

Vocabulary Energizers II:

Stories of Word Origins

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Chapter 2

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| 1. Spartan | 6. pittance |
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| 4. spurn | 9. farce |
| 5. pedigree | 10. bombast |

1. *Spartan* (SPAR tun) *adj.* severe, rigorous, disciplined

Life in Sparta, an ancient Greek city-state, was much like boot camp or basic training. Spartans survived on simple food and the barest minimum of clothing and shelter. Their daily routine included vigorous exercise and military training. To eliminate weaklings, Spartans even killed deformed or unhealthy infants.

An early Spartan king demonstrated his extreme self-discipline when he and his soldiers were about to die of thirst. The king promised to give over his entire treasure to the enemy's leader provided that the king and his men all receive water from a spring guarded by the enemy. Before allowing his men to quench their thirst, the king declared that anyone who refrained from drinking would be the new king. So parched were his men that none could resist gulping the water. However, the king himself passed the stream without tasting one drop of water. True to the narrowest interpretation of his agreement, the king—who had not drunk—therefore refused to yield his treasures to the enemy's leader after succeeding to refresh his warriors. This king's famous great-grandson Lycurgus, known as the creator of Sparta's laws, also revealed his capacity for self-control when he made the Spartan citizens promise that they would obey his laws until he returned from a visit to the oracle of Delphi, a place where the god Apollo presumably answered one's questions. After arriving at Delphi, King Lycurgus refused to eat, starving himself to death and thus insuring that his fellow citizens would perpetually observe his laws. Because of their reputation for discipline and enduring hardships, the Spartans lent their name to describe vigorous self-denial and a severely simple lifestyle.

By following a Spartan regimen of diet and exercise, I managed to lose thirty pounds in a month. Rocky Marciano, the only heavyweight boxing champion to retire with a perfect record (49-0, with 43 knock-outs) would isolate himself weeks before fights so he could Spartanly train to reach his peak. "Spartan" can also be a noun as when we say a brave, uncomplaining person is a true Spartan.

Synonyms: self-denying, plain, spare, restrained, strict, stern, austere (aw STEER)

Related words: abstemious, abstinent, ascetic, stringent, frugal

Contrasted words: lavish, self-indulgent, hedonistic, sybaritic

2. *gadfly* (GAD fly) *n.* person who continually annoys others

Old Norse *gaddr* meant "spike." A gadfly, commonly known as a horsefly, is a large fly that spikes or stings cattle and horses. The meaning of "gadfly" has metaphorically evolved to refer to a persistently annoying person, especially one who tries to sting or arouse others to action. Perhaps the most famous of all gadflies was the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates. In his famous trial where he defended himself against the charge of corrupting the youth of Athens, Socrates referred to himself as a gadfly and to Athens as a great steed. The philosopher felt his purpose was to sting the conscience of the city and rouse his countrymen to moral action. Socrates began his career as a moral gadfly when told by a friend that the oracle of Delphi (voice of the god Apollo) had declared Socrates the wisest of men. Socrates did not feel particularly wise, so he went around cross-examining craftsmen, poets, and politicians to see if the oracle erred and perhaps someone else was wiser. Employing his scalpel-like intellect to dissect the opinion of others, Socrates discovered that no one indeed knew more. The only difference was that others were not aware of their ignorance and thought they knew something whereas Socrates himself knew that he knew nothing. He therefore concluded that the oracle must have meant that Socrates was the wisest of men because he alone knew the limits of his knowledge. Martin Luther King, Jr., holder of a Ph.D. in philosophy from Boston University and a great admirer of Socrates, roused the conscience of our nation in his role as gadfly for civil rights. While some gadflies may be restless, critical, and annoying to no meaningful end, humanity sorely needs more gadflies like Socrates and King.

