FAIR IS FOUL AND FOUL IS FAIR

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One of the sophomoric jokes making the rounds in the early Sixties explains the difference between a good girl and a nice girl as follows: the good girl goes to a party, goes home, and goes to bed; the nice girl goes to bed, then goes home.

From an etymological perspective, this naughty sense of 'nice' is correct. Chaucer's usage of nice in Romance of the Rose in the year 1366 suggests unchaste behaviour: 'Nice she was, but she meant no harm or slight in her intent'.

In Shakespeare's Love's Labour Lost, the connotation is lascivious: 'These are complements, these are humors that betray nice wenches that would be betrayed'. In Anthony and Cleopatra, 'nice' refers to amoral behaviour: 'When my hours were nice and lucky men did ransom lives'.

The word nice evolved from the Latin word 'nescius' which meant 'ignorant'. It has enjoyed many meanings along its etymological odyssey. It has referred to all sort of unchristian behaviour, including promiscuity, extravagance and decadence. Early in its evolution it had an unmanly taint, being somewhat synonymous to timid, shy, fastidious, dainty and effeminate.

Ironically, its modern meaning of being synonymous with pleasant was the last one to develop. The pleasant connotation did not emerge until late in the eighteenth century. It was not until 1828 that Noah Webster saw fit to equate nice with pleasant.

Shrewd is another word that is defined more complimentarily than originally intended. It probably derives from the mouselike shrew, common in English forests, who will do combat for the tiniest morsel and will top off a meal by eating the vanquished foe. As one can see, this makes the taming of one no small feat. By the fifteenth century it had been used to mean wicked, dangerous, ugly and grave. In the sixteenth century it came to mean deceitfully cunning, and it is from this pejorative sense that the modern 'astute' meaning emerged.

The word brave has also taken an upward path. Originally it meant uncivilized or savage, having evolved from the vulgar Latin 'brabus' which itself derives from the Latin 'barbarus'.

While some words have improved with age, the opposite tendency, that of taking on negative connotations over time, has been more common.

Originally, a silly person was blessed and happy, due to an

innocent nature. The word comes from the German 'selig' which means 'happy'. The Middle English word 'seely' meant good or happy.

Although the meek may inherit the world, they are not overly respected before they claim their inheritance. To be silly original- ly made one deserving of compassion and sympathy. This implied helplessness, and, since important people are not seen as being helpless, silly came to mean insignificant and trivial.

Daft has undergone a similar regression. It started out meaning 'mild' or 'gentle', and only in the fifteenth century did it fall from grace and mean 'stupid'. A cousin, the word 'deft', has managed to keep its meaning positive. Daft is a not-uncommon surname in Leicestershire and, notwithstanding the shift in mean- ing, the Dafts have not sought to change their names.

Originally, notorious had no pejorative connotation and simply meant 'well-known'. Its descent is probably due to the company it kept. It was used often to describe a liar, and by the seven- teenth century it had itself acquired a negative connotation. A similar situation is happening in reverse with the noun 'attitude' which has taken on a negative hue without the adjective 'bad'.

The stock of lewd and villain has also cascaded. Originally, lewd referred to being a member of the laity, as opposed to the clergy. Since the masses were uncultured, lewd came to mean this and since the uncultured were vulgar it took on this sense. Vulgar itself originally meant 'belonging to the common people' and only took on a lascivious meaning in the eighteenth century.

The evolution of villain also shows a contempt for the masses. Originally it referred to a low-born rustic. In feudal England, a 'villein' (the original spelling) was a serf who was a virtual slave to his lord and was regarded more as a commodity than a person. The similarity between 'vile' and 'villain' may have contributed to its demise. Charles Lamb inaugurated the use of villain as a play's protagonist in 1822.

Probably the most cynical metamorphosis is the word cretin. Originally it meant 'Christian', and was used charitably to de- scribe a mentally deficient person. One's imperfection enabled one to receive more of God's grace. It was the fate of the 'clowns of God' to be reduced to mere clowns.

Are no meanings fixed, you ask? Is not 'good' good and 'bad' bad? Not according to the OED. One of the definitions of 'bad' is 'Possessing an abundant of favourable qualities, of a musical performance or player: going to the limits of free improvisation, of a lover...'

Macbeth's witches were right. Foul is, indeed, fair.