

Cratchit: The Etymology

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It probably goes without saying that Charles Dickens was a master of the onomastic arts, but the pleasure of his names is so very much in the saying: *Pip*, *Magwitch*, *Micawber*, *Uriah Heep*, *Whole*, *Fagin*, *Bill Sykes*, *Esther Summerson*, *Veneering*, *Miss Flite*, *Mr. Pickwick*, *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield*, *Barnaby Rudge*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, and hundreds more, central or incidental to the novels. Kelsie B. Harder (“Charles” 35) noted that Dickens “was a master at concocting names with tonal and allegorical qualities,” and the short list immediately preceding provides examples of both. More recently, Harder (“Dickens”) examined Dickens’s experimental lists of names and demonstrated something of the care and energy Dickens invested in naming. For Dickens, names were more than ornaments: he had an onomastic sensibility, and naming is a profound element of his style. As John R. Reed has argued, there is a meta-narrative aspect to Dickens’s flamboyant naming, for Dickens “purposely uses names to call attention to his own performances as the force behind naming both within and beyond the diegesis, the fictional world created by the narrative” (183).

Cratchit, the surname shared by Bob, Martha, Peter, Belinda, assorted other Cratchits, the mother and wife who is only identified as “Mrs. Cratchit,” and especially Tiny Tim, in *A Christmas Carol* (1843), is one of Dickens’s most thematically and stylistically significant character names, as well as arguably the best loved. Nevertheless, the name’s etymology has given rise to relatively little commentary and is as yet undetermined. The exception is Michael Patrick Hearn’s *The Annotated Christmas Carol* (Dickens and Hearn 119) which correctly identifies the predominant etymon, without any attempt to “determine” it. Here I examine various etymological claims and argue for a particular mixed etymology, one that makes linguistic (morphological, semantic, pragmatic) and literary (thematic, characterological, stylistic) sense. The etymology leads to the name’s fictive value: the etymology is essential to understanding, not only the significance of the name, but the significance of the novel, as well as something about the aesthetic assumptions or inclinations underlying both, of which we are aware at their point of intersection.

Five etymological possibilities are worth considering: (1) *Cratchit* is an evocative or suggestive name, one to which readers respond without regard for any lexical meaning actually embedded in the name; (2) *Cratchit* derives from French *criquet* ‘feeble horse or person’; (3) *Cratchit* derives from dialectal *cratch* ‘crutch’; (4) *Cratchit* derives from *cratch* ‘rack, cradle, manger’; or (5) *Cratchit* derives from *cratch* in the specialized sense ‘cradle, esp. the Nativity manger’.

In fiction, names need not proceed in discrete sequence from a single etymon; they can resolve multiple associations within an author's imagination and carry a surfeit of meaning, not the dragging weight of Marley's cashboxes and chains, but the liberating weight of paradox and immanence. Or, to mix metaphors as well as the etymology, one might consider Dickens's *Cratchit* an etymological punch composed, not indiscriminately of all possible etyma, but of something like 3 parts (5), 1 part (4), 1 part (1), and a suspicion of (3). It has a salutary effect on the story it serves.

1. The Sound of the Name: Evocation, Suggestion, Association

Let's consider the claims for each possible etymology, beginning with the proposition that *Cratchit* is primarily evocative or suggestive, in line with so many other Dickensian names. As Reed observes, "Often the names Dickens selects have connotative value only, as with Quilp, a name that sounds both foolish and nasty" (185); Dickens trades on the fact that "[e]specially in comic literature, we willingly accept names that typify," so that "in many cases a name itself defines a character's nature or hints at it" (183). While the mere sound of a name like *Quilp* (from the *Old Curiosity Shop*) can hint at character, very often sound and lexical associations cooperate in the typifying, as in the case of *Crisparkle*, from *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, which would seem to be a blend of *crisp* and *sparkle* (Brook 215), both of which are potentially mimetic, so that there is a sort of sound symbolism in the name derived from them.

Because they sound somewhat alike, *Scrooge* carries the thematically relevant negative connotations of *screw*: the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the noun as "One who forces down (prices) by haggling; a stingy, miserly person" (sv *screw* n¹ in sense 16), and supports it with quotations ranging in date from 1835 through 1893—it was a meaning that belonged to Dickens's generation. And it suits the unregenerate Scrooge well as a general character, though, as a speculator, he forces prices down at his purchase, later forcing them up at the sale. The noun *screw*, in this sense, derives from various verb senses meaning 'exact money,' 'force to lower a price,' 'oppress,' leading eventually to (generally) American *be/get screwed* (see *OED* sv *screw* v in senses 5b and 6a–d).

If the sound structure of *Scrooge* is evocatively negative, then that of *Cratchit*, with its low, front, lax vowel actually opposite *Scrooge*'s high, back, relatively tense vowel, should be evocatively positive. The impressionistic values of the contrasting consonants (unvoiced alveolar /s/ and voiced palatal /dj/ preferred to unvoiced velar /k/ and unvoiced palatal /tʃ/), however, might tip to the opposite polarity. In other words, in some cases at least, and perhaps in the case of *Scrooge* v. *Cratchit*, it's hard to make a consistent argument for one association rather than another. People hear and value the sounds of names differently. Under the pseudonym

“Silverpen,” Eliza Meteyard, Dickens’s contemporary, published the serial “The Story of an Olden Play” in *The Ladies’ Companion* (1855); one of the story’s central characters is named *Cratch*, but Meteyard’s *Cratch* is a miser—*Cratch* is Scrooge, in other words. While Meteyard may have expected readers to find the name *Cratch* evocative, she must also have expected them to make associations different from those Dickens hoped would accompany *Cratchit*.

Dickens may have expected readers to associate *Cratchit* with something thematically relevant like *hard scrabble* ‘especially difficult, requiring great effort’, an Americanism he might have encountered in his American travels (though it doesn’t appear in his *American Notes*), and could have associated it in turn with *scrabble* ‘scratching, scraping, scrambling’. By the fourteenth century, *cratch* ‘scratch’ had entered Middle English; Early Modern English *scratch* develops analogically from *cratch* (many *cr-* words end up with *scr-* alternants) and replaces it—*cratch* ‘scratch’ is more or less obsolete by the seventeenth century. As Hearn proposes (Dickens and Hearn 119), “The name also suggests the scratching of the clerk’s pen.” Anyway, this chain of associations has rather weak links, and other meanings of *cratch* would have been more readily available to Dickens and his readers, for instance, “A disease of the feet of horses” (OED sv *cratch* n²)—not likely the association Dickens had in mind. There are, of course, yet more meanings of *cratch* readers might associate with *Cratchit*, but the relationship between word and name in those cases is more strictly etymological, and the semantics lexical rather than pragmatic, as much of the argument below will make clear. *Cratchit* does not evoke these meanings of *cratch* in the same way that *Scrooge* evokes the negative connotations of *screw*, certainly not in the way that *Quilp* leaves a negative impression by means of sound alone.

In one respect, however, the meaning of *Cratchit* is clearly pragmatic. If one takes *cratch* as the name’s base and *-it* as representing a suffix, then the suffix in question is probably *-et*. A French suffix borrowed into English during the Anglo-French ascendancy, *-et/-ette* indicates a diminutive or familiar version of the base to which it attaches: *tour* < *turret*, *Bayonne* < *bayonet*, *cigar* < *cigarette*, *alouette* ‘lark’, *Annette*, etc. These meanings are lexical (*-et* is a meaningful lexical item, definable in a dictionary), but they are also often pragmatic (they are expressions of speaker attitude and have an illocutionary force): *turret* merely means ‘small tower’, but *alouette* and *Annette* indicate (as folk name or nickname) small, socially or naturally less significant, or dependent objects of familiar relationships with their speakers.

These pragmatic meanings fit well with *A Christmas Carol*, not just because Tim is “tiny,” but because the whole family of Cratchits (and the name belongs to all of them, not just Tim) is socially diminished: Bob is a clerk subordinate to Scrooge (both behave in ways that underscore the fact), and the family has benefactors of higher social status (Scrooge gives Bob the whole of Christmas

Day off, Scrooge's nephew provides a position for Peter, Scrooge gives them a turkey and more subsequent to his reformation). In their humble circumstances, however, they are familiar, and they evoke a sentimental familiarity in readers. It's quite clear that Dickens intended them do so. When we hear *Cratchit*, we aren't prompted to look the *-et* suffix up in an etymological dictionary. We associate pragmatic meaning with the suffix well below the level of consciousness, much as we do the same range of meaning with the *-ie/-ey/-y* in nicknames like *Lexie*, *Charley*, or *Billy*. The sound of the suffix is enough to evoke the meaning, but that hardly extends to the base, so we must look elsewhere than coinage for the sake of sound and its effects to find our etymology.

2. *Cratchit* < French *criquet*

Derivation of *Cratchit* from French *criquet* is next to impossible, but because it has been proposed seriously by a credentialed scholar, it should be considered before withdrawn. L. R. N. Ashley wondered "if Dickens realized that Tiny Tim Cratchit's name originally came from *crichet* or *criquet*, a French word that at first was used to mean a crooked man and then came to be used to describe a small one. Surely so appropriate a name was no accident, but I have never heard anyone comment on this fact" (180). Ashley believed that *Cratchit* is more than a fictional name, and that Dickens had adopted it without knowing its provenance. As far as I can tell, there is no foundation for this belief—*Cratchit* is Dickens's invention. As for no one having commented on the etymology, we can explain the omission largely because it was not fact, as Ashley asserts, but fancy.

This is not to deny the existence of the purported etymon; it is well attested in French historical dictionaries. For Dickens to have employed it in a name invented for a book published in 1843, however, would have required quick work. Littré's *Dictionnaire de la Langue Française* defined *criquet* as "petit cheval faible et de vil prix" and noted that the meaning "homme faible et de petit taille" comes "par extension." So, Ashley was right about the word's meanings, and he was also right to point out that "feeble man of little value" is a meaning especially appropriate to *A Christmas Carol*. Alain Rey, in *Dictionnaire Historique de la Langue Française* writes problematically, "Il a désigné (1650) un petit cheval et (1828–1829) un homme malinger, deux sens à mettre en rapport, de façon obscure, avec le norvégien et le danois *krikke*, *krik* <<cheval malinger>>." Did Dickens create the name from the well established meaning "un petit cheval malinger," thus himself applying it to disabled boys and men of little worth "par extension"? Or did he know the very recent shift in meaning to "un homme malinger"? The latter seems unlikely.

Oscar Black and Walther von Wartburg, in *Dictionnaire Étymologique de la Langue Française*, confirm Rey's first date, but antedate the application of *criquet* to mean 'petit homme' to 1785. They label the term "Onomatopée, évoquant

la faiblesse” (I suppose, were this really true, Dickens would not have needed a French source for the name—it might have been sufficiently evocative in English), but they do not provide any evidence of the term meaning ‘petit homme faible et de petit taille’ from that early date. Paul Imbs, for the *Trésor de la Langue Française*, cites Eugène Fromentin’s *Été Sahara* (1857) for the horse and Balzac’s *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* (1844) for the man—if the term is first recorded for the man in 1828 and can best be attested subsequently, it seems unlikely that it was so prevalent in use that an Englishman, watching his flocks by night or otherwise engaged, would happen upon its nativity.

To give Ashley credit, all of this is tantalizing: the extended meaning, indeed, the meaning extended as far as all of ‘frail humankind’, is personified in Tiny Tim, a person of “little value” according to Scrooge’s infamous Malthusian doctrine (*Christmas* 12). And the meanings captured in the supposed French etymon are, not surprisingly, consistent with the pragmatic effect of the originally French suffix. Nevertheless, *A Christmas Carol* was published in 1843, and deriving *Cratchit* from *criquet* ‘feeble man, disabled boy’ requires that Dickens heard the term with that meaning within its first decade of use. It’s not impossible that he did, since he visited France and Belgium briefly in 1837, a visit that may be associated with *The Battle of Life* (1846), the fourth of Dickens’s Christmas Books (Slater 104). But Dickens took his next trip through France, on the way to Genoa, in 1844, after publication of *A Christmas Carol* (Slater 226). Dickens certainly knew French after a fashion. As Forster explained, “He never spoke that language very well, his accent being somehow defective; but he practised himself into writing it with remarkable ease and fluency” (1.541). *Criquet*, though, is just the sort of word that comes up in conversation rather than in the course of epistolary exercise.

In addition to these problems of chronology, lexical access, and French fluency, phonology is an obstacle to the *criquet* etymology: how does the /i/ become /æ/? How does the /k/ become the affricate /tʃ/? One cannot attribute such differences to natural processes of sound change or patterns of variation in French (neither /tʃ/ nor /æ/ is available in French), nor to accommodation of the French form to English phonology. Dickens’s pronunciation of French may have been “defective,” but if he altered words as dramatically as the *criquet* etymology requires, he’d have been incomprehensible. The proposed transformation of *criquet* into *Cratchit* is to all intents and purposes impossible. To favor this etymology, we would need some additional evidence to overcome the mass of coincidence and vexing improbability.

3. *Cratchit* > *cratch* ‘crutch’

Derivation of *Cratchit* from *cratch*, a variant of *crutch*, is an especially appealing etymology, because Tiny Tim uses (one hesitates to say “depends on”) a crutch; that he uses a crutch and that he lives with disability in Christian stoicism figure

significantly in the moral argument of *A Christmas Carol*. He is himself an iconic reminder of Christ's miraculous intervention:

“And how did little Tim behave?” asked Mrs. Cratchit. ...
 “As good as gold,” said Bob, “and better. Somehow he gets thoughtful, sitting by himself so much, and thinks the strangest things you ever heard. He told me, coming home, that he hoped the people saw him in the church, because he was a cripple, and it might be pleasant to them to remember upon Christmas Day, who made lame beggars walk and blind men see.” (45)

One feels the pull of the irrelevant evocations of *criquet* here, but one must resist them.

The supposed tragedy is that Tim has not been the subject of a miracle and may not be unless someone, namely Scrooge, reforms in time to perform one on Christ's behalf. In relation to Tim, the crutch operates as synecdoche: Tim is out of the room during Bob's “tremulous” account of their morning in church, but as soon as Bob is finished, “His active little crutch was heard upon the floor and back came Tiny Tim before another word was spoken” (45)—the order in which the crutch and Tim are apprehended suggests something about how deliberately symbolic both of them are. In the future, the Ghost of Christmas Present suggests, the crutch may be the only earthly remnant of the boy who stood for miracles without being healed, an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace:

“Spirit,” said Scrooge, with an interest he had never felt before, “Tell me if Tiny Tim will live.”
 “I see a vacant seat,” replied the Ghost, “in the poor chimney corner, and a crutch without an owner, carefully preserved. If these shadows remain unaltered by the Future, the child will die.” (47)

We **want** *Cratchit* to carry all of the thematic and symbolic weight of the crutch, even more than the *faiblesse* of *criquet*.

According to the *English Dialect Dictionary* (henceforth *EDD*), in the nineteenth century *cratch* and *crutch* were, in some dialectal situations, interchangeable for the meanings ‘tool used by thatchers’ and ‘long, slight pole, with a fork at the end, used to support a clothes-line; a prop.’ The equivalence is probably due to *cratch* taking the low back vowel /a/, as in *father*, in some dialects, which positions it more closely to *crutch* than to *cratch* with the low front vowel /æ/, as in *apple*. This explanation is simple and credible enough, but there are, nonetheless, problems with the derivation.

First, the relationship between *cratch* and *crutch* is not transitive; *cratch*

sometimes means ‘crutch’ but *crutch* never means ‘cratch.’ If one knew the word *cratch*, one might use it to replace *crutch*, but what would motivate Dickens, knowing *crutch*, to replace it with *cratch*? Second, this quibble is all the more troubling because *crutch* in the sense ‘staff for a lame or infirm person to lean upon’ is a metaphorical specialization from *cratch/crutch* in the sense ‘tool, prop.’ There is no evidence of *cratch* to mean ‘staff for a lame or infirm person to lean upon,’ so Dickens would have had to work backwards from the specialized sense of a standard word to a more general sense of a dialect word—certainly not impossible, but unlikely. Third, *cratch* ‘tool, prop’ is recorded in *EDD* from Gloucester and Sussex, but Dickens had no known experience of Sussex, and his experience of Gloucester was restricted to Gloucester Crescent, in Regent’s Park, and Gloucester Place, his residence in Hyde Park Gardens, London. *Cratch* is not given as a variant of *crutch* in the *OED*, so *cratch* ‘crutch’ appears to have been narrowly distributed regionally, and probably unfamiliar to Londoners. Appealing as it is, the *Cratchit* > *cratch* ‘crutch’ derivation is troubling enough for us to look in other etymological directions.

4. *Cratchit* > *cratch* ‘manger’

The origin of *Cratchit* in *cratch* ‘manger’ is compelling because it does not suffer the problems of phonetic impressionism, interlinguistic adaptation, chronology, or dialectal limitation that make us suspicious (if not in some cases dismissive) of the previous alternatives. Also in its favor, *cratch* was a perfectly usual word from Samuel Johnson’s perspective in *A Dictionary of the English Language*, where he defines it as “The palisaded frame in which hay is put for cattle.” It’s worth considering the quotation that accompanies the entry, from George Hakewill’s *Apologie ... of the Power and Providence of God* (1627): “When being expelled out of Paradise, by reason of sin, thou wert held in the chains of death; I was inclosed in the virgin’s womb, I was laid in the *cratch*, I was wrapped in swathling-cloaths.” The association of *cratch* with the Nativity manger isn’t a focus of Johnson’s entry, but it comes up. Dickens owned a copy of Johnson’s *Dictionary*, as edited by Todd and abridged by Alexander Chalmers in 1843 (Stonehouse 66). It included the original definition and cited Hakewill without the quotation.

Dickens also owned a copy of Thomas Urquhart’s translation of Rabelais, another text that supports the Johnsonian definition, by 27 May 1844, when an inventory of his house at Devonshire Terrace was completed (Tillotson 715). As the chapter heading puts it, “How Gargamelle, being great with Gargantua, did eat a huge deal of tripes,” a most remarkable craving, even for a pregnant giantess, and one that induced birth: “Her bum-gut, indeed, or fundament escaped her in an afternoon, on the third day of February, with having eaten at dinner too many godebillios. Godebillios are the fat tripes of coiros. Coiros are beeves fattened

at the cratch in ox stalls, or in the fresh guimo meadows” (Rabelais 36). In this and many other texts, *cratch* ‘manger’ was available to Dickens, and, as I shall argue in the next section, it was undoubtedly familiar to him. Indeed, it was current in English speech throughout his lifetime (see *OED* sv *cratch* in sense 2, esp. quot. 1831 and 1834), though it’s difficult to know how common it was. If one were to apply Occam’s Razor to the etymology of *Cratchit*, it would scrape away all possible etyma but *cratch* ‘manger’, which requires the least argument or justification.

Actually, though, by the time Dickens died in 1870, *cratch* appears to have become something of a relic. Sometimes it was taken (erroneously) as attached to a particular place, as when Arthur Evans entered it among *Leicestershire Words* (22) or Joseph Lucas wrote about it in *Studies in Nidderdale* (245). The *OED* (sv *cratch* in sense 2) quotes from Georgina F. Jackson’s *Shropshire Wordbook* (103–104). At other times, *cratch* refers to an “ancient” farming implement, as described in James Britten’s *Old Country and Farming Words* (139), though “old” words may nonetheless be current. At still other times, *cratch* ‘manger’ was the already obscure missing link in an etymology, as John Pickford argued of *cat’s cradle* > *cratch cradle* in *Notes and Queries*. Pickford’s article excerpts John Chalmers Morton’s *Cyclopedia of Agriculture*, as does Britten. By century’s end, it was understood as an archaism requiring a gloss when used in literature, so was entered in W. W. Skeat and A. L. Mayhew’s *A Glossary of Tudor and Stuart Words Especially from the Dramatists* (98).

In the years from Johnson (1755) to Skeat and Mayhew (1914), *cratch* ‘manger’ passed from natural use to archaism around when Dickens published *A Christmas Carol* (1843). Thus, Dickens accomplishes something of fictive significance with his onomastic style. In “What’s in a Name: Fantasy and Calculation in Dickens,” Harry Stone hints at that something:

That there was a right name he had no doubt. It was the name that conveyed the outward show and inward mystery of a character ... the name which revealed and yet concealed. Part of a name’s magic lay in this latter property. This ability to be open and yet secretive ... Dickens’s names are deceptive. They often seem clear or even simple, but this is frequently a figment of hindsight, a wisdom that comes only after we have been made privy to the grand design of a novel. (191)

Indeed, only once we have identified the narrowest and most thematically potent etymon for *Cratchit*, in hindsight, after we’ve read and thought about *A Christmas Carol*, when we’re able to recognize the significance of the name in the novel’s “grand design,” can we appreciate Dickens’s onomastic genius or the novel’s thematic focus. Dickens was able to trade on a word still resonating in readers’ lexical memories, but not so familiar as to be obvious, not a pin to stick the

butterfly name to the board of meaning and allegorical association. This is as true of *cratch* ‘Nativity manger’ as of the more general sense.

5. *Cratchit* > *cratch* ‘Nativity manger’

Cratch is defined in the restricted sense ‘Nativity manger’ more or less identically in both *OED* (1.b. *spec.* applied to the ‘manger’ at Bethlehem where the infant Jesus was laid”) and *EDD* (“2. *Spec.* applied to the ‘manger’ at Bethlehem where the infant Jesus was laid; hence, a cradle”). *The Middle English Dictionary’s* first quotation for *cracche* in the sense “a manger (for feeding animals)” is from the legend of the Infant Christ in the *South English Legendary* (MS Laud Misc. 108, c1300): “*Ʒwane ihu crist was I bore..In one Crachche he was i-leid Bi fore Oxe and Asse.*” The *OED’s* is from the *Ancrene Riwe* (a1225): “*Heo leiden hine up on heih in one crèche, mit clutes biwrabbed.*” The association of *cratch* with the Nativity manger was of long duration, then, and was pandialectal—in other words, it was difficult for Dickens NOT to know it.

Dickens’s associations of *cratch* with the Nativity are both generally cultural and specifically textual. In “*Natalis Christi*,” the seventeenth-century poet Joshua Sylvester uses *cratch* typically, in a way that represents use of the word in Early Modern and Modern English and leading into Dickens’s awareness of the word:

Who made al time, this time was made a man,
Bred after time, but being ay before,
Th’All-Father’s Sonne, of his own Daughter born;
Eternity now (as it were) began:
Clouts swaddle him, when no Cloude circle can:
Hee cries for milke, who giveth all things meat:
Th’Almighty, feeble; little, th’onely-Great;
Christ in a Cratch, who all the world doth span. (2.341)

Another poem of the same period in the same vein is Bishop Joseph Hall’s “*Antheme for Christmas Day*,”

Immortall babe, who this deare day
Didst change thine Heaven for our clay,
And didst with flesh thy Godhead vail,
Eternal Son of God, All-hail.

Shine happy star, ye Angels sing
Glory on high to Heavens King:
Run Shepherds, leave your nightly watch,
See Heaven come down to *Bethleems* cratch.

Worship ye Sages of the East

The King of Gods in meanness drest.
 O blessed maid smile and adore
 The God thy womb and armes have bore.

Star, Angels, Shepherds, and wise sages;
 Thou Virgin glory of all ages
 Restored frame of heaven and Earth
 Joy in your dear Redeemers Birth. (154)

There is a significant difference between Sylvester's and Hall's poems: while there is no evidence that Dickens read Sylvester, Hall was, according to Richard Altick in *The English Common Reader* (255), an author well known to the Victorian middle classes, Altick's "self-made readers."

