

Scots Word of the Season: Fankle

By Maggie Scott

fankle *v.* to tangle, mix up; to become tangled; (formerly to trap, ensnare)

n. a tangle, muddle

Fankle is a relatively young word in the history of Scots, first appearing in print in the poetry of Allan Ramsay in the eighteenth century. Although its older verbal uses are documented by the *Dictionary of the Scots Language* as 'to catch in a snare, to trap', the modern sense of the word is more often 'to tangle', and it is very widely used in journalistic and other writing.

The verb *fankle* is related to the now less common word *fank* (to twist, tangle; to snare, catch in a noose). *Fank* is a variant of an earlier term, *fang* (to catch, seize, capture, acquire), which developed from an Old English word, *fon*, meaning 'to grasp, seize or catch'. *Fankle* evolved from this earlier *fank*, with the addition of the *-le* suffix, common to so-called 'frequentative' verbs, which refer to repeated action or movement. Similar words in common use include *crackle*, *jiggle*, *wrestle* (from *wrest*) and *dazzle* (from *daze*). Somehow, *fank* failed to adequately express the intensity of the many possible cases of twisting, tangling, muddling and guddling, and so *fankle* was drafted in to add some apparently much-needed emphasis.

By the nineteenth century, we find the noun in print; helpfully explained, for example, in John MacTaggart's *Scottish Gallovidian Encyclopedia* (1824): 'When cloth is in unrid [untidy] folds, it is said to be in a fankle'. Scots have grappled with the word ever since. As Nick Rodger wrote last month in the *Sunday Herald*, the football match between Partick Thistle and Hamilton Academical saw Thistle's Miles Storey catch Hamilton keeper Gary Woods 'in a flapping fankle but the ball bounced off the bar'. Earlier this year, the BBC's Scottish Sport pages observed that Kilmarnock player Kirk Broadfoot was 'getting himself in a fankle' with the appointment of manager Lee McCulloch. Having known his former Rangers team mate as 'Jig', Broadfoot's attempts to rethink McCulloch as his 'gaffer' have resulted in the alternate, malapropistic moniker, 'Jigaffer'.

Fankle has retained much of its Scottish identity and, despite a few cameo appearances abroad thanks to the media, it is frequently translated when it appears in non-Scottish contexts. In an article in the *American Quilter's Newsletter Magazine* in 2003, the word was explained for its U.S. audience as a 'snarly nest or mess'. Fankling being inevitable within textile crafts, the Scots word aptly appears in the name of Fankle Quilting and Knitting (formerly Fankle Wools and Needlecraft), a company based in Troon, South Ayrshire.

As Robin Jenkins wrote, with some profundity, in *The Thistle and the Grail* (1954), 'human affairs aye get into a fankle'. But for me, the true textbook example will forever remain the scene from John Byrne's *Your Cheatin' Heart* in which reporter Tamara MacAskill gets her microphone cord 'inexplicably and inextricably fankled' in the belt of Frank McClusky's Burberry coat — expertly illustrated by John Gordon-Sinclair and Helen Atkinson-Wood in the BBC Scotland adaptation.

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