Synonyms: critic, pest, faultfinder, goad (rhymes with "toad" and can be a noun or verb)

3. *homage* (HOM ij) *n.* action showing respect and honor

Feudalism was a military and political system in medieval Europe in which a warrior swore loyalty to his lord and in turn would be protected by the lord. In a formal ceremony, the warrior knelt unarmed and bareheaded while placing his hands between those of the lord. The warrior swore to use his hands and his weapons only for the ruler. This warrior would then become a "vassal" of the lord and receive a gift of land in return for military support. Since the vassal or warrior thus became the "man" (from French *homme*, ultimately from Latin *homo*) of the lord, this ceremony was called *homage*. Although we are no longer in the Middle Ages, we still pay homage to anyone we greatly respect or admire. Since "imitation is the sincerest form of flattery," we show homage when we model ourselves after our heroes. Baseball pays homage to great ballplayers with the Hall of Fame, Hollywood pays homage to its performers with the Academy Award, and the world pays homage to humanity's outstanding contributors with the Nobel prize.

Synonyms: honor, admiration, esteem, reverence, tribute (TRIB yoot)

Related words: deference, obeisance, veneration

Contrasted words: irreverence, contempt, disdain, scorn

4. *spurn* (SPURN) *v.* scornfully refuse or reject

Old English *spurnan* meant "kick." Shakespeare uses this meaning of "spurn" when he has Shylock, the Jewish moneylender in *The Merchant of Venice*, express his rage and resentment at being rudely handled by the merchant Antonio who has asked him for a loan:

Fair sir, you [Antonio] spit on me on Wednesday last,
You spurned me such a day, another time
You called me dog; and for these courtesies

I'll lend you thus much moneys?...
You that did void your rheum [spit] upon my beard
And foot me as you spurn a stranger cur [dog]
Over your threshold!

"Spurn" still kicks where it hurts when the boy or girl of our dreams spurns us. The innovative filmmaker Spike Lee contemptuously rejects and spurns the shallow Hollywood stereotypes of Blacks.

Synonyms: scorn, repel, despise, decline, dismiss, repudiate (rih PYOO dee ate, PYOO rhymes with "few" and "blue")

Related words: disdain, rebuff, contemn, repulse

Contrasted words: crave

5. *pedigree* (PED uh gree) *n.* ancestry or record of ancestry, line of descent

During the Middle Ages noblemen had to substantiate their claims to an inheritance or title by proving their ancestry. The scholars they employed to trace their ancestry compiled genealogical charts or family trees that used a wavering three-line symbol to show descent. Since this symbol resembled the imprint of the foot of a crane (a long-legged and long-necked bird resembling a stork), the symbol was called *ped de grue* (*ped* = "foot," *de* = "of," *grue* = "crane") in French, the court language of many kingdoms at the time. *Pied de grue* also became the name for the historical family chart, and the word entered our English language in the fifteenth century. Through a series of spelling transformations, *ped de grue* became "pedigree," meaning "ancestry" or a "genealogical table showing one's descent." The Daughters of the American Revolution is a society of women who trace their pedigree back to persons who helped establish American independence. A pedigreed dog is a purebred whose papers show its line of descent. Heathcliff, the passionate and almost demonic central character of Emily Bronte's romantic novel *Wuthering Heights*, was an orphan without pedigree.

Synonyms: descent, family tree, lineage, genealogy (jee nee AL uh jee)

Related words: progenitors, forebears, forefathers, heritage

6. *pittance* (PIT uns) *n.* small amount or portion, especially of money

Church sponsors in the Middle Ages sometimes donated money to a monastery to feast the monks on the successive anniversaries of the donor's death. This donation was a *pittance*, derived from Latin *pietas* ("piety," "devotion"). Originally a rather large and generous offering, the *pittance* dwindled until barely enough to provide crumbs for the monks. This shrunken *pittance* thus became synonymous with any small, inconsiderable, or inadequate amount.