Dickens may not have read Hall's poem, but it was certainly available to him and in time for its *cratch* to have influenced *Cratchit*: he would have found it among Hall's poems in Alexander Chalmers's *The Works of the English Poets from Chaucer to Cowper* (5.284), which he purchased for £9.9 in the sale of Thomas Hill's books on 10 March 1841 (House, Storey, and Tillotson 229n4), and which remained in his library until his death (Stonehouse 94). Hall's poem also appeared among William Sandys's *Christmas Carols Ancient and Modern* (34), though not among the carols in other pre-*Christmas Carol* collections, such as Davies Gilbert's *Some Ancient Christmas Carols* (1822). It appeared again, after publication of *A Christmas Carol*, in Frank Vizetelly's *Christmas with the Poets* (47). Sandys was a significant scholar of Christmas traditions, eventually author of *Christmastide: Its History, Festivities, and Carols*. His anthology of Christmas carols and poems "became increasingly popular as antiquarians' zeal coincided with a rising interest in the English Christmas" (Moore 122). He corresponded with Dickens (House, Storey, and Tillotson 512) regarding other matters, not about Christmas, though "it has been suggested that two of the carols gave CD hints for the *Carol*, because of their incidental references to misers and the words 'He said, God bless us every one' (House, Storey, and Tillotson 512n2), and one might add mention of Mary's joy "To see her own son Jesus/To make the lame to go" (Sandys 157). Vizetelly's collection represented "the new style of illustrated, gilded books of poetry ... marketed as Christmas gifts" (Moore 103); it elevated Hall by association (somewhat beyond his current reputation), pointing out that "he was contemporary with Shakespeare, Jonson, Spenser, and the other lights of the Elizabethan Age" (47).

Though *cratch* 'Nativity manger' appears in these prominent Christmas anthologies, it is far from frequent in them: it is but one lexical option among a few for the furniture in which the infant Jesus was laid. In the earliest of the carol books signaling the Christmas revival, Gilbert's *Some Ancient Christmas Carols*, four carols speak of a *manger* and one of a *cradle* (this slim volume includes only

eight carols), but none mentions a *cratch*. In Sandys's *Christmas Carols Ancient and Modern*, a more influential (and with 80 carols considerably larger) collection, *manger* (14 instances) is more than twice as frequent as *cradle* (6 instances), which is twice as frequent as *crib* (3 instances), which is more frequent than *cratch* (2 instances, including the one in Hall's "Immortal Babe"). In Vizetelly's still larger (117 carols, poems, and excerpts from poems) and more popular collection, *Christmas with the Poets*, *manger* (12 instances) appears four times more often than *crib* (3 instances), and six times more than *cradle* (2 instances), while *cratch* occurs only once, in Hall's poem. In *The Life of Our Lord* (written 1846–1849), Dickens preferred what pretty much everyone else preferred: "And the town being very full of people, also brought there by business, there was no room for Joseph and Mary in the Inn or in any house; so they went into a stable to lodge, and in this stable Jesus Christ was born. There was no cradle or anything of that kind there, so Mary laid her pretty little boy in what is called the manger, which is the place the horses eat out of" (12). From Sandys to Vizetelly, *manger* is the dominant alternative, and the one that first comes to mind for twenty-first century carolers; the others aren't even close to competing with its preferred status, *cratch* least among them.

Of course, Vizetelly's collection was published well after *A Christmas Carol*, and, though Dickens must have been aware of Sandys's book, there is no evidence that he ever owned or read a copy. Nevertheless, between Sandys and Vizetelly, Hall's poem was sufficiently established in the imaginations of those Victorians interested in the rise of Christmas celebration, among whom Dickens figures centrally, as a consumer of Christmas lore in the interest of composing his several Christmas books and, one imagines, as one committed to living life to the fullest. As Forster put it, "He had identified himself with Christmas fancies. Its life and spirits, its humour in riotous abundance, of right belonged to him" (1.364). Dickens participated in reframing the folkloric Christmas as a mainstream "tradition." Tara Moore writes that Dickens's "first and most famous Christmas book, *A Christmas Carol* (1843), restarted a trend in Christmas publishing" (1), though clearly the trend started somewhat earlier, with the first collections of carols and poems. David Parker (307) rightly insists that "Dickens ... was not the inventor of Christmas—or of the modern Christmas, or of 'Christmas as we celebrate it today.' He was a writer who used his love of a popular but unfashionable festival to shape texts which helped to make it fashionable once again."

And Dickens was seriously interested in Christmas lore, which undoubtedly influenced *A Christmas Carol*—he had purchased and, one assumes, read John Brand's *Observations on Popular Antiquities*, originally published in 1777, but enlarged by Sir Henry Ellis and reprinted in three volumes in 1841–1842 (Stonehouse 15). So, as Moore argues, "The importance Christmas historians allocate to the trend-setting ... *A Christmas Carol* attests to the interconnectedness of the

Christmas genres and the evolution of the cultural Christmas” (1). Among these texts, carols are central: Dickens “could evoke [Christmas’s] various traditions by foregrounding one [i.e. carols] which, more than any other, summoned up the rest” (Parker 178). *Cratch* ‘Nativity manger’ occurs in particular poems in particular books, but these are specimens of the rising cultural interest in Christmas, a tide in which Dickens participated fully—fully enough, certainly, to know the word and its meanings and to recognize their value to naming in *A Christmas Carol*.

Besides Hall’s poem, two texts stand out as particularly likely influences on Dickens’s use of *cratch* ‘Nativity manger’ as the formative base of *Cratchit*. At one point, discussing Easter rather than Christmas customs, the edited Brand quotes from the jurist, antiquarian, Republican John Selden’s *Table Talk* (1689): “Our meats and sports, says he, ‘have much of them relation to church works. The coffin of our Christmas Pies, in shape long, is in imitation of the cratch,(4) i.e. rack or manger, wherein Christ was laid.” The footnote indicated expands on the gloss: “Among the MSS. of Benet College, Cambridge, is a Translation of part of the New Testament in the English spoken soon after the Conquest. The 7th verse of the 2nd chapter of St. Luke is thus rendered: ‘And layde him in a *cratche*, for to hym was no place in the dyversory” (Brand 1.103–104). Dickens may have read Selden’s use of *cratch* more than once, because the excerpt above appears under the heading “Christmas” in the Table–Talk (165) volume of *Constable’s Miscellany of Original and Selected Publications in the Various Departments of Literature, Science, & the Arts*, which Dickens owned (Stonehouse 106).

