

THE MAJESTIC PALINDROME

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Towering above all other features of the logological landscape are palindromes. Enveloped in a majestic, icy, unapproachable grandeur all their own, their perfect symmetry or balance has symbolized the eternal in a changing world - for more than 2000 years. Palindromes therefore constitute the logological equivalent of an archetypal Platonic form - a form which all else reflects imperfectly, and to which it aspires, but which nothing else can ever attain.

Two species of the palindrome have attracted the greatest admiration and awe: the word or name, and the sentence or verse. The search for English sentence palindromes and cancrine or Sotadic verse has languished in the past few decades, possibly because of a spreading perception that almost all quality examples have already been found. By contrast, the search for word and name palindromes has continued vigorously, flourishing as never before. Some logologists, such as Jeff Grant of Hastings, New Zealand (a city on North Island, 160 miles northeast of Wellington), have actually accumulated more than a thousand specimens of the genre.

There are, unfortunately, not nearly that many quality English word and name palindromes. Most of them are highly objectionable in one or more different ways - they are blatantly obsolete or dialectal; tautonyms or tautonym plurals; or so un-English in appearance and sound that logological aesthetics prohibits their admission to the hallowed grounds of English palindromy. The purpose of this article is, accordingly, to select and present all known quality word and name palindromes as a unified group, for the first time anywhere, casting all others into the Outer Darkness from which they emerged briefly to haunt logologists. The following list of palindromes is classified by letter length, and alphabetized within each letter length. The palindromes are defined, commented upon, or discussed - as seems appropriate. The English list is followed by a much shorter list of the finest known foreign-language palindromes, to present a complete picture of word palindromes today.

1 Letter

Each letter of the alphabet is a palindrome, and each one is a dictionary entry, defined both as the letter itself and in other plebeian ways - as an object in the shape of that letter, for instance. This cheapening monotony excludes most letters from my list. Deserving of inclusion are four letters that are also authen-

tic words: A and I (two of the most common English words), the evocative and invocative poetic exclamation O, and the verb X ("to mark with an X"). The last of these words makes me a little uncomfortable because it is spelled without a vowel. I console myself with the thought that it has a respectable literary history: Edgar Allan Poe, for instance, used its present participle in the title of his short story, "X-ing a Paragrab."

2 Letters

Only one word of this letter length qualifies for inclusion here: SS, plural of the letter S. All other letters form their plurals in like manner, but none of the other plurals is a palindrome. Adding to its uniqueness is the decisive contrast between SS and other well-known two-letter palindromes such as AA (a rough, cindery form of lava common in Hawaii), EE (the Scottish word for "eye"), and OO (an extinct Hawaiian bird). The other two-letter palindromes are so flagrantly un-English that SS becomes a shining example by comparison.

3 Letters

There are 36 quality English word palindromes of 3 letters:

| | | | | | | | | |
|------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| ADA | ASA | DAD | ERE | GAG | MOM | PAP | PUP | TIT |
| AHA | AVA | DID | EVE | GIG | MUM | PEP | SIS | TOT |
| A LA | BIB | DUD | EWE | HAH | NUN | PIP | SOS | TUT |
| ANA | BOB | EKE | EYE | HUH | OHO | POP | TAT | WOW |

Interjections such as AHA, HAH, HUH, OHO, and WOW, and words such as DAD, MOM, and SIS are informal, of course, but they are so much a part of the English language that they cannot be denied admission to my list. ADA, ASA, and AVA are acceptable as common first names. The two-word term A LA is preferable to the highly technical term ALA because it is far more common, and its Frenchness lends it an air of charm and sophistication. I have included the fully capitalized term SOS with some trepidation: I feel, however, that its informal meaning of "any urgent call for help" qualifies it for inclusion here.

4 Letters

There are 11 quality English word palindromes of 4 letters:

| | | | | | |
|------|------|-------|------|------|------|
| ANNA | DEED | MA'AM | OTTO | POOP | TOOT |
| BOOB | KOOK | NOON | PEEP | SEES | |

BOOB and KOOK are both informal terms of derogation for a disliked individual; ANNA and OTTO are common first names. NOON is a palindrome upside down as well as right side up, adding to its distinction and value.

