

Gifts Displayed on Sleeves

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“I knew her by this jewel on her sleeve.”

Love's Labour's Lost, Act V, Scene ii, line 456

My essay of July 1980 on the traditional evasive answers known as *put-offs* contains a couple of examples in which a non-existent present known as a *new-nothing* is said to be hung on a recipient's arm or sleeve. Thus, dated 1578, *I owe you a new-nothing to hange vppon your sleeve*, or, more recently, the Northamptonshire *a new-nothing to hang on your sleeves*, and the Warwickshire *a silver new-nothing to hang on your arm*, both collected in the late nineteenth century. *A silver new-nothing* and its Continental analogues were dealt with on pp. 37-39 of my essay (Smith, 1980). The idea of a silver new-nothing and the like being fastened to a recipient's arm or sleeve would benefit from further discussion.

Here, then, are some hopefully relevant Continental examples, beginning with material from West Friesland, where birthdays were marked by a custom that was by the late nineteenth century becoming obsolete. A birthday present would be attached to a stout cord or chain, whereupon the celebrant would be seized and tied to a chair, the birthday present, consisting of sweetmeats or some finery, being attached to his or her right arm or sleeve. A traditional verse was then intoned, ending with words to the effect that the recipient would not be released until he or she had undertaken to treat those present to a feast of cake, wine, brandy, and the like. A child who had been celebrated in this way would say, not “I was given such-and-such for my birthday” but “I was *tied* with such-and-such for my birthday”, *binden*, “to tie” or “bind” being the operative verb (Dykstra, 1895, pp. 223-224).

Thus, in Groningen and thereabouts one child would ask another, “*Waarmee ben je gebonde?*”, meaning “What have you been tied with?” alias “What did you get for your birthday?” Relevant here is the Dutch proverbialism *iemand iets op de mouw spelden*, literally “to pin something on someone's sleeve”, with *spelden* rather than *binden*, and hence “to pass off as significant that which is second-rate or shoddy”. As our authority puts it, the saying derives from the old custom of “pinning or tying a sweetmeat or other present to the arm of a child celebrating his or her birthday” (ter Laan, 1950, p. 202).

In order further to investigate such matters, it will be best for us now to consult Jacob Grimm's disquisition of 1848 on gifts and giving, in which he quotes from a sermon by the popular preacher Geiler von Kaisersberg (b. Schaffhausen 1445, d. Strassburg 1510), who condemns (pp. 189 ff.) the foolish fairground trinkets presented by paramours to married women, to be worn on their sleeves, examples being a pennorth of needles or a pair of bellows. Further examples of such trumpery wares are jew's harps, rakes, emunctoria or candle-snuffers, flea traps, and blue ducks wearing wooden shoes. When a paramour gives his lady-love such a pair of bellows, she will buy him a candle-snuffer. These things they wear on their sleeves, nor does the hidden meaning of all this escape them. By bellows and suchlike, says Grimm, we are

not to understand the respective kitchen utensils, but rather miniature ornamental bellows, candle-snuffers and the like, to be worn on the sleeve. They have been described as “small objects conveying lascivious messages” (“kleine Gegenstände ... Symbole mit lasciver [sic] Bedeutung.”) (Schmidt, 1901, p. 1) As for the blue ducks wearing wooden shoes (*blawenten, die vff holdtschuhen gon*), these have been seen as fairground toys, and hence anything childish and frivolous. Note, incidentally, the probably related idiom *von blauen Enten predigen*, literally “to preach about blue ducks”, for “to spread lies and empty talk” (Wanzeck, 2003, p. 258; Röhrich, 1, 1977, p. 239).

There is no indication in all this of what such ornaments were made from. In an extensive footnote, however, Grimm takes us to a work of 1677 by the satirist Johann Michael Moscherosch (1601-1662), who, under the pen-name Philander von Sittewald, a hundred and fifty years after von Kaisersberg, condemns, using a multiplicity of colourful adjectives, the contemporary obsession with gewgaws, each made of pewter and in the shape of a household implement. Attached to different parts of the attire, these, according to Grimm, were a sign of secret compacts between the sexes. In this remarkable array, amounting to maybe a score, we note in particular the miniature candle-snuffers and bellows that had apparently been popular in von Kaisersberg’s day. Alongside these we are told of miniature sweeping-brushes, oven peels, trivets, flea-traps, roasting spits, to name but a few, all made of pewter (Moscherosch, 1677, pp. 133-134; Moscherosch, 1830, pp. 134-135; Grimm, 1879, p. 190, footnote 2). Could there be a connection here with the lead brooches described by Malcolm Jones? Admittedly there is a world of difference between the courtly theme of the beautiful Dutch lead badge shown as a chapter ornament to Jones’s chapter ten (2002, pp. 196-201), and that of the pewter ornaments just discussed.