Some people feel that Congress provides a pittance for education compared to the lavish expenditures for the military. Last year's high-priced fads can often be had today for a pittance. After losing their lucrative positions as a result of Senator Joseph McCarthy's witch hunt for Communists in the 1950's, several entertainers and screenwriters could find work that paid only a meager sum or pittance.

Synonyms: trifle, insufficiency, ration, minimal wage, modicum (MOD uh kum)

Related words: dole, meager remuneration

Contrasted words: abundance, largess, bounty

7. *preposterous* (prih POS tur us) *adj.* ridiculous, obviously absurd, contrary to reason

From the ancient Romans we get the expression "to put the cart before the horse," meaning "to be mixed up" or "do things in the wrong order," since a horse normally pulls rather than pushes a cart. The Latin word conveying the sense of this expression was *praeposterous* (*pre* = "before," *post* = "after") and meant "having the last first," hence "not in the right way or manner." Therefore, our English word "preposterous" is truly a preposterous or absurd word since it literally derives from "before coming after." The Fool in Shakespeare's *King Lear* emphasizes the preposterousness of Lear's situation (King Lear had foolishly divided his kingdom between his two evil daughters while banishing his third devoted daughter) when he asks the king, "May not an ass know when the cart draws the horse?"— incidentally bringing to mind the etymology of "preposterous." It would be preposterous to kill a fly with a cannon. Someone preposterously proposed that an illiterate be chairman of the board of education.

Synonyms: foolish, nonsensical, silly, unreasonable, irrational, ludicrous (LOO dih krus)

Related words: fatuous, asinine, implausible, unfeasible

Contrasted words: plausible, credible, tenable, feasible

8. *macabre* (muh KAH bruh, muh KAHB) *adj.* gruesome, horrible, causing fear, suggesting the horror of death

The Middle Ages produced morality plays in which abstract qualities like good deeds, poverty, wealth, and sin were represented by actors. These plays would teach a moral lesson through the conflict of good and evil to capture the souls of people. In one such morality play, Death debates with humans, wins the arguments, and leads the victims offstage in a weird *danse macabre* (French for "dance of death"). Medieval and Renaissance artists depicted the dance of death with Death in the form of a dancing skeleton. The Black Death, probably bubonic plague, wiped out approximately a third of Europe's population in the fourteenth century and contributed to the popularity of the gruesome *danse macabre* as a subject for art. With its horrid heritage of death, "macabre" most fittingly describes weird and terrifying events. Macabre films of horror and supernatural suspense often attract large audiences. Edgar Allan Poe and Stephen King are masters of the macabre.

Synonyms: grim, hideous, horrid, dreadful, weird, ghastly (GAST lee)

Related words: grisly, eerie, morbid

9. *farce* (FARS) *n.* ridiculous, light comedy; slapstick comedy; absurd thing; mockery

10. *bombast* (BOM bast) *n.* speech or writing that sounds grand or important but has little meaning

Both "farce" and "bombast" have to do with stuffing and padding. Since most people in the Middle Ages were illiterate, one way for them to learn about the Bible and religious events was through watching religious plays. However, the spectators sometimes grew restless as the actors took time out to change costumes between the acts of a play. Performers began to fill these gaps with light, humorous sketches called *farces*—from Latin *farcire* ("stuff")—since they were stuffed between acts. "Bombast" also derives from stuffing since men's court costumes in olden times were padded with cotton, this padding being called *bombace* in the French at that time. Today, lofty, flowery, high-sounding language lacking meaningful content is bombast, for it is essentially little more than padding. Bombastic speeches may even turn farcical if they become ridiculous enough. Intentional farces amuse us in T.V. situation comedies and films, but farces in justice where criminals go free are not amusing. In *Henry IV*, Shakespeare presents us with the swaggering, boasting, beer-bellied liar and joyful source of farcical entertainment— Falstaff, described by the hero, Prince Hal, as "my sweet creature of bombast" (clearly alluding to Falstaff's padding, rolls of fat, and inflated speech).

