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How a Saint Becomes a Sinner

Holy fool or nutcase?

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Emilio Machado / unsplash

Околесица: blather, nonsense

Now here's a word I'd never heard before: куролесица. It isn't used much — less than 15,000 hits on Google — and apparently means nonsense, confusion, something unintelligible. It comes with a verb, куролесить, which means to behave oddly, to act silly, to play pranks. Он дурачился на счет "таганской куролесицы" ⊠ как Любимов и любимовцы станут улучшать и разукрашивать Булгакова (He clowned around at the expense of what he called the "Taganka circus" — how Lyubimov and his troupe would improve and embellish Bulgakov).

The only context where it seems common is holiday entertainment, usually state-organized. You can find it in ads for (possibly wild) merriment, like this announcement for Развлекательная программа "Новогодняя куролесица", Ишненский сельский дом

культуры в Ростовском районе (The entertainment program “New Year’s Hullabaloo” at the Ishnya Village House of Culture in the Rostov region).

Sounds like a fun night on the town!

Куролесица may or may not be related to another similar-sounding word: околесица which means to speak nonsense. Sometimes it sounds like fun blather: Выпив, он становился чересчур весёл и нёс околесицу (After he had something to drink he got really happy and spouted a lot of hogwash). Sometimes it sounds less fun: Я вынужден слушать, как ты несёшь какую-то околесицу о любви и дружбе, и не могу захохотать, потому что мне тебя тоже жалко (I have to listen you rattling off some kind of drivel about love and friendship, and I can’t laugh because I also feel sorry for you). And the whole point seems to be that the listener can’t tell fact from fiction: Он понёс в ответ сущую околесицу, так что я только тут понял, как неприятно иметь дело с людьми, о которых никогда нельзя сказать наверное, лгут они или нет (In reply he rattled off arrant nonsense, so that I suddenly realized how unpleasant it is to have dealings with people when you can’t tell for certain if they are lying or not).

I couldn’t agree more.

The really interesting bit about these words is their origin. Околесица has two possible origins, one from the word около (near, about, around), the idea being someone dances around something in their speech. The other is the noun колесо (wheel) and verb колесить, which means to drive for a long time or to drive around in circles. That supposedly led to the notion of going off the beaten path while talking: spouting nonsense. To be honest, both possibilities sound like a stretch, but word derivation and transformation is a mysterious process.

The origin myth for куролесица is even more fantastical but oddly more believable. It is supposedly a mispronunciation of the Greek Kyrie Eleison (God have mercy) said in religious services. Since Russians didn’t understand the phrase they were chanting — although why they were chanting Greek and not the Russian Господи, помилуй is a mystery — they decided that куролес or куролесица was just a bit of gobbledygook.

Do you believe any of that? I’m not sure I do, but they are lovely stories.

And since I liked the image of Russian churchgoers struggling with Kyrie Eleison — and since this is the season of religious holidays — I thought it might be useful to look at a few more words with religious meanings that are used in secular life, too — often with very different meanings.

As I say: word transformation is a mysterious process.

Here’s an interesting one: блуд. In religion it means straying from the path of righteousness. You might recognize Блудный сын as the Prodigal Son as well as, on a happier note, Покаяние блудного сына (the Penitence of the Prodigal Son). Outside the church these days the adjective блудный is used more commonly in the sense of being lewd, profligate, as if “straying from the path of righteousness” came down to being unchaste. Вместе с возвращением к единственной женщине, рожавшей ему детей, закольцевав свою

блудную судьбу, дед вернулся и на некогда купленную дачу (Along with returning to the only woman who bore him children, my grandfather closed the chapter on his immoral life and came back to the dacha he bought long ago).

In religion, almost the opposite of блудный человек is угодник, which means someone pleasing to God. The most revered Божий угодник (saint pleasing to God) is St. Nicholas, aka Santa Claus, who was in reality the Archbishop of Myra (now part of Turkey) in the 3rd and 4th centuries. He is especially venerated in Russia: Был святой угол в избе, и икона Николая Угодника в кухоньке (The village cottage had an icon corner and an icon of St. Nicholas in the kitchen).

But out in the world, угодник has almost the opposite meaning. The угодник is pleasing to others in order to get something for himself. Угодник is a bootlicker, a sycophant, a lackey. Он угодник влиятельных людей (He sucks up to influential people). With women, he's a cad. В округе я известен как настоящий дамский угодник (In the district I'm famous for being a real ladies' man).

Another word that is better in church than outside its doors is юродивый. In church circles this is a holy fool or a fool for Christ, that is, someone who has the madness to get rid of his or her belongings and wander the earth in tattered bits of clothing, begging for food and praying. These people have always been revered in Russia — as have people like them in other parts of the world. They may be mad, but in the service of God. Она – из разряда блаженных и юродивых, обижать которых – великий грех (She is one of the blessed, the fools in Christ. Mistreating them is a great sin).

But the kind of insanity that is sanctified in a believer is regarded as just plain nuts and/or stupid in an ordinary person. Инженер, да еще атомщик, а рассуждаете, как юродивый (You're an engineer, an atomic engineer to boot, and you analyze things like a lunatic). Even marketplaces can be a bit nutty: Этот рынок был весёлым и даже немного юродивым местом (That market was a fun and even a slightly wacky place). There might have been some beggars, holy or not, there, but if this was said last week, perhaps it was just wacky.

May your spring holidays be fun and even a bit wacky.

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