

# How Vanessa Became a Butterfly: A Psychologist's Adventure in Entomological Etymology

Cleveland Kent Evans

Most American baby name books claim that the origin of the name *Vanessa* is a Greek word meaning 'butterfly,' while British authorities claim that the name is the literary invention of Jonathan Swift. Evidence is presented showing that not only is the latter derivation the correct one, but also that the entomologist Johann Fabricius probably named a genus of butterfly *Vanessa* after the character in Swift's poem.

---

Onomastics is interdisciplinary by nature, so name researchers must be generalists, able to conduct and evaluate research outside of their main area of training and expertise. Leonard Ashley, a professor of English, amply demonstrated his interdisciplinary skills in *What's in a Name?*, which includes fascinating information drawn from history, geography, psychology, business, and the occult, as well as from literature and linguistics. It is in the generalist spirit that I, trained as a psychologist, offer this example of how literature, religious history, Classical and Modern Greek, and entomology were used to satisfy my curiosity about one common English first name — *Vanessa*.

When I was hired to rewrite the book *Unusual and Most Popular Baby Names* in 1991, I had to check the etymological origins for accuracy. For *Vanessa*, the first edition of the book gave "Greek 'butterfly'" as the original meaning (Consumer Guide Editors 117). However, a check of the first name books by British authors known for their etymological accuracy (Dunkling &

Gosling 282, Hanks & Hodges 329, Withycombe 287) found all agreed that *Vanessa* is the literary invention of Jonathan Swift, a name created to honor his friend Esther Vanhomrigh by combining the *Van-* from her surname with *Essa*, a pet form of *Esther*. Ms. Vanhomrigh, twenty-one years younger than Swift, her tutor, fell madly in love with him. In 1713 he wrote the poem *Cadenus and Vanessa* for her to try to explain why he couldn't fully return her affections. After her untimely death in 1723, the poem became public, and it was published in Swift's *Works* in 1735, ten years before his death (Ross & Woolley, 657).

The original editors of *Unusual and Most Popular Baby Names* were not alone in their entomological interpretation of the name; out of another twenty-two first name books by North American authors published since 1941, sixteen gave "butterfly" as the explanation for *Vanessa*, thirteen deriving it from Greek and three from Latin. (One of these [Bailey] even had an illustration of a baby named Vