

TWO PALINDROME RECREATIONS

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As anyone who has ever sincerely tried, yet failed ignominiously, to read all the way through someone else's long list of sentence palindromes has reason to know, the real fun in palindromes lies mainly in their making, not in their reading. Two of the more structured ways of enjoying palindrome composition involve the application of a systematic subject constraint to this already much constrained form. In one, one selects some limited set of related words, such as the names of the U.S. states or presidents, and attempts to use as many as possible in short palindromic passages. In the other, one composes (hopefully amusing) variations of some familiar palindrome chestnut such as **Able was I ere I saw Elba**, e.g., **Stressed was I ere I saw desserts**, etc. Most such chestnuts are endlessly variable; with the "Able...Elba" palindrome, for example, once one has run out of usable reversal word pairs for the end positions, one can simply move on to longer and longer reversal phrases, clauses and such. At the other extreme, a few chestnuts may have quite limited variational potential: **Do not start at rats to nod**, e.g., may have only one remotely acceptable variation, **Do not stint at nits to nod**. We may thus distinguish (as it is sometimes useful to do) between open chestnut variation sets and closed chestnut variation sets.

The two sub-articles that follow explore examples of each of these two palindrome pastimes. The first one investigates the variational potential of the venerable chestnut **Sex at noon taxes**, while the second one attempts, probably for the first time anywhere with or without an eraser, the hazard-fraught palindromization of all twelve names of the months of the year.

1. SEX AND THE PALINDROMIST

Observers of the palindrome soon notice that content-wise, these orthographic confections tend to faithfully reflect the attitudes of the societies that produce them. Nowhere is this truer than with the sensitive subject of sexuality, with regard to the open discussion of which there has been so much change in the last century. Palindromes written before World War II are unlikely to so much as a hint at the topic, whereas in the postwar era, especially in latter times, one finds increasingly frank references to sex in sotadics, even at times a seeming obsession with the subject.

Many individual palindromists have contributed to this trend, but a few landmarks of the phenomenon may be mentioned. First of



all, there was the 1973 publication of Howard Bergerson's book *Palindromes and Anagrams*; not only was this the first time many readers had seen explicit references to sexuality in palindromes, but some readers, then and now, have expressed surprise at the relative quantity of the sexual content in the palindromes by Bergerson and J. A. Lindon collected in the book. This circumstance is perhaps explainable by the fact that, in an era when neither *Word Ways* nor the Internet existed to absorb the creative energies of palindromists, much of the palindromic content of Bergerson's book appears to have originated in the private correspondence between himself and Lindon. Not only would that privacy have served to lessen inhibitions, it might also have conduced to some mutual egging-on to ever greater heights of verbal mischief in their palindromic repartee. (One can only wonder what Bergerson may have felt constrained to leave *out* of his book.)

Richard Lederer's 1995 book *Nothing Riské, Nothing Gained* offered readers many varieties of off-color wordplay to peruse, but no palindromes. Nonetheless, it did serve as the inspiration for two "Phallicdromes" articles in *Word Ways* (the first by Howard Richler in the Nov 1996 issue and the second by Win Emmons in the May 1997 issue), richly ribald collections well suited to introduce the curious to the fertile field of adult palindromes. As regards individual palindromes, notable efforts include Bergerson's poems "Fling Thong," "Cold Ewes" and "Nita Lulu" (in his book), and Barry Duncan's 16-line "semi-erotic" poem "To Her I Flee" in the Feb 1995 *Word Ways*. Duncan's poem, although it gets off to a somewhat confused start, does an astonishingly good job, for a long palindrome, of cleaving to a single-minded thought in its second half.

For some reason, most palindromes which actually use the word "sex" are either innocuous or no more than mildly risqué, as this article's selection of variations on the familiar short palindrome **sex at noon taxes** will shortly demonstrate. Essentially, any palindromic sentence or short passage which begins with the word *sex*, or one of its inflections or compounds, can be regarded as a member of this class. The last three letters of such palindromes must necessarily be *-xes*, and since there are only a few more than a hundred English words (including familiar names) that do so, this palindrome's basic variation set may be considered to be a closed one. Not only is its basic variation set closed, but the majority of those hundred-plus *-xes* words cannot, as it happens, be satisfactorily palindromized, a circumstance which further simplifies the task of surveying the basic variations of **sex at noon taxes**. In what follows, there is no attempt to present an exhaustive listing of such variations, most of which are dull, but only to exhibit some of the more interesting ones.