Gifts of the type described, but especially birthday presents, were in German traditionally referred to as *Angebände*, meaning “that which is bound or attached to someone as a present”. If a celebrant could not be congratulated in person on the day, the gift would be sent with a covering letter, typically in verse, called an *Anbindbrieflein*, along with a silken ribbon (Röhrich, 1, 1977, p. 57). The operative word here is *binden*, “to bind”. As a loan translation this entered other European languages on which German had an important influence. Thus Bohemian, Polish, and Lettish, whereas Grimm found nothing comparable in Russian, Slovenian, or Serbian (Grimm, 1879, p. 195).

German verbs conveying ideas similar to that of *anbinden* are *einbinden*, *einstecken*, *einstricken*, all of which broadly cover the sense “to insert, envelop”. From *einstricken*, following the pattern of *anbinden* and *Angebände*, comes Swiss-German *Einstrickete* for the coin wrapped or tucked as a present into an infant’s swaddling clothes. High Alemannic *hälsa* reminds us of the fact that such presents could be fastened round the neck or *Hals*. For parts of Baden, Meyer recorded a variation on the activities mentioned so far in this paragraph. It was *Würgen*, “throttling”, matched in Unzhurst (Bühl) by *Zobeln*, hair-pulling (Meyer, 1900, pp. 27 and 107), a form of birthday torture known closer to home (Opie and Opie, 1977, pp. 324-325), and, like much of the material here, in need of further discussion (cf. also Landolt, March 26th, 2019).

Returning now to the Dutch *iemand iets op de mouw spelden* touched on in my third paragraph above, we find that in the English equivalent, *to pin such-and-such on another's sleeve*, the “such-and-such” that is pinned is frequently represented by the word *faith*. The relevant saying has been traced back to the mid-sixteenth century. A nice example, dated 1660, is attributed to Sir Thomas More: *I will not pin my faith upon any man's sleeve, because I know not whither he will carry it* (Apperson, 1993, p. 497; Wilson, 1970, p. 626). We also note a pertinent remark made by Samuel Pegge in the early nineteenth century: “I remember, that asking my father, when I was a child, on his return home at any time, ‘*What have you brought me?*’ the answer used to be, ‘*A new nothing, to pin on your sleeve*’; which I was long before I understood: but I find now, that the custom formerly was, for people to wear both badges and presents, such as New-year's Gifts, on their sleeves ... Hence, I suppose, the expression ‘*to pin one's faith on another's sleeve*’.” (Pegge (1), century iii, lxiii, p. 74)

Compare further information from the same author: “Gifts that admitted of it (especially to Women from Men) were usually worn on the Sleeve ... Fairings and such Tokens were of this sort. Hence the question and answer: Question What have you bought me? (from the Fair, &c.) Answer *A new nothing, to pin on your Sleeve*’.” (Pegge (2), pp. 309-310)

Finally, we note a handful of survivals, beginning with the following from Northamptonshire, recorded in 1854: “When children are importuning their parents or friends to tell them what fairings they will bring them from the fair, it is often said in joke, ‘If you'll be good children, *I'll bring you all a new-nothing to hang on your sleeves*,’ i.e. nothing at all.” A Warwickshire variant, recorded by Northall in 1896, speaks of *A silver new-nothing to hang on your arm*. Both the above are to be found in *EDD*, 4, p. 257. An unusual variant comes from Galloway: “Wigtown and Whithorn were touns lang afore Stranraer and Newton were thocht o'. Them an' their causeyed [paved] streets, gravitation water supplies ... and a' the ither bonnie blue naethings they stick on their sleeves.” (McCormick, 1932, p. 56) From a Mangotsfield, Bristol lady born about 1900 I received on March 3rd, 1981 the following remark about her grandmother: “If ever we asked her what she had bought us for birthdays or Christmas she would say: ‘*A silver new-nothing to hang down your back*’.” Writing from Petersfield, Hampshire, on April 24th, 1981, a correspondent recalled how, when asked what birthday present his father had in mind for his offspring, he would say: “*A tuppenny new-nothing*.” On January 22nd, 1980 a correspondent stated that from her mother who had lived in London would come promises of the type *A silver new-nothing to tie round your neck*. On June 9th, 1981 an informant in Redditch, West Midlands, wrote that in reply to questions along the lines of “What will you bring me?” her mother-in-law in a village near Cheltenham would say: *A silver new-nothing to hang on your sleeve*.

Abbreviations

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