Yet another source of *cratch* in a context thematically aligned with *A Christmas Carol* is Edmund Spenser’s “An Hymne of Heavenly Love:”

Beginne from first, where He encradled was
 In Simple cratch, wrapt in a wad of hay,
 Betweene the toylfull oxen and humbles asse,
 And in what rags, and in how base aray,
 The glory of our heavenly riches lay,
 When Him the silly shepherds come to see,
 Whom greatest princes sought on lowest knee.

Dickens knew his Shakespeare and his library included other Early Modern authors, but significantly, he bought Henry J. Todd’s edition of Spenser’s *Works* in the Hill sale for £3.13.6. (House and Storey 229n4). The “Hymne” is in volume 8, and *cratch* is treated in a glossarial note at the bottom of page 253, below the stanza just quoted, thus memorably highlighted, much as in Brand’s explication of Selden. Todd’s Spenser was still in Dickens’s library when he died (Stonehouse 104). Dickens bought both his Spenser and his *Works of the English Poets* at just the right time for them to influence his naming in *A Christmas Carol*—before he wrote it, but just before.

While *cratch* ‘manger’ fell from general use and became marked as regional or

archaic, *cratch* ‘Nativity manger’, because it was a special word with a special meaning in a special register, was stable, always there in the old poems and familiar carols, though hardly frequent, not an everyday word. From a stylistic point of view, we might characterize this as “sufficient infrequency,” and it offered Dickens a stylistic opportunity. *Cratch* ‘Nativity manger’ was familiar enough for Dickens to appropriate it in *Cratchit*, familiar enough, too, for thoughtful readers to recognize it as the root of the name. Indeed, *Cratchit* is a name to catch the reader’s attention, to bother the lexical memory: it looks familiar in that way one just can’t place, at least, not at first. But eventually one makes the association. So, *cratch* ‘Nativity manger’ is sufficient for the etymology but infrequent enough in speech to succeed as a camouflaged form. It is both hidden and, once one sees the *cratch* in it, obvious—a mystery revealed in the name. Of course, Dickens might have coined less mysterious names based on more usual synonyms for *cratch*, such as **Mangercroft*, **Cradleworthy*, or **Cribble*. It’s stylistically significant that Dickens created the less obvious *Cratchit*, instead.

6. Mixed Etymology

Some might object to calling what I have just outlined an etymology, reserving that term for the results of comparative linguistic inquiry, as when Proto-Indo-European *ghreb-* ‘seize, reach’ yields (after some intervening stages) Germanic reflexes like Middle English *graspen*, from which Modern English *gasp* derives, and Middle Dutch *grabben*, which gives us Modern English *grab*. Reflexes derive from etyma according to laws of historical sound change, inflectional rules, derivational patterns, and other systematic influences on word formation. The etymological enterprise proceeds under certain assumptions: change occurs one step at a time, so that etymology involves “tracing the linear history of a word” (Durkin 3), etymologists “trace a word ... to its ultimate source” (Jackson 117), and an etymon is “the form from which a word in a subsequent period of a language is derived” (Hartmann and James 52). Given these assumptions, what I’ve accomplished here is a “word history” rather than a proper etymology.

The master lexicographer Bo Svensén, however, distinguishes between “remote etymology” and “immediate etymology” (335), and the preceding notes lead to the latter for *Cratchit*—we’re not concerned here with the “remote” origins and development of English *cratch* from Old French *cresche* (which, given its /kr/ onset was probably borrowed from Germanic); undoubtedly, we’re considering a late stage or “immediate” etymology, much as when we conclude that *couch potato* is a semi-metaphorical compounding of *couch* and *potato*, without going into the remote etymologies of *couch* and *potato*. Immediate etymologies are not necessarily systematic, except insofar as meaning and metaphor, and semantic and structural associations, are patterned and predictable in cognition—all of this

is a matter of dispute at the moment, and certainly the choice of *cratch* ‘Nativity manger’ as the basis for the wholly imagined name, *Cratchit*, seems considerably less systematically derived than sound change would be explained by Grimm’s or Verner’s or any other Law.

In this, etymology of literary names is more nearly aligned with slang etymology than with etymology of common terms. As Connie Eble (46–48) and I (Adams 78–84) have noted, slang is susceptible to “mixed” or “multiple” etymologies when there is more than one relevant lexical or cultural association in the minds of speakers of a slang item. Literary names, when they are created for the purposes of a particular fiction, can also derive from more than one etymon, in a synthetic act of the author’s imagination. The author is under no constraints typical of remote etymology, such as “*the* form,” “ultimate,” or “linear.”

So, I propose a mixed etymology for *Cratchit*. There is no doubt, as one hopes the above analysis proves, that *cratch* ‘Nativity manger’ is the most likely etymon among a possible few, and so the predominant one in any mixed etymology. This conclusion is not *post hoc*, that is, not a product of hopeful thematic associations of the Cratchits and especially Tiny Tim with the Nativity story, even though (after all) that’s exactly what *A Christmas Carol* is about—spiritual rebirth on the occasion of the Nativity. Rather, it takes into account the popular culture of the Christmas revival (which brought Hall’s poem and its *cratch* into seasonal use) and Dickens’s particular textual experience, which included a number of significant literary uses of *cratch*, some of which were highlighted in memorable annotations. Though *cratch* ‘Nativity manger’ is a quite focused etymon, it does not necessarily exclude the more generic *cratch* ‘manger’, especially because the homeliness and social lowness of the Cratchits, captured in *Cratchit*, depends on it. Thematically, the low *cratch* ‘manger’ is elevated to *cratch* ‘Nativity manger’, whether you are reading the Gospel of Luke or *A Christmas Carol*—again, that’s the point.