The provenance of **sex at noon taxes** does not seem to be known. It is not among the hundred palindromes, mostly gleaned from earlier sources, that Leigh Mercer published in *Notes & Queries* in the 1940s, which means that it was probably first published in the 1950s or -60s. (Which does not mean that earlier generations of wordplayers did not know about and chuckle over it, only that no one had the poor taste to publish the naughty thing in that more propriety-conscious era.) It is not among the hundred or so short palindromes cited by Dmitri Borgmann in his 1965 book *Language on Vacation*, but Willard Espy in his 1975 book *A Calendar of Words at Play* reports the accretion "**Naomi, sex at noon taxes, I moan**. Some time before this, however, as evidenced by its appearance in Bergerson's 1973 *Palindrome and Anagrams*, J. A. Lindon had already crafted the related palindromic passage, **Sex, Rex? Nil. Ever I revel in Xerxes**. Also in *Palindromes and Anagrams* is Bergerson's own *sex*-palindrome, its two sides embedded in the inverse of their usual order in these lines from his "Selections from 'Fling Thong'":

**...In Melos on desserts I lived;
I merit tasseltops, rose calyxes,
Sexy laces or spotless attire.
Mid evil, I stressed no solemnities...**

In more recent times, several other palindromes starting with “Sex” have been published in various books. Three of the more literate ones, as cited by Ove Michaelsen in his 1997 book *Words at Play*, are James Rambo’s **Sex, Rex? A trap, Artaxerxes** (in the Apr 1972 *Enigma*) and Howard Richler’s **Sex at my gym taxes!** and **Sex? Even a Dane vexes!** (in the Nov 1991 and May 1993 *Word Ways*).

In ordering the following variations on **Sex at noon taxes**, it seemed to make the most sense to list the palindromes (except for the first pair) in the alphabetical order of their key final words:

fixes

Pride of place in this concourse goes to the two “fixes” palindromes. Something about that word—its suggestion of healing, perhaps—seems to dictate the expression of only sober, sincere sentiments in its palindromizations:

Sex, if reverent, rapt partner, ever fixes.
Sex—if, Suse, its sensuousness *ties* us—fixes!

Would that my entire collection could maintain the elevated tone set by these two excellent exemplars! Alas...

addaxes

Sex? Add Adnan, Ellen and addaxes.

affixes

Sex, if fast, raw warts affixes.

calyxes

Sexy lace “kilts” [Erse?], mad-girt now on, now on “trig” dames rest like calyxes!

Compare this calyxes palindromization with Bergerson’s far more poetic—albeit somewhat disingenuous—lines above. (I mean, “tasseltops”? “Solemnities”? And what’s with the weird yearning after rose calyxes? What does she do, immediately rip the petals off all of her roses? At least my plainer palindrome means everything it says.)

infixes

Sex, Ifni dog, *God* infixes!

lynxes

Moscow zookeeper giving direct order to reluctant assistant:

Sex, Nyles—or *Omsk!*—“Ired Erik’s” morose lynxes!

minxes

Macaronic palindromes violate all the vocabulary rules, but this one is such a natural that I can’t resist it:

Sex? N’importe—de même, de *trop*, minxes!

(“Sex? It’s unimportant—likewise, too much, minxes!” Note that the circumflex accent stays on the same e in the reverse reading.)

nixes

Traveling Midwestern salesman of holistic medical remedies to amorous farmer’s wife, when she suggests a roll in the hay:

“Sex in passion illicit, silo hon, *no* holistic Illinois sap nixes!”

From the “it takes two to tango” dept.:

Sex in bed, Deb nixes.

Sex in toile, Eliot nixes.

Sex in a tram, Marta nixes.

Sex in Tulsa, Neven, even a slut nixes.

Sex in haiku, Ukiah nixes.