5 Letters

There are 20 quality English word palindromes of 5 letters:

| | | | | |
|-------|-------|--------|-------|-------|
| CIVIC | KAYAK | MINIM | REFER | SARAS |
| DELED | LEVEL | PUT UP | ROTOR | SERES |
| DEWED | MADAM | RADAR | SAGAS | SEXES |

SHAHS SOHOS STATS STETS TENET

KAYAK is a word that could be regarded as objectionably foreign; I have included it because it is common enough to be found in all current pocket dictionaries, as well as in hard-cover dictionaries for juvenile readers. The two-word verb PUT UP, with assorted meanings, is aesthetically preferable to the hyphenated adjective PUT-UP. SARAS is the plural of the feminine first name SARA, formed in accordance with current Websterian rules. SHAHS is another foreign word, qualifying for inclusion because American involvement with the Shah of Iran resulted in the Iranian hostage crisis, central to the American consciousness for a period of more than a year. SOHOS are hailing shouts used by huntsmen. Like its shorter companion NOON, the word is a four-way palindrome. STATS is an informal name for photostats, listed in Roget's International Thesaurus, if nowhere else.

6 Letters

There are eight quality English word palindromes of 6 letters:

| | | | |
|--------|---------|---------|---------|
| DENNED | PULL UP | RETTTER | TERRET |
| HANNAH | REDDER | TAT-TAT | TUT-TUT |

HANNAH is a feminine first name. The two-word verb PULL UP is aesthetically preferable to the hyphenated noun PULL-UP. The mutual transposals RETTTER (one who soaks flax) and TERRET (a ring on the top of a harness pad) are remote from the everyday lives of most Americans. TAT-TAT and TUT-TUT are tautonyms, but thoroughly English ones.

7 Letters

With the advance to the 7-letter level, a slight loosening of the standards governing palindrome admission is in order, and takes effect. On the new basis, there are 8 quality English word palindromes of 7 letters:

| | | | |
|----------|----------|---------|-----------|
| DEIFIED | RACK CAR | REVIVER | TOP SPOT |
| RACE CAR | REPAPER | ROTATOR | VERY REV. |

RACE CAR (an automobile used in racing) and TOP SPOT (as on a political ticket) are common terms in English parlance: I have seen each of them repeatedly in newspaper and magazine articles. Their absence from dictionaries is, therefore, irrelevant in evaluating them qualitatively. RACK CAR (A railroad flatcar for transporting motor vehicles) is in Webster's 1981 Addenda Section and elsewhere. VERY REV. is the shortened form of (The) VERY REVEREND, a title used in addressing certain ecclesiastics (a canon or clergyman belonging to the chapter or staff of a cathedral or collegiate church, for example).

8 Letters

The advance to the higher levels of the palindrome, thriving in a rarefied atmosphere, requires abandoning reliance on dictionaries as arbiters of word acceptability, replacing such reliance with reliance on one's own expert knowledge of English. This fur-

ther slight relaxation of the standards governing palindrome admission results in 11 quality English word palindromes of 8 letters:

| | | | |
|------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| APOLLO, PA | GNIPPING | SNELLEN'S | STELLETS |
| DEDEEDED | PEEP-PEEP | SNIFFIN'S | TOOT-TOOT |
| DRAY YARD | REDEEDER | SNIPPIN'S | |

APOLLO, PA. A borough in Armstrong County, in western Pennsylvania, some 25 miles east-northeast of Pittsburgh.

DEDEEDED ("rescinded a transfer by deed of property") and REDEEDER ("one who transfers property by means of a deed"). These are simple derivatives of the common verb DEED ("to transfer property by means of a deed").

DRAY YARD. Just as a shipyard is a place where ships are built or repaired, so is a dray yard a place where drays (carts for hauling heavy loads) are built, stored, or repaired. The term may and should probably be written as a solid word, DRAYYARD, but I hesitated doing so because of the resulting juxtaposition of two Y's.

GNIPPING and STELLETS. Both words were formerly but are no longer in use. They are acceptable to me despite their obsolescence because they look just like modern English words (GNIPPING resembles GRIPPING; STELLETS resembles SKILLETS). GNIPPING ("champing at the bit, as a horse") is in Webster's First Edition and in the Oxford. The illustrative quotations in the Oxford happen to show the present participle of the verb GNIP as GNIPPAND. I am certain that the choice of quotations was accidental, and that other quotations could have been selected in which the present participle was used in the palindromic form GNIPPING. STELLETS ("stylets") is in both the old (1893) and the new (1913 and later years) Funk and Wagnalls unabridged dictionaries.

PEEP-PEEP and TOOT-TOOT. Both words are in lightface type in the Oxford. PEEP-PEEP, under PEEP, is the cry of the hedge sparrow, a bird thereby immortalized. TOOT-TOOT, under TOOT, is the blast of a horn.

SNELLEN'S. SNELLEN is a Dutch, not an English, surname, but Dutch is a language belonging to the same branch and group (West Germanic) of the Indo-European language family as does English. More importantly, SNELLEN'S test type for visual acuity is all too well-known to Americans, and some of them are exposed to it on every business day.

SNIFFIN'S and SNIPPIN'S. These are those forms of the gerundial plurals SNIFFINGS and SNIPPINGS which correspond to FIXIN'S as a variant of FIXINGS. FIXIN'S is found in references such as The American Thesaurus of Slang by Berrey and Van den Bark, and H.L. Mencken's The American Language: Supplement One (p. 506, unitalicized type).

9 Letters

Since there are many more palindromes spelled with an odd than with an even number of letters, the slight liberalization of acceptability standards adopted with respect to 8-letter word palindromes produces its first significant effect at the 9-letter level, providing 22 palindromes at that level;

| | | | |
|------------|--------------|-------------|-------------|
| ABBA DABBA | N.A. GAHAGAN | REGARAGER | SEMIDIMES |
| DERBY-BRED | NE'ER-GREEN | RELEVELER | SEMITIMES |
| ELLEMELLE | NEVER-EVEN | REP. PEPPER | SORBY BROS |
| EVITATIVE | NON-ALANON | RE-REVERER | STENT NETS |
| LEONA NOEL | RED-EYEDER | ROTAVATOR | TAT-TAT-TAT |
| MARY BYRAM | REDIVIDER | | |

ABBA DABBA. The payoff portion of "Abba Dabba Honeymoon," the title of a song of 1914 vintage, with both words and music written by a pair of then 26-year-olds: Arthur Fields and Walter Donovan. The longtime standing of the song as a popular favorite outweighs the unfortunate resemblance of the palindrome to one of native African or Polynesian provenance.

DERBY-BRED. A compound adjective describing horses bred for the specific purpose of competing in horse races such as the Kentucky Derby.

ELLEMELLE. A town in Belgium, some 13 miles south-southeast of the city of Liège. The town is in the French-speaking portion of Belgium, and its name is a French one, a factor outweighing its somewhat unfortunate close approximation to a tautonym.

EVITATIVE. Tending to shun or to avoid: an adjective derived from the verb EVITATE and the noun EVITATION.

LEONA NOEL, MARY BYRAM, and N.A. GAHAGAN. Palindromic names of individuals in the English-speaking world. There almost certainly are, or have been, actual individuals so named. Finding the names in reference works is unimportant, however - they are there, like empty seats on a bus, whether or not anyone is ingenious enough and opportunistic enough to use them. Words and names are archetypes endowed with an eternal existence entirely independent of their actual use. I consider myself very fortunate to have chanced upon these particular palindromes.

NE'ER-GREEN. A compound adjective describing entities that are never green - entities such as cow's milk, northern ravens, and erythrocytes. Use of the word is most appropriate in a poetic or solemn context.

NEVER-EVEN. Another compound adjective, this one describing quantities whose numerical values are invariably odd - 3, 5, or 7, for instance. Numbers not evenly divisible by two are never-even numbers.

NON-ALANON. Yet another compound adjective, one designating principles, practices, or individuals not associated with or representing Al-Anon, an organization affiliated with Alcoholics Anonymous and dedicated to helping the families of alcoholics. Encouraging alcoholics to drink more and more is a non-Al-Anon practice.

RED-EYEDER. The comparative form of the adjective RED-EYED. An alternative form, MORE RED-EYED, is more common. RED-EYEDER, however, is in the tradition of writers such as Thomas Carlyle, who used comparatives such as beautifuller, eminenter, and slavisher.

