most favorite dirty word.

George Orwell’s brave utopia of 1984

Showed us how Big Brother has some language games in store.

And if you listen to the politician throw the bull,

You may find out that you’re the victim of the Newspeak pull.

Our English language has more words than any other tongue.

We all know several thousand from which we may choose among.

But still there are those times when finding words can seem so hard—

It’s times like these when I suggest you send a Hallmark card.

Amy Benjamin