

'Sculduggery' and the Lord's Prayer: Sound Change, Emigration, and Cultural Attitudes as Factors in the Solution of a Disputed Etymology

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In every language, there are words whose provenance is at best uncertain and at worst unknown, and they present a fascinating challenge to the historical linguist and etymologist, a challenge that is impossible to resist. Such a word in English is *sculduggery*.¹ The very sound of the word raises thoughts of secrecy, of underhandedness, of a mystery needing to be solved. Like most speakers of North American English, I have used the word fairly often and read it even more often without, except in passing, particularly wondering about its source. "People have always used words without knowing where they 'came from' and what they once denoted. Such knowledge would not be of any use to a speaker anyway..." (Sornig 1981:11); it is only etymologists, either amateur or professional, who are suddenly struck by the feeling described by Northrop Frye (1982:220) as "there is more to be got out of this...not necessarily something we have overlooked before, but [coming] rather from a new context in our experience." In this case, the new context was a teaching aid, a hand-out featuring the Lord's Prayer in a dozen IE languages, one of which was Swedish. In that Swedish Paternoster occurs the line "Förlåt oss våra skulder såsom ock vi förlåta dem oss skyldiga äro." Did *skyldiga äro* have any relationship to "sculduggery"? I was asked. After a brief digression in the direction of i-umlauting, palatalization, and other Germanic sound shifts, I promised to try to find out. It seemed to me intuitively realistic to suggest that the connection between those who trespass against us, *dem oss skyldiga äro*, and the trespass itself, the sculduggery, should be close, especially considering the frequent historical and linguistic contacts between speakers of the languages involved.

Watkins (1989) says,

After nearly a decade of studying the preservation, diffusion, transformation, and revitalization of a single formula..., I am more firmly than ever convinced of the extraordinary longevity of surface phraseology and verbal behaviour when it serves as the expression of an enduring cultural theme. A proper linguistic theory must be able to account for the creativity of human language; but it must also account for the possible long-term preservation of surface formulaic strings in the same or different linguistic traditions over millenia.

The problem, therefore, was to track down the traces of this particular "surface formulaic string," using both linguistic and cultural clues. A good etymological dictionary seemed to be the logical starting point.

Many dictionaries label *sculduggery* as slang or informal usage, and those published in Great Britain regard it as an Americanism. One of the major problems of tracing the origin of lexical items regarded as slang is the comparative lack of written records, and the further back in time one goes, the fewer records there are. This lack, as Sornig (1981: 9) points out, "invites conjectures of the most outlandish kind," folk-etymologies that create familiar sound patterns and apparent conjunctions of existing morphemes that can then be re-analysed as explaining the source of an otherwise mysterious word. Responsible popular works of the "Where did it come from?" type usually ignore items such as *sculduggery* for which there is no accepted explanation, but some of the less scholarly ones indulge in shameless folk-etymologizing, and it was in one of the latter² that I found the following wonderful example of Sornig's "conjectures of the most outlandish kind":

Skullduggery [sic] How did evil actions come to be called "skullduggery"?

Grave robbing was once a common crime and a grave robber was called a "skull digger." From this, any criminal activity--especially one practiced at night--came to be called "skulldigging" or "skullduggery."

This is even less satisfactory than most folk-etymologies, as it raises the question of why the putative originators of the term should choose to change from a gerundive compound of the object-verb type which would have done perfectly well as it was (cp. *muckraking*, *plane-spotting*) to a participial-compound (again object-verb) plus derivational suffix, a much less common type of compound formation especially where metaphors are concerned.³ A further problem arises from the fact that the sources of slang are more difficult to uncover than those of the standard lexicon because of the meaning shifts involved. To quote Sornig again (1981: 8f):

Slang etymology is frequently faced with different and far more complicated problems of reconstruction than normal philological etymology, if only because of the variety and obscurity of the source languages, and the various stages of their linguistic and sociolinguistic development and assessment which have to be taken into consideration.

Most dictionaries, building as they must on the work of their predecessors, note the origin of *sculduggery* either as unknown (for example, *The American Heritage Dictionary* and *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*)⁴, or as from a Scottish dialect term *sculduddery* or *sculdudry*, meaning 'fornication, grossness, obscenity, filthy talk; vulgar, low people; rubbish, tatters' (as in War-rack, 1911), and "itself of obscure origin" (Partridge 1984). Few attempts have been made to trace the source back beyond this etymon. One 19th century source (Barrere and Leland, 1897) gives the etymology as "From Low Dutch slang (thieves) *schooldogery*, *schoel*, a villain," and comments that it is "(American)...A Western word." Spitzer, in an article in *American Speech* (1944:25), while agreeing with the majority that *sculduggery* has its origin in English or Scots *sculduddery*, decrees the latter to be "traceable to French origin, and like *culprit*, a word derived from legal procedure." He bases his argument in the first place on the meaning of the word in its earliest (1713) attestation, i.e. 'fornication', deriving it from O.Fr. *esco(u)lo(u)rgier* 'to slip' from Vulg. Lat. **excollubricare*, with an extended meaning 'to slip morally, to sin.' Semantically, Spitzer's argument makes sense, but the phonological changes required to derive *sculduddery* from *esco(u)lo(u)rgier* are somewhat baroque. First, one would need to posit a derived noun, **escoulourgerie* which, as Spitzer (1944:27) remarks, "is not attested (the abstract noun generally found being *escoulourgement*)." If we allow that such a noun as **escoulourgerie* may have existed, then the derivation (expanded and phonemicized from Spitzer's) should be something like:

1. /*ɛskul ur ʒəri*/ (hypothetical etymon)
2. / *skul ur ʒəri*/ (borrowed into English)
3. / *skəl ərdʒri*/ (vowel weakening, intrusive stop)
4. / *skəldə dʒəri*/ (a second intrusive stop and assimilation of the liquid)
5. / *skəldə d əri*/ (a second assimilation)
and/or /*skəldədri*/ (by analogy with *ribaldry*, *husbandry*, etc.)

At some point in this development, the stress must have shifted from the final syllable (the usual place for tonic stress in OF) to the antepenult, possibly about stage (3) with the introduction of the first intrusive /d/. (The loss of the /r/ preceding this stop in a dialect area that is to this day rhotic is difficult to explain, and Spitzer makes no attempt to do so.) It then becomes necessary to account for the North American form with a velar rather than an alveolar stop at the onset of the third syllable, a change which Spitzer feels is attributable to analogy with *humbuggery*, *doggery*, etc. (1944:27). A colleague of mine⁵ who is a semanticist suggests that given the connotations of illegal and immoral sexual activity attached to the Scots word, the American *sculduggery* is more likely formed by analogy with *buggery*, if it is, in fact, a variant of *sculduddery* and not an independent development. All this might be relatively convincing, were it not that even Spitzer admits that the OF forms are "etymologically intransparen[t]" and that "there was no word stem with which the popular mind could connect the derivative of Vulgar Latin **excollubricare*" (1944:27).

I would suggest that the etymon of both *sculduddery* and *sculduggery* is to be found not in Proto-Romance but in Proto-Germanic, and that the transmission of this etymon into both Scots dialect and American English slang is from Scandinavian sources. In all the Germanic languages there exist members of a class of words with the basic meaning 'sin' or 'guilt,' apparently related to a verb root **skl-* 'owe, ought, must' (Feist, 1923), and traceable to a Proto-Indo-European root **skel-* 'to be under an obligation.'⁶ Thus we find sets like

1. **Goth.**: *skulds ist* 'it is lawful'; *skula* 'owing, in debt, guilty', (as a noun) 'debtor'
2. **ON**: *skyldr* 'obligatory', *skyldu past inf.* of 'should'
3. **OI**: *skolo* 'ought', *skuldr* 'guilty', *skuld* 'guilt'
4. **OE**: *sculan* 'ought', *scyldful* 'guilty', *scyld* 'guilt'
5. **OSax**: *scolan*, *skuld*
6. **OHG**: *scolan*, *scult*, *sculd(a)*
7. **OFries**: *skela*, *skelda*,

(The last three sets all have the same 'guilty' meanings as the previous ones.)

Other Indo-European languages have sets that are apparently cognate with these; for example,

1. **Lith.** *skeliu* 'I am guilty' and *skola* 'guilt', as well as an *s*-less form *kaltas* 'guilty'
2. **OPruss.** *skalisnan* (*accus.*) 'obligation, duty', *skellants* 'guilty,' and *poskulit* 'admonish'.

It seems likely that **Arm.** *sxalem*, *sxalim* 'staggering, confused,' **OL** *skhalati* 'stumble', and **Greek** *σφαλλω* 'make fall', *σφαλλομαι* 'stumble, fail, meet with mischance' are also related (Feist, 1923), as well as **Latin** *scelus*, *-eris* 'crime, evil deed, impious action' and its derivatives *scelero*, *-are* 'to pollute, profane with guilt', *sceleratus* 'polluted, profaned with guilt' (with its French descendant *scelerat*); *scelerosus* 'full of guilt, wicked, accursed'; and the literary form *scelestus* 'wicked, accursed, infamous'. **Old English** has a particularly impressive set of **skl*-derived items: *scyldan* 'to accuse', *scyldfrecu* 'wicked craving', *scyld-hata* 'enemy,' *scyldigung* 'sum demanded as *wergeld* 'compensation, value of a man's life', and *scyldigian* 'to sin, place in the position of a criminal, render liable to punishment'. Nor does Modern English lack for related terms. Consider *scalawag* or (19th C.) *scallywag*, and also the earlier terms *scaldrum* 'beggar' and *skellum* 'rascal, scoundrel, villain'. This last is first attested for 1611 (Shipley, 1968), and is also found in Burns' "Tam o'Shanter"; its immediate etymon is **Du.** *schelm*. Geipel (1971) notes that *skellum* is common from Shetland south to East Anglia and Northampton. It is found in South Africa in the Afrikaans form *skelm*; South African English also has in its lexicon the word *skolly* or *skollie* 'a Coloured street hoodlum, usually a criminal or potential criminal and member of a gang' (Branford, 1980), presumably from **Du.** *schoelje* 'rascal, scamp, rogue'. A good argument can also be made for the relationship of *scold* in its use as a noun dating from the 13th century, 'a ribald or abusive person, especially a woman'; Geipel (1971) lists *scold* (n) among words of Middle English derived from Old Norse, with the meaning 'a person given to ribaldry and then to fault-finding', from whence the verb 'to abuse verbally'. *Scold* (n.) is generally held to be derived from **ON** *skald* 'poet' in the dyslogistic sense in which it is found in compounds such as *skaldskapr* having in Icelandic law books the specific sense of libel in verse (DEE). The semantic development from 'be under an obligation', to 'owe', to 'ought' to 'guilt[y]' (of sins of both omission 'those things we ought to have done' and commission 'those things we ought not to have done'), to 'one who is guilty', to whatever one is guilty of, is an easy path to follow.

The pertinent lines in the Lord's Prayer in the older Germanic languages (the words that in their modern Swedish form started this whole inquiry) show this relationship very neatly, especially when one remembers the traditional English versions, "Forgive us our *debts/trespases* as we forgive our *debtors/those who trespass against us*":

1. **Gothic:** Jah aflet uns þatei *skulans* syaima, swase jah weis afletam þam *skulam unsair-am*.
2. **Old Norse:** Ok fyrerlat oss ossar *skulder*, sua sem ver fyrerlatom ossom *skuldo-nautum*.
3. **Heliand (OHG):** ...endi alat us mangoro *mensculdio*, al so uue othrum mannum doan.
4. **Tatian (OHG):** ...inti furtaz uns unsara *sculdi*, so uuie furlazemes unsaren *sculdigon*.⁸

It is immediately apparent that these older forms have not yet undergone the vowel mutation and subsequent palatalization of the velar stops that appear in the modern versions:

1. **Swedish:** Förlåt oss våra skulder såsom ock vi förlåta dem oss *skyldiga* äro.
2. **Norwegian:** Og forlat oss var *skyld*, som vi og forlater vare *skyldnere*.⁹

However, since the palatalization of the velar consonants began only towards the end of Old Scandinavian (as Haugen terms the Medieval stage of the language), and continued until at least 1300 (Haugen, 1976:268), any borrowing into the dialects of the northern British Isles at the time of the Danelaw, or for some time after, would not show this change. As for the unmutated root vowel of *sculduggery*, two possibilities exist. The first is that it is simply a later spelling pronunciation resulting from the practice of writing the front rounded vowel as <u>. The second possibility is that the root never did undergo mutation in the dialects of the speakers of Old Norse who settled in the Danelaw and the western and northern parts of Scotland; this area, which included Lowland Scots, was invaded and settled by Danish Vikings, and mutation was much less common in East Norse than it was in West Norse (Walshe, 1965:39, 41). According to Geipel (1971:62), "The presence of the unmutated form *lagu* ['law'] in early English adds weight to the supposition that U Mutation may not have been particularly characteristic of the variety of Norse carried to the Danelaw....the development was much less widespread in Denmark and southern Sweden...than in Norway and Iceland." The suffix *-ig* that underlies the /əŋ/ of *sculduggery* is common to all the Germanic languages, and is a development of PG **-aga-* from PIE **-oqo-* (Wright, 1910:177). As the suffix was unstressed, the vowel would have tended to be unstable, even to the point of weakening to /ə/. If, as posited above, *skuldig* arrived in the Danelaw before the palatalization of velar stops had taken place, the final consonant would have remained hard. Its shift from velar to dental in *sculduddery* can be accounted for by assimilation under the influence of a shift in stress, caused by the addition of the further suffix *-ery*. This final suffix came through French borrowings into Middle English, but very soon became productive in its own right. The close relationship between France and Scotland in the late Middle and Early Modern English periods doubtless ensured its productivity in Scots English as well. The end result is thus the realization of the Scots form /skəldədəri/. This same suffix had also been adopted into Old Scandinavian from French via Middle Low German at the time of the Hanseatic League's great influence, and has remained productive in the Scandinavian languages (Walshe, 1965:48f). This fact is important for the hypothesized origin of the North American variant *sculduggery* (see below).

The rest of the evidence for the Scandinavian origin of *sculduggery* is essentially sociolinguistic, having regard to the external history of the English language in Britain and America. The effect of the Danish invasions on the English language is well known. The area affected covered northern England and much of Scotland including the outer islands; McIntosh (1989:104) describes the spread of Scandinavian influence thus:

Apart from the direct linguistic impact of the settlements in South West Scotland, and from the rather late and fairly small influx of words southwards from Caithness, Orkney and Shetland, the Scandinavian element in Scots as a whole must largely have its origin in the speech of emigrants and refugees from England (and mainly the northern part of England) who made their way to Scotland in the two centuries after the Norman Conquest.

In some of these areas, especially in ^{Shet}Scotland, Norse in some form was spoken for nearly a thousand years. Geipel (1971:56) cites a verse from Shetland collected by J. Jakobsen in the late 1800's, of which only the first three lines were translated:

Enga bonga loru	(My own dear child, sleep,
Bel <u>skola</u> reena	The <u>evil</u> shall stream out
Bel <u>skola</u> beti...	We shall chase the <u>evil</u> ...)
	[emphasis mine. BPH]

where the word for 'evil' is clearly related to the present discussion. Even in those places where the use of Norse died out after a mere half-millennium, "the presence of so many Danes certainly resulted in varieties of English that were strongly tinged with Norse accentuation and stiff with Scandinavian turns of phrase" (*ibid.*: 58). Geipel further notes that it is in the dialects of northern England and of Scotland that we find the greatest number of Norse terms even today, and that most of these terms have never made their way into the standard or literary language. As far as cultural influences are concerned, Sornig (1981:63) points out that the focus of interest of any speech community influences its vocabulary, and that there is always a "topic no.1," Watkin's "enduring cultural theme." What more natural in a society so preoccupied with its moral well-being as was Scotland after the Reformation and under the religious rule of the Calvinists than the adoption of a perhaps archaic or obsolete dialect term as a euphemism for the all-too-common sin of fornication?

The socio-religious climate was much the same for the 19th century Scandinavian settlers in the mid-western United states. The first emigrants from Scandinavia to North America set sail in 1825, and although their immediate destination was New York, they soon pushed westwards. It was not until mid-century, however, that the effect of increasing Scandinavian settlement, especially in Minnesota, was apparent; by 1875, Scandinavians accounted for 52% of the foreign-born residents of that state (Lungmark, 1971:1), and indeed (as noted later), the earliest citation for our word is from that very state as well. There were also sizeable Scandinavian populations in Wisconsin, North Dakota, Illinois (Scott, 1975:284), and later, Montana (Ferguson and Heath, 1981:353); in nearly all areas, Norwegians constituted the largest part of the immigrant populations (Scott, *loc.cit.*). Their church became, as it had been in their homeland, the focus of community life, and that church was Lutheran, like Calvinism rigid in its denunciation of "sinful delights" (Semningsen, 1978:81). In this atmosphere, then, *skyldig* was no doubt a common word. (Its pronunciation in Nynorsk is /skuldi/, unmutated and unpalatalized, although Bokmål has /sjylði/.) The productivity of the borrowed suffix *-eri* has been noted above; why not attach it to an old root to form a new noun referring to the sinful delights of the New World? Geipel (1971:57) notes that "Scandinavians abroad have never been particularly faithful to their mother tongue," and it is certain that once isolated from its homeland, the language of the Scandinavian-Americans began to change; all sources comment on the kind of pidgin Norse-English that arose. A kind of blending like the one that took place in Middle English must also have occurred as the different Scandinavian groups intermarried and moved ever further west. Haugen (1963:356) comments that American Norwegian speakers were unaware of changes in their pronunciation, and also that "[t]he forms of their BL are generally pure spelling pronunciations"; thus the pronunciation of the initial cluster of *skyldig* would be consistent with Nynorsk, and the final <g> might also be pronounced "hard" when reading prayers. As well, consider the closeness in sound of the suffix *-ery* to the following *äro* of the Lord's Prayer.

That the non-Scandinavian linguistic groups borrowed from the Scandinavian settlers is attested to by Mencken (1977:254), who remarks, "In Minnesota and adjacent states many Swedish and Dano-Norwegian terms are in common use." As the Scandinavians moved westward, they must have encountered the descendants of the Scots fur-traders already resident in many north-western states; if anyone knew the meaning of *sculduddery*, it was the mountain men! And who knows but what the repetition of *skyldiga äro* by the devout Lutheran settlers might not have triggered the final semantic connection needed to create *sculduggery*? By the late 19th century, however, the word *sculduggery* apparently referred to a less mortal sort of sin. The newest edition of the OED (1989), while still attributing the word to an alteration of *sculduddery*, gives the following as the earliest citation:

1867 A.D. Richardson *Beyond Mississippi* "From Minnesota had been imported the mysterious term 'sculduggery' [*sic*], used to signify political or other trickery."

From Scandinavia across the North Sea to Scotland, from Scandinavia across the North Atlantic to America a thousand years later, two linguistic streams meet and reinforce each other, a living example, to paraphrase Watkins, of the preservation of surface phraseology over time and space, because of the endurance of a cultural theme -- in this case, that of sin, guilt, in a word, "sculduggery."

NOTES

- 1 This is a revised version of a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Philological Association of the Pacific Coast, at San Jose State University, November 1990.
- 2 An anonymous (with good reason) work entitled *Why Do We Say It? The Stories Behind the Words, Expressions and Cliches We Use* (Secaucus: Castle, 1985), which does not deserve to be listed under "Works Cited." My only excuse for owning it is that I bought it sight unseen; the author's only possible excuse for writing it is as a test of his readers' gullibility.
- 3 Both these types of nominal compound formation are quite uncommon, but the second is considerably more uncommon than the first. In the data I have collected for nominal compounds in Canadian English, 82 (.013%) items out of a grand total of 6,274 have the form Noun+Gerund, and only 5 have the form Noun+Participle; two of these are borrowed directly from French, and none has the suffix *-ery*.
- 4 Definitions and etymologies, unless otherwise stated, are from *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (DEE), and reconstructed Indo-European roots are from *The American Heritage Dictionary* (AHD).
- 5 James Arthurs, p.c., June 9, 1989.
- 6 This is, of course, the same verb root that turns up in the preterite-present modals, e.g. Eng. *shall*, having not only a predictive sense as in 'I shall', but retaining the original mandative sense in 'I should,' 'he shall,' etc.

- 7 This last, given the Scandinavian influence on the phonology of the northern dialects, could also have contributed to the development of our word, since one who has been 'render[ed] liable to punishment' has undoubtedly committed some form of sculduggery.
- 8 Old English does not use cognates of the **skl-* forms in the Paternoster, but rather two other items from an unknown source (DEE), *gyltas* and *gyltendum*. But is it beyond the realm of possibility that generations of illiterate speakers gabbling their prayers could have produced the slight changes needed to go from *skyld* (which, after all, meant 'guilt' in OE) to *gylt*? The sound changes involved are typical of those made by young children (cp. /*tap*/ for *stop*), and an increasing number of psycholinguists consider that it is children who are the real innovators of language change (p.c. Ron Hoppe, 10 October, 1990).
- 9 This version came from a locket in the possession of one of my students. Neither she nor any of her family knew exactly where it was from; another student tentatively identified it as a dialect of Danish, while yet another source, a retired linguist, decreed it to be an archaic form of Norwegian. The whole prayer reads as follows; the spelling and punctuation are exactly as they appeared on the locket and the slashes indicate the ends of lines (it was engraved as if poetry):

FADAR VAR!/ Du som er I himmelen!/ Helliget vorde ditt navn:/ Komme dit rike;/ Ske din vilje som I himmelen,/ Sa og pa jorden. Giv oss idag vart daglige brod./ Og forlat oss var skyld,/ Som vi og forlater vare skyldnere og led oss/ Ikke inni fristelse men fri oss fra det onde,/ For ditt er riket,/ Makten og aeren ievighet. Amen.

Roslyn Raney (p.c., June 24, 1989), after identifying some spellings as typically Norwegian and others as more likely Danish, says, "If I had to guess, I'd say the text is *Riksmål* or Dano-Norwegian from the late 19th/early 20th century." Paul Hopkins remarks (p.c., July 22, 1991) that after some further investigation, he feels that it is Norwegian *Bokmål* (previously known as *Riksmål* or, before WW 2, *Riksmål*) of a fairly recent date (viz. *vare* [= *våre*] for *vore*), and further that the locket was perhaps produced in North America, possibly engraved by a non-Scandinavian speaker; this deduction is based on the lack of diacritics and some outright errors in spelling (e.g. *ditt* vs. *dit*). I would add that the locket's provenance and the design on the front (a ship in full sail) provide further evidence for P.H.'s conclusion.

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