Sex in a mabolo Agaña gaol, Obama nixes. [*This was before he got his current gig.*]

Sex, in yen, more—Romney nixes! [*Newspaper headline, re nominee’s Japan trip.*]

(*The mabolo or camagon [both Web3] is a dark-wooded timber tree of the Philippines.*)

onyxes, oryxes

“Sexy,” Roxy? Not onyxes! *Sin* is sexy—not onyx oryxes!

parallaxes

As a humble assistant to the world-renowned scientific explorer Professor Rosse, Emery gets all of the scutwork and none of the glory. Lately, he’s begun mumbling to himself...

“Sex all arapaima! Topos, Emery—Tetons! Note Tyre-Mesopotamia parallaxes!...”

(The arapaima or pirarucu [both Web3] is a large South American food fish. A “topo” [Web3] is common slang for a topographical map.)

(Parenthetically, I just noticed something rather remarkable, logologically speaking, about that word pirarucu. Does the reader see it too? [And this is a food fish?])

poxes

“Sex oppose!” Adelia hailed Aesop. “Poxes!”

reflexes

“Sex, elf Erroll, I won’t essay,” a fat Ondia said. “*Not* a fay asset—no will or reflexes.”

relaxes

“Sex,” alerted Acre vendor Rod, “never, cadet, relaxes!”

“Sex alerts Ujiji felines,” said I, “as senile Fiji just *relaxes!*”

(A lakeport town in Tanzania, Ujiji is associated with Fiji mainly in palindromes.)

taxes

Okay, so sex at noon taxes. But what about sex at the other end of the day, at midnight? Sex at Midnight at the Oasis! Yes! What, not too believable? Well, would you believe sex at midnight in Albuquerque? Then how about sex at midnight out back on the emu farm?

“Sex at midnight,” I wrote, fume-nided in emu fetor, with gin dim, “...taxes.”

A tax, of course, is a levy. It might be a levy upon one’s energies, as above, but more commonly it refers to a levy upon one’s wealth. So far, governments haven’t been able to figure out how to tax noncommercial sex, but give them time. Say it’s the year 2112:

Sex at one, Reno taxes.

Sex at nine, Benin taxes.

Sex at Regina, Niger taxes.*

Sex at Amana, Panama taxes.

Sex at mass, Assam taxes.

Sex at a buran, Aruba taxes.*

Sex at airy spots on a cloven-ere-serene volcano’s top, Syria taxes.*

Sex at “nil,” bud? Oho! *Dublin* taxes!

“Sex at *all*,” Ed Dias said, “Della taxes.”

*(*Also works with in and nixes in place of at and taxes.)*

But as early as 2012:

Sex at a mabolo Agaña gaol, Obama taxes. [*Reasoning that convicts can't vote.*]

vexes

Sex, even if fine, vexes.

Sex, even if art “lust” is—even if, in eves, it’s “ultra” fine—vexes.

Xerxes

Sex, Rex decided, “iced” Xerxes.

* * *

The MockOK.com website’s large alphabetized list of sentence palindromes includes some fifty entries, most of them linguistically less than perfect, that begin with *Sex-*. The six best ones, I’d say, are:

Sex alert: “Ella, my mallet relaxes!” ~ Bill A. O’Connor

Sex ever a hare vexes. [*Some researchers question this.*] ~ “Nora Baron”

“Sex in A.M.?” Ana pondered. “No, Panama nixes.” ~ Win Emmons

Sex in Asia, Raisa nixes. [*“But...what about Glasnost?”*] ~ Win Emmons

Sex in Lebanon Abel nixes. ~ John Kamb

Sexy Rose divides oryxes. ~ Eric Harshbarger

* * *



**“Sex in passion illicit, silo hon,
no holistic Illinois sap nixes!”**

2. HOW TO REVERSE TIME

What is the minimum standard of language or literacy required of a “good” palindrome? As that is a complex question on which there is no universal agreement, it is impossible to say with certainty whether or not the following effort to fairly palindromize the names of all 12 months succeeds. Probably my most egregious compromise with necessity occurs in the palindrome for April, in which I had to resort to the use of the chemical abbreviation for an element. (An even less palatable expedient would have been to use some obscure proper noun ending in *-lir* or *-lirp* or having the letter sequence *lirpa* within it, or whose full name happened to be *Ir*, *Lir*, *Irp*, *Lirp* or *Lirpa*.) It seems unnecessarily ironic that one of the shortest month names should also be the most obdurate one!