REDIVIDER, REGARAGER, RELEVELER, and RE-REVERER. Each of these agent nouns follows the standard rules of English word formation, and each is derived from a simple verb (to divide, garage, level, or revere). Each term has a definition cast in the mold,

"One who or that which reperformers the action of the root verb."

REP. PEPPER. Claude Denson Pepper, a Democratic member of the House of Representatives. He was born September 8, 1900, represents the State of Florida, and has been a congressman since January, 1963.

ROTAVATOR. The original spelling of ROTOVATOR, a power-driven tool with rotating blades for breaking up or tilling the soil (A Dictionary of New English 1963-1972, by C.L. Barnhart, S. Steinmetz, and R.K. Barnhart, published 1973). Though I am no farmer, I assume that this British term is the equivalent of the American Rototiller.

SEMIDIMES. A delightfully natural name for nickels.

SEMITIMES. According to Webster's Second Edition, a solidly-written word meaning "half times." The Oxford hyphenates the word and relates it to the words "half a time" in the New Testament (Rev. 12:14). I have never found the word SEMI-TIME in the Bible. It is actually found in two works by Henry More (1614-1687), an English philosopher of the Cambridge Platonist school: An Exposition of the Seven Epistles of the Seven Churches (1664 or 1669; the Oxford contradicts itself regarding the year of publication), and Paralipomena Prophetica, Containing Several Supplements and Defences (1685).

SORBY BROS. An excellent name for a business partnership formed and owned by the Sorby brothers. SORBY is an English surname in fine standing (A Dictionary of English and Welsh Surnames by Charles Wareing Bardsley, 1967). Henry Clifton Sorby (1826-1908) was an English geologist who studied Egyptian hieroglyphics and who helped found Sheffield University in 1905 (a university in West Riding, Yorkshire, England). I am told that a SORBY BROS. business formerly existed somewhere in Michigan. Whether it did or not is immaterial - the name is like an empty vessel, waiting to be filled. It is there, whether or not a business appears to fill it, and that is all that matters.

STENT NETS. Nets anchored at one end to a stake, used in river fishing (Webster's Third Edition).

TAT-TAT-TAT. A sound of sharp, repeated knocking or tapping (Webster's Third Edition): a thoroughly English retriplication.

10 Letters

There are 5 quality English word palindromes of 10 letters:

| | | |
|------------|---------------|------------|
| DETANNATED | N.A. GILLIGAN | RESUFFUSER |
| ETIENNEITE | NELLA ALLEN | |

DETANNATED. Separated from, or free of, tannic acid. The word has been used as part of the drug name "detannated tincture of cinchona" (Pharmacopoeia of the United States, 8th decennial revision, Philadelphia, 1905).

ETIENNEITE. A follower of Charles G. Etienne (1778-1845), a French dramatist and poet; or of Pierre H. Etienne (1801-1861), a French politician. The last E of Etienne is retained, as it is in words such as Boiseite and Seattleite (see the one-volume abridged edition of The American Language by H.L. Mencken, pre-

pared by Raven I. McDavid, Jr., for Boiseite, and Webster's Third Edition for Seattleite). I am an Etienneite!

N.A. GILLIGAN. An English name probably borne by someone, somewhere, sometime. If not, it is waiting to be appropriated. Should no one ever appear to claim the name, so much the better: its pristine purity will remain undefiled by use.

NELLA ALLEN. A heroine in Kathleen Winsor's Wanderers Eastward, Wanderers West (New York: Random House, 1965).

RESUFFUSER. One who or that which suffuses again - a simple derivative of the common verb suffuse.

11 Letters

There are 10 quality English word palindromes of 11 letters:

| | | |
|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| BLAKE DEKALB | EDNA LALANDE | NORAH SHARON |
| DEED/NONDEED | LEVITATIVEL | RE-REPAPERER |
| DETARTRATED | NOON/NONNOON | SENSUOUSNES |
| DUANE RENAUD | | |

BLAKE DEKALB, DUANE RENAUD, EDNA LALANDE, and NORAH SHARON. These are, once again, excellent English names which may already have been appropriated for use by specific individuals, or which may be so appropriated at some future time. Either way, they exist as eternal archetypes or prototypes, as ideal forms of the palindrome.

