

THE BALEFUL TALE OF HALE AND GALE

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Whenever I see a palindrome I am touched by sadness, for it reminds me of the tragic fate of my former colleague, Mr. Gale, and his boss, Mr. Hale. From the first, their behavior in each other's company struck me as most unnatural. Like an electron and a positron, they lived peaceably enough in different universes, but as soon as they came together each threatened to annihilate the other.

I should have been warned of impending disaster by an incident which occurred one summer morning several years ago. Mr. Gale, having taken part in some sort of celebration the evening before, appeared for work an hour late. Unfortunately, this was not the first time this had happened. Upon his arrival, the placid atmosphere was replaced by one of tense confrontation.

"Late again!" thundered Mr. Hale.

"I know" retorted Mr. Gale.

"I know you know!" Mr. Hale roared.

And Mr. Gale, never one to let Mr. Hale have the last word, replied gamely, "I know you know I know."

Hours later, the duet ". . . I know you know I know you know I know you know I know . . ." was still going, until we managed to separate the haggard adversaries and restore peace to the office.

Mr. Hale and Mr. Gale held sharply contrasting philosophies about the English language. Mr. Hale was a strict grammarian -- to him, a split infinitive was anathema, and a word not appearing in Webster's dictionary did not exist. Mr. Gale, on the other hand, subscribed to the more liberal view that language is less a set of eternally-fixed rules and vocabulary than a tool for conveying ideas from one mind to another.

The decisive incident began on a crisp winter day a little more

than a year ago. Mr. Hale, proofreading a report written by Mr. Gale about a conference with an out-of-town official of our company, felt that Mr. Gale had used the word MIME in a way that might cause offense. "Strike this word out!" wrote Hale on the margin. "Have you no sensitivity?"

The response came back on our company's standard memo form: "I have DEMIMED the report." Hale, who had conceived and designed the memo form, was enraged. He shot back: "I beg you, do not befoul the company's stationery with your illiterate concoctions. DEMIMED, indeed!"

Gale answered: "Please amend my previous memo to read 'I have removed MIME from the report'" and added: "I hope you are happy, Mr. Hale. I have DEDEMIMEDED the memo, just as I am sure you would wish." Hale was quick with: "DEDEMIMEDED is not a word and never, never will be."

Of course it went on from there, step by step. The productive lives of Hale and Gale came to an end. They devoted every waking moment to firing memos back and forth. The contentious word itself grew steadily longer, a voracious parasite sapping the energies of its hosts. The memos became pages long, then volumes long. It soon became evident that both men were quite insane. Neither one rested while the other was preparing his salvo; each felt compelled to work on his next reply. Within a few months we had the unfortunates confined. Behind the asylum walls, they carry on their demented correspondence to this day.

From time to time I look in on them, partly from duty, but mainly because of a morbid interest in the growth of the word-parasite. At times it inspires in me a feeling close to awe. My last visit was only a few days ago. Mr. Gale had just finished a memo containing a 44,623,895-letter word made up of MIM bracketed by the appropriate number of DEs and EDs. The memo was 1524 pages long and weighed more than three pounds. I state with confidence (and vicarious pride) that this word is -- or at least was when completed -- the world's longest palindrome.

Perhaps when their earthly lives are done, Mr. Gale and Mr. Hale will continue their contest somewhere out among the stars and produce that logological pearl, an infinite palindrome.