The lexical basis for *Cratchit* supersedes the name’s expressive or evocative qualities, except insofar as the latter support the former. Certainly, however, sound participates in the impression the name makes on readers and the meaning it conveys. Lexical meanings of *cratch* do not exclude the sonantal and affective values of *Cratch-* (whatever they might be) nor especially does it exclude the pragmatic meanings of the suffix *-et*, familiarity and diminution, which extend to all Cratchits, not just to Tiny Tim. The relationship between sound and meaning in the name resonates with our experience of names and naming, so the name performs an aspect of Dickens’s style, yet also signals his metastylistic awareness.

Mixed etymology, however, doesn’t mean that “anything goes.” *Cratch* ‘crutch,’ for instance, would appear to have little bearing on Dickens’s invention of *Cratchit*, no matter its obvious thematic relevance. Tiny Tim, at the center of the story, uses a crutch because he is a “cripple,” and that crutch is given a

certain symbolic emphasis. Dickens and his contemporaries associated a figure like Tiny Tim with Christmas even before publication *A Christmas Carol*: Brand's *Observations on Popular Antiquities* records Selden's use of *cratch* but also opens its section of "The Christmas Carol" with a popular example, "Now too is heard/ The hapless cripple, tuning through the streets/His *Carol* new" (1.262), which might well have influenced Dickens's conception of his story as much as any use of *cratch*.

The image of the "hapless cripple," however, who is not even described as using a crutch, is far from an instance of *cratch* 'crutch.' Not all words potentially relevant to a name contribute to making it, but only the relevant words actually in the author's mind, at whatever degree of consciousness, when the name is made. And there is no evidence that Dickens knew or would have known *cratch* in the sense 'crutch'. Of course, he *could* have known it without our knowing that he did, just as he could have known anything we don't know he knew. But for any positive etymological assertion, we demand some sort of proof—proof and possibility are far from being the same thing.

Still, as I indicated at the outset, *cratch* 'crutch' cannot be utterly excluded from the etymology. There's just a suggestion of it in the etymological mixture, much like vermouth passed over gin but not poured into the martini. Though it's quite unlikely that Dickens knew *cratch* 'crutch', so further unlikely that it motivated to any degree creation of the name *Cratchit*, it's also quite likely that contemporary readers of *A Christmas Carol* (or auditors of private or public readings of the book), those in Gloucester and Sussex, for instance, knew *cratch* 'crutch' as well as they knew *cratch* 'Nativity manger.' If those readers attributed *Cratchit* to *cratch* 'crutch', they constructed a folk etymology for the name, but it wouldn't be an irrelevant folk etymology. These putative readers or auditors hadn't looked in dictionaries and drawn lines between lexical dots to arrive at an "incorrect" etymology, and they hadn't inclined toward an etymology because mere synonymy made thematic or characterological sense. Because it's a plausible but unlikely etymon, because it immediately influenced the way some understood the name and its significance, and because one can't prove that it wasn't within Dickens's lexical repertoire, it is worth noting in the etymology without actually approving it as an etymon. In this respect, *cratch* 'crutch' differs from *cratch* 'Nativity manger' and the pragmatic evocations of the name, but it also differs from *criquet*.

For *criquet* is simply an implausible etymon for *Cratchit*. I wouldn't propose any limits on Dickens's onomastic imagination or facility, but there were doubtless limits to his onomastic material, limits of phonotaxis in the sound structure of names, for instance (though he pushes these in names like *Vholes*, if the /h/ is to be taken seriously), and limits of lexical experience whenever a name carries some lexical semantic information. Rather than *criquet*, the base etymon of *Cratchit* is more likely to be Scots *crat* 'feeble, puny' or 'small, insignificant person' (Grant

and Murison *sv* *crat*), a precise synonym for *criquet* in the sense ‘petit homme faible et de petit taille.’ Dickens had been in Scotland for a month in 1841 (Slater 163–168), having thus more exposure to Scots than French before writing *A Christmas Carol*. Still, *Cratchit* from *crat* isn’t a persuasive etymology, either, since final consonant reduction and glottalization are more likely than affricate extension, and this last would have to occur so that *Crat(ch)-* could serve as base for the pragmatically significant suffix *-et*. We can’t let our sentimentality overcome the lexical facts, no matter how relevant our sentimentality may be to the novel’s purpose.

As G. L. Brook writes, “The study of the language used by an author ... can lead the way to a better understanding of the author’s meaning and a fuller appreciation of his literary skill” (1). Lexical content in Dickens’s naming is fairly frequent and a frequently appreciated aspect of his names, applauded about his style, attributed to his genius. Brook (209) notes names like *Mudfog* (from *Sketches by Boz*, “a descriptive place-name”), *Mrs. Queertable* (“the keeper of a boarding-house,” from the same), and the *Honourable Captain Fitz-Whisker Fiercy* (from the *Pantomime of Life*). All of these names have lexically meaningful elements metaphorically relevant to the characters named: *mud*, *fog*, *queer*, *table*, *whisker*, and *fierce* are all non-name words appropriated to Dickens’s onomastic uses. There are, of course, many more examples.

In most of those examples, the elements are transparent, as in the cases given above—just everyday words meaning everyday things, projected metaphorically onto a character with a thematic role to play in one or another Dickensian fiction. Because so many of Dickens’s names fit into this category, it is possible to underestimate the subtlety of some others, to underestimate the purposeful indirection of some of his onomastic work. To put it another way, given so many “obvious” names, one can overlook Dickens’s onomastic finesse, and miss the apogee of his onomastic style. *Cratchit* is paradoxically clear and camouflaged, and not just the lexical meaning folded into the name, but the paradox, too, is thematically significant: *cratch* ‘Nativity manger’ is the base of a name in a story about spiritual rebirth and revelation of the unexpected, though on closer examination, the unexpected is already assumed, a theological Truth.

This onomastic camouflage, the proposed obscurity of the central point, is the obverse of the *vanitas* tradition in seventeenth-century Dutch painting. In that tradition, an artist illustrates the “vanity of human wishes,” by representing wealth, learning, longevity, fashion, and other such vanities, with a pile of coins, a stack of books, a half-consumed candle, a misplaced glove. Most often, in the background, in shade, perhaps barely recognizable, is a skull—a *memento mori*, or reminder of the mortality that makes human wishes so vain. Granted, there is no resurrection to the life without death, so the skull is not a wholly oppressive metaphorical presence, no more so than the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come,

with whom Scrooge visits his own grave, a perfectly straightforward *memento*. But the *vanitas* tradition hides the specter of mortality among familiar artifacts of the good life, which isn't the same as a life well lived. In *Cratchit*, a name very much in the foreground of *A Christmas Carol*, the Nativity and the redemptive possibilities it focuses and promises are immanent in the name. Nativity is the opposite but also the complement of death; the *cratch* is the allegorical alternative to the skull, a reminder that, like Scrooge, one can put aside the old man and take on the new in this life.

The etymology of *Cratchit* is interesting in itself, and this article is in the way of an extended annotation on the name. *Cratchit* is undoubtedly worth the trouble: it is an unusually meaningful name, created from a word with a long and interesting history of literary and popular use; it is also central to one of Dickens's most widely familiar stories, a meaningful marker of character and theme. Though but one name, *Cratchit* demonstrates that Dickens's names can be more meaningful than we assume; we are complacent because we are used to a characteristic transparency to his names. *Cratchit* also proves that Dickens can name more adroitly than more obviously literal names, like *Veneering* or *Crisparkle*, or purely evocative names, like *Micawber* or *Quilp*, suggest. While so many of Dickens's names are phonetic representations of the characters to which they attach, in a case like *Cratchit* (and it's unclear how many other such cases there are), Dickens's naming is unexpectedly literary, a result of his reading and absorbing a word and an image, thereby drawing *A Christmas Carol* covertly into the English literary tradition. Recognizing and valuing Dickens's onomastic finesse is essential to any sophisticated assessment of his style.

Style and idea commingle, and to misunderstand one may imply misunderstanding both. Ruskin wrote that Christmas meant nothing more to Dickens than "mistletoe and pudding—neither resurrection from dead, nor rising of new stars, nor teaching of wise men, nor shepherds" (37.7). That is, in Ruskin's view, Dickens never thought of the Nativity. The etymology of *Cratchit* argued here disproves that view. As Jane Vogel (26) realized, for Dickens, "the Christian moment is one with the living scene, nothing of it awesomely apart, but, released from conventional pallor of abstraction, near, accessible, ever-presently alive." *Cratchit* is a notably successful name because its allegorical meaning, derived primarily from *cratch* 'Nativity manger', is never "awesomely apart." It resists "the conventional pallor of abstraction" because the idea is incarnate in the name. The Word was with God in the Beginning, and its incarnation is a name that identifies the "near, accessible," homely, yet "ever-presently alive" Cratchits. Names, like the objects depicted in still lifes, are especially good at instantiating allegory in a fictional "ever-present." And Dickens's interest in the "true meaning" of Christmas was more profound than Ruskin and most other readers have imagined.

Ruskin operated from one aesthetic, Dickens from another. In the *Stones of*

Venice, Ruskin remembered, “I once thought I must be wrong in considering a skull disagreeable. I gave it fair trial; put one on my bedroom chimney-piece, and looked at it by sunrise every morning, and by moonlight every night, and by all the best lights I could think of, for a month, in vain. I found it as ugly at last as I did at first” (9.452). Apparently, the skull was inadequate to its allegorical purpose, at least for Ruskin. When he tried to make life imitate art, the attempt was unpersuasive. But really, the *memento mori* had been unpersuasive before; discovering whether it would be more effective out of a painting than in one was the experiment’s moral and aesthetic purpose. One might doubt that a critic immune to the *memento mori*, or, at least, to the skull as the memento, would recognize the significance of a name like *Cratchit*, whose role in the fictional composition so closely imitates the memento’s role in pictorial composition within the *vanitas* tradition.

Well, Dutch still life was not Ruskin’s favorite genre of painting: “A Dutchman can be just as solemnly and entirely contemplative of a lemon pip and a cheese paring, as an Italian of the Virgin in Glory. An English squire has pictures, purely contemplative, of his favourite horse—and a Parisian lady, pictures, purely contemplative, of the back and front of the last dress proposed to her in *La Mode Artistique*. All these works belong to the same school of silent admiration;—the vital question concerning them is, ‘What do you admire?’” (23.326). Ruskin did not attend that school. He admired neither the lemon pip nor the horse, nor contemplation of them, nor representation derived from that contemplation. In this context, when asked the question, “What do you admire?” Ruskin responded, “Something else.” He expected to find intimations of Christian theology in a name like *Cratchit* no more or less than in a lemon pip.

Discussing St. Peter’s “two massy keys” in Milton’s *Lycidas*, Ruskin argued, “Is this, then, the power of the keys claimed by the Bishops of Rome? And is it acknowledged here by Milton only in a poetical license, for the sake of its picturesqueness, that he may get the gleam of the golden keys to help his effect? Do not think it. Great men do not play stage tricks with the doctrines of life and death; only little men do that. Milton means what he says; and means it with his might too—is going to put the whole strength of his spirit presently into the saying of it” (18.70). I grant that Milton was not one for stage tricks, but I don’t think it useful, really, to argue whether Milton is “bigger” than Dickens—Dickens is big enough. One author’s sleight of hand is another’s mystery. Perhaps, if you look at *A Christmas Carol* with Ruskin’s sensibility, Dickens seems to play stage tricks in *Cratchit*; but, from another point of view, perhaps he also puts the whole strength of his spirit, and the Spirit of Christmas, into the name.

Registering the difference between Ruskin’s aesthetic and Dickens’s reminds us that Dickens’s onomastics is part of an aesthetic worth arguing about. Undoubtedly, Dickens indulges in the sentimental and the picturesque. The latter is often

exuberant: it shines and sparkles, like the folk celebration of Christmas so dear to Dickens and most of his readers and so irrelevant to Ruskin. Sentimentality and the picturesque distracted Ruskin from other things that mattered to Dickens and that figured significantly in the architecture of *A Christmas Carol*; but Ruskin was looking in the wrong places for significance. He overlooked Dickens's verbal, especially his onomastic, dexterity. The most specific thing, a name, just one name, can hold a general truth, whether an aesthetic truth, or a moral truth, or a metaphysical truth—or even, in its etymological integrity, all three.

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