January						
Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Tue	Mon	Sun
					1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
15	14	13	12	11	10	9
8	7	6	5	4	3	2
1						

One of the more amusing things about the game of trying to use complete sets of related words in palindromic passages is that the more difficult words often force strange scenarios that would never occur to anyone in the absence of such exigency. The months-of-the-year-names set has been a standing palindromic challenge precisely because it includes a number of difficult words, so be prepared to encounter some strangeness.

January

An orderly in a mental hospital affably humors a delusional patient:

“Huh, Bob?...Oh? Cy’s pet anole Myra, ‘unajar,’ a January *melon* ate, Psycho Bob? ...Huh!”

February

Em reviled Dad’s tip: “Krasnoyarsk? Corcyra? *Ur*? Before *Zama*, Dad Adam? A *zero*! February *crocks*!...Rayon *sark* pits, Dad! Deliver me!...”

Tsk! Only February, and already quite strange. All of the geographical names are in the gazetteer section of Webster’s Collegiate, which suggests that they are not obscure.

March

Oh, March *cram*, Ho.

March is the only month name to function in four categories of speech: proper noun, common noun, adjective and verb. Here it is seen in its common noun persona:

“Dias, a nulla—gasp!—march *cramps* a gal!” Luna said.

A nulla, in India, is a dry ravine.

April

Well, “Ir panic” *is* a blatant natal basic in April, Lew.

Ir is the chemical symbol for the heavy metal iridium, a valuable industrial commodity.

May

Snatch of conversation faintly overheard emanating from a darkened midnight grocery store:

“Yah! May a yap—ay, a pap!—a yam pay
To *not* yammer a hymn in my harem, May?”
“To *not* yap? May a papaya pay a yam hay?”

Note that “May” plays two roles, proper noun and verb, in this bit of veggie vaudeville.

June

“P.U.!” gnarled Debi. “Jerome nims a June *menu!*” “*Jejune* menu,” Jasmine More jibed. Del rang up.

July

“Sit, Feral—let’s trade.” Pooh Wyld lobbed “Wolf” (Rob Benoit) a lever, as in a tub Mary Lu jammed a last salad. “Emma, July rambutan is a *revelation*—ebb or flow,” Deb boldly whooped. “Art, Stella, *reft* is!”

Not sure what’s going on here, but if it’s the prelude to a boating excursion, I have some misgivings.

August

Like March and May, August works at more than one job. In the next two palindromes, it appears first as an adjective and then as a proper noun:

Ay, nosy rat! On Elba, *I*—Matsu guano-defecating nit Ace!—fed on august, amiable notary Sonya!

A nit, of course, is the egg or young of a louse. And for any who don't know, Matsu is a small offshore island once hotly quarreled over by the two Chinas.

On Matsu, Guam, lacier islets,
Apropos a harem muse,
Rests a vast, sere summer.
Ah, a sopor pastels ire...
I, calm August, *am*, no?

"August," an accidentally palindromic poem unwittingly composed by a staunchly antipalindromist poet, has appeared in Word Ways previously. This is an August rerun.

September

O *be*, Zagreb-met pest-raft tar, a nil! Lewd ogrish sir, go dwell in a rat-fart September gazebo!

Who said this, and why? Not unlike a logological coloring book, Word Ways leaves it to the reader to fill in this palindrome's missing scenario.

October

Me? "...And even a "*ganev*," Edna-Em? Stiff! A "one-peso ogre," "bot-collecting niggard-emir," "grime-dragging nit cell," "October goose-pen oaf" [fits me] and even a "*ganev*," Edna-Em?

See the September note.

November

Snippet of conversation overheard in a bistro:

"Sal—I see, sidewise, Zagreb: me, Vonda's sad November gazes...I...We'd..."
"I see, Silas."

Alternatively, instead of stammering at the end of his speech, the two-timing Silas could simply confess, "I wed."

December

A young Croatian expatriate, alone and lonely in Reno (and we all know what that's like), yearns for her hometown and for her Zagreb street-palindromist boyfriend, Nero Loren:

"O Reno! Be Zagreb—me, cedar odor, a doe, deodar odor, a December gazebo, Nero..."