DEED/NONDEED. A compound adjective describing a property transfer which may be accomplished either with or without a conveyance by deed.

DETARTRATED. Separated from, or free of, tartaric acid. The word is a simple derivative of the dictionary adjective TARTRATED, which means the exact opposite. In many ways, DETARTRATED is the finest palindrome the English language has to offer: its crowning achievement in the field of word palindromy.

LEVITATIVEL. This 11-letter palindrome appears only as part of the 12-letter word LEVITATIVELY ("in a levitative manner"). Quality word palindromes of 11-letter length are so rare that they deserve to be recognized even if they exist only in a bound state (somewhat like the quarks of particle physics).

NOON/NONNOON. A compound adjective describing events which may take place either at noon or at other times. A businessman may, for instance, ask his secretary for a list of his noon/nonnoon appointments for the coming week. The word is the longest one in English using only two letters of the alphabet without also being a tautonym; the two letters are, moreover, alphabetically adjacent and in the last half of the alphabet, so that the word rivals NONSUPPORTS as the longest last-half word.

RE-REPAPERER. One who or that which repapers again - a simple derivative of the common word (and palindrome) REPAPER.

SENSUOUSNES. This 11-letter palindrome, like LEVITATIVEL, appears only as part of a 12-letter word, SENSUOUSNESS. Though in a bound state, it is equally remarkable and worthy of inclusion here.

12 Letters

There are only two quality English word palindromes of 12 letters - ADAVEN, NEVADA and REDNESS ENDER.

ADAVEN, NEVADA. A location in Nye County, Nevada, about 125 miles north of Las Vegas. It is inside the southernmost section of the Humboldt National Forest, near one of the east-west boundaries of that section, on a dirt road running through the forest section. The name ADAVEN is a reversal of the state name; undoubtedly, an intentional reversal, detracting slightly from the value of the palindrome. About 12 miles northwest of Adaven is the town of NYALA, also an interesting name. Interpretable as a combination of abbreviations for the states of New York and Alabama (NY plus ALA), the name is actually that of several southern or eastern African antelopes, commonly bluish-gray with faint white markings (Webster's Third Edition). The names ADAVEN and NYALA were common on maps of Nevada published in the 1960s and 1970s, but have disappeared from the maps of the 1980s. I wonder what has happened to these locations.

REDNESS ENDER. A factual, and happily palindromic, designation for an ointment or other medication which acts to reduce and eliminate skin inflammations. A superb potential brand name!

Longer Palindromes

I would be content to end my list of English word palindromes with the 12-letter examples just presented. Unfortunately, English is in competition with other European languages capable of forming substantially longer single-word palindromes because compound concepts in those languages are customarily unified instead of being represented by two-or-more-word phrases as in English. Since English is under a categorical imperative to surpass all other languages, an imperative that cannot be denied, I continue.

CIVIC/NONCIVIC (13). A compound adjective describing personal obligations: both those connected with the individual's citizenship and all others.

GREGORY, ROGER G. (13). The telephone-directory form of the name Roger G. Gregory.

LEVEL/NONLEVEL (13). A compound adjective describing a diversity of terrains: both those where the ground is level and those where the ground is sloping or hilly.

RADAR/NONRADAR (13). A compound adjective describing the detection of distant objects both by means of radar and through the use of other detection devices.

ROGER G. M'GREGOR (13). The pseudonym, within the National Puzzlers' League, of the noted English palindromist Leigh Mercer.

DEIFIED/NONDEIFIED (17). A compound adjective describing two classes of culture heroes: those who have been elevated to the status of deities, and those who have remained mere heroes.

GOLDENROD-ADORNED LOG (19). A log left on the ground in the forest by lumberjacks - one which has subsequently been overgrown by the gaily-colored goldenrods springing up beside it.

In languages such as German, Dutch and Finnish, one solidly-written palindromic word would suffice to express this ennobling concept.

DETANNATED/NONDETANNATED (23). A compound adjective describing two classes of chemical substances: those which have been separated from tannic acid, and those which have not been so separated.

