

A COMBER COMES A CROPPER

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It was along toward the autumn of the year that I found Dr. Wombat, the learned logothere, lying reading under the spreading cover of a beech, a picnic basket at his side. Surveying his classic pose I remarked that he should be reading Virgil's Eclogues.

"Indeed," replied my friend, "but it is the Liber Macaronicus of Merlinus Coccaius, the pseudonym of the recreant Italian monk Teofilo Folengo, whose floruit was the early sixteenth century."

A macaroni book, thought I. The good doctor pursues his gourmet interests even into the Renaissance. Well, I know something about macaroni, too. And I quoted "He stuck a feather in his cap and called it macaroni."

Further I commented, "What a dumb bunny! Why on earth would anyone want macaroni in his cap, anyway!"

An even broader smile than that begotten of the reading of Messer Folengo arose on the countenance of the furry savant. "In Yankee Doodle's time macaroni was an adjective meaning foppish or even modish. The gay attire of certain Maryland soldiery gained them the name of Macaronies." He paused, then, as my eyebrows shot up, quickly added, "No, they didn't wear skin-tight denims or other queer dress! I might call down a murrain on those that have perverted the word gay, but a certain recently-become-rampant affliction has made that unnecessary."

Dr. Wombat had begun to frown, so I hastily diverted him by asking, "Come across any interesting words lately?"

"The Master Logologist," he replied, "has rightly asserted that there is no word that is not interesting, but, as I have just been reading macaronics, which are burlesque poems in which words from modern languages with Latin endings are strewn throughout Latin verse for a ludicrous and risible effect..."

"You mean like 'Boyibus kissibus pritti girlorum, / Girlibus likibus, wanti summorum?'" I interrupted.

"No, because there is no Latin there at all. Here's a macaronic

De brancha in brancham degradingolat, et faciens pouf!
Ex ormo cadit, et clunes obvertit Olympos

about a man who 'tumbled from branch to branch, and going plop!, fell from the elm, and turned his buttocks toward heaven.' Historical present, of course.

"I can, however, single out an interesting word I just came across in my favorite type of reading. It is PEIGNE-ZIZI. Really ridiculous."

I recognized the word as French and as belonging to that class of compounds made up of a verb in the third person singular of the present plus a noun, the duo composing another noun denoting something or someone that performs the action of the verb on the noun following it. An example is COUVRE-LIT, cover + bed = bed cover, blanket, coverlet (the English word coming from the French). French peigner means 'to comb,' hence PEIGNE-ZIZI had something to do with combing and a ZIZI. In my thoughts reigned puzzlement, which, however, I reined in enough to remember that I had once seen a ballerina named Zizi Jeanmaire, whose hair, indeed, needed combing after she had whirled her head about in a series of provocative pirouettes. But could she have had her very own noun, a Zizi comber?

I explained my perplexity to the little logogymnic, who replied, "You are on the right track. The word does, to be sure, mean 'zizi comber,' but it may be construed as 'non-entity' or 'creep.'"

"Is it because the one who combs Zizi is a hairdresser, and a hairdresser is often an urning burning with yearning for..."

The Wombat hoisted a peremptory paw. "Please - no clinical details. Zizi is a vulgar French term for that organ central to Freudian sciolism and celebrated by Walt Whitman, namely, ..."

It was my term to raise a paw. "I get it, I get it!" Dr. Wombat looked relieved.

"But why," I continued, "would anyone call the seductive Mlle Jeanmaire a ..."

"I get it, I get it!" echoed the beast as I was forming my lips for a voiceless bilabial plosive. "Let her name of Zizi be her secret. The point I make is that PEIGNE-ZIZI is a ludicrous French mistranslation of an English word. Zizi, by the way, is also the French name for a type of bunting, the girl bunting."

"Of no interest to anyone but a bird-watcher," I sniffed.

"On the contrary, the Spanish word PAJARO, meaning 'bird,' is a common name for the same Freudian organ. I would like to know why the French have chosen such a specific bird. Because it is easily caused to rise into the air?" He mused.

"You sound, my dear Wombat," quoth I, "as though you were contemplating an article for the unofficial journal of coprolalia, Maledicta."

"Ah, that reminds me," said the Wombat as he reached into the picnic basket and produced a pair of tightly sealed tins, two butter knives, and a box of unsalted wheat crackers.

"We're pretty far from macaronics, but yet in the realm of translinguistics," I observed and added, "What English word did the French translate so wrong?"

My furry fere proffered me one of the tins and opened his. The odor of Limburger cheese assailed my nostrils. Dr. W. bade me follow his example of spreading a cracker with a thick coating of Limburger, which I gladly did, knowing that the cheese's nutty flavor would quite quench its stench.

"Why, the word is COXCOMB. The cloth fashioned after a rooster's comb, which licensed jesters used to wear on their caps. It came to mean a conceited, silly man, a fop. Jacques Amyot, a founder of Modern French in the 16th century, and Charles Baudelaire, a masterful renderer of Poe in the 19th, were great translators; but whoever construed COXCOMB as PELGNE-ZIZI erred grievously."

"You are right," I rejoined. "The real French words for coxcomb, of which there are several, are quite different. I myself prefer 'le fat.' The cock's comb is simply 'la crête du coq' - the rooster's crest. Now, here's something else. We can English a French text; why can't we French an English text?"

"I suppose," replied the Wombat evenly, "because we can't Welsh, Scotch, or Polish an English text either. The French, however, seem quite prone to off-color translations: I have seen Sir Francis Drake's flagship, The Golden Hind, Frenched, if you will, into Le Cul Doré - the golden behind."

"Talk about striking below the belt! The translators of COXCOMB and The Golden Hind sure met their Waterloo!"

The Wombat pensively savored a second sampling of Limburger. "My housekeeper thinks that Limburger should never be eaten in-house, but always out-house, so she always makes me eat it outdoors."

"In lieu of the loo Limburger should be et 'neath the yew," I improvised.

"That reminds me," responded the Wombat, "your famous namesake Eric P. says that LOO comes from French l'eau meaning water, as in WATER CLOSET. For several reasons that is wrong. Nor does it come from French lieu meaning 'place.' It can only come from a shortening of WATERLOO: water closet is to closet and Waterloo is to loo."

"Can you prove that?"

"I think it is self-evident."

"Tell me, in what favorite reading of yours did you find PELGNE-ZIZI?"

"Harrap's New Standard French-English Dictionary, of course."

Of course. But he discerned the etymology himself.