Synonyms for "farce": mockery, absurdity, ridiculousness, nonsense, burlesque (bur LESK)

Related words for "farce": sham, travesty, parody, caricature

Synonyms for "bombast": wordiness, grandiloquence (gran DIL uh kwens)

Related words for "bombast": magniloquence, rhetoric, pretentiousness, pomposity

Working With Words

I. Fill in each blank with the appropriate word from the following list:

gadfly	pedigree
pittance	macabre
spurned	farce
Spartan	homage
preposterous	bombast

The life and teachings of the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates (469-399 B.C.) have made him one of history's most respected and influential figures. His lifestyle was simple, even (1)_____, eating plain food, wearing the same old robe throughout the year, and walking barefoot even on ice. However, he would occasionally party and could outdrink anyone on these occasions. Socrates' basic attitude to material comforts and luxuries can be seen when he looked at the numerous articles in a market place and remarked, "How many things there are that I do not want!" Whereas wealth meant nothing to Socrates, truth and goodness meant everything, the philosopher being credited with the saying "the unexamined life is not worth living." At that time there were teachers called "sophists," who, for a fee, would teach one how to win arguments. Socrates (2)_____ the ways of these sophists, for he was concerned with discovering truth rather than winning debates and never accepted even a (3)_____ for his teachings.

Because he continually annoyed many of the citizens of Athens with his stinging inquiries into truth and justice, Socrates was known as the (4)_____ of Athens. His enemies brought him to trial with the charges of corruption of the youth and denial of traditional religion. In his defense, Socrates showed how wild, irrational, and (5)_____ were the charges of his accusers. Indeed, he made the opponents' arguments appear to be nothing but high-sounding speech with little meaning, mere (6)_____. Socrates' skillful mockery of his prosecutors almost turned the trial into a ridiculous (7)_____. However, the majority of Athenians had made up their minds before the trial and condemned Socrates to death. In what may seem to us a (8)_____ ending, although in reality it was a relatively gentle and peaceful death, Socrates drank the poison hemlock in his prison cell while surrounded by his weeping friends. His enemies succeeded in killing his body but not his thought. Western philosophy pays honor and (9)_____ to him by tracing its lineage or (10)_____ back to the ancient Greek philosophers, of whom Aristotle was a student of Plato and Plato a student of Socrates.

II. Match the word on the left with its synonyms.

- | | |
|-------------------|------------------------------|
| _1. gadfly | a. reverence, respect |
| _2. farce | b. austere, severe |
| _3. pittance | c. repudiate, reject |
| _4. Spartan | d. modicum, trifle |
| _5. macabre | e. ludicrous, ridiculous |
| _6. pedigree | f. burlesque, mockery |
| _7. spurn | g. grandiloquence, wordiness |
| _8. homage | h. goad, critic |
| _9. bombast | i. ghastly, gruesome |
| _10. preposterous | j. genealogy, ancestry |

III. Word Part: ROG—ask (surrogate)

prerogative (prih ROG uh tiv) *n.* exclusive or special right or privilege

derogatory (dih ROG uh tor ee) *adj.* tending to make a person or thing seem lower or of less value; belittling; negative; discrediting

interrogate (in TER uh gate) *v.* question formally, closely, systematically

arrogant (AR uh gunt) *adj.* showing an excessive and unpleasant sense of superiority; overbearingly proud; haughty

abrogate (AB ruh gate) v. abolish, repeal, cancel, legally do away with

Using each of the five ROG words only once, complete the following sentences.

1. I am not surprised that my political opponent makes negative, _____ remarks about my character.
2. Power and wealth transformed the humble, pleasant man into an _____ tyrant.
3. The Prohibition Era, the period when alcoholic beverages were illegal in the United States, began in 1920 and ended in 1933 when the government finally decided to _____ the Prohibition law.
4. It is the boss' _____ to hire or fire anyone she wishes.
5. We will _____ the captured enemy officer about the number and location of his troops.