DETARTRATED/NONDETARTRATED (25). A compound adjective describing two classes of chemical substances: those which have been separated from tartaric acid, and those which have not been so separated.

The Websterian palindromic effort merits or requires a footnote. The longest solidly-written palindrome in Webster's Second Edition (MALAYALAM, a Dravidian language of southwestern India), and the longest such palindrome in Webster's Third Edition (KINNIKINNIK, a smoking mixture used by American Indians in the Ohio valley) do not qualify for recognition as English words. Each palindrome is, essentially, a tautonym; is derived from a language far beyond the Indo-European pale; and conveys an extremely uncommon meaning - I estimate that neither word is one of the 50,000 most common English words. Many other palindromes have fallen by the wayside for the same or similar reasons.

Foreign Word Palindromes

Listed below, for comparative purposes, are the 22 highest-quality foreign-language palindromes that I have encountered in three decades of searching for them. My list begins with 8-letter examples, since shorter palindromes are reasonably common in many foreign languages.

DOORROOD (8). A deep red: red through and through (Dutch).

GWALLAWG (8). A masculine first name (Welsh).

OOCOOCOO (8). The wild turkey (Cherokee Indian). I took this word and its definition from an old issue of *The Enigma*, but have not had an opportunity to verify it in a dictionary of the Cherokee language.

OTTO-OTTO (8). In music, eight-eight time (Italian).

ANINANINA (9). Giddy (Maori).

ANONANONA (9). The ant (Hawaiian).

MARKTKRAM (9). Retail goods or small wares sold in a market (German).

NEPPOPPEN (9). Imitation dolls (Dutch). The definition disturbs me: since dolls are imitation humans, what are imitations of imitations of humans - real humans?

RECONOCER (9). To submit to the command or jurisdiction of others (Spanish).

REGNINGER (9). Calculations or computations (Danish, Norwegian).

RESSASSER (9). To dwell or harp on; to repeat (French).

REGALLAGER (10). A warehouse or storehouse for portable (music) organs (German).

SIMILLIMIS (10). Very similar, or most similar: the dative plural form of the adjective SIMILIS (Latin).

MASSINISSAM (11). The accusative singular form of MASSINISSA, an alternate spelling of MASINISSA, a Numidian king in the second

century BC allied with Rome (Latin).

NEDERTREDEN (11). To step or walk down (Dutch).

KORNETTENROK (12). The dress coat of a servant to an officer in the Dutch East Indian army (Dutch). In English, by contrast,

PARTERRETRAP (12). A ground-floor stairway (Dutch).

ATT ORDIDROTTA (13). To contest with words: to engage in logomachy, to logomachize (Swedish).

RELIEFPFELER (13). An architectural column or pillar decorated with reliefs (German).

SAIPPUAKAUPPIAS (15). A soap dealer (Finnish).

PARTERRESERRETRAP (17). A stairway leading to an enclosed ground-floor back porch or veranda (Dutch).

SAIPPUAKIVIKAUPPIAS (19). A dealer in lye (Finnish).

Further affiant saith not.

A NEW WORD LIST

The Complete Word Game Dictionary (Facts on File, 1984; \$19.95 in hardcover), by Tom Pulliam and Gorton Carruth, is an alphabetical list of 185,000 words taken from a variety of unspecified dictionaries. It contains no words that are always capitalized (though sometimes capitalized words like *China* or *Argentine* do appear), relatively few s-plurals, but a considerable number of -ed and -ing verb forms. Its major shortcoming is the fact that long words are underrepresented compared with the typical unabridged dictionary; I could find only two 19-letter ones, straightforwardness and incommensurableness, and five 18-letter ones. (Some rather common shorter words also didn't make it, such as neighborliness and crystallography.) On the other hand, one can find a number of logological old friends like aegilops, nastaliq, stolcjaerre, tch, muzjik, oii and euouae.

For me, the book's strongest feature is the separate listing of all words containing J, Q, X or Z by word-length, by position of the rare letter in the word, and by Scrabble score.

The book is typographically identical to one published by the same authors seven years earlier under the name *The Complete Scrabble Dictionary*. As the result of legal action brought by Selchow & Righter, all but a handful of copies were destroyed. The authors have been careful to sanitize the Scrabble name in this book with the circle-around-an-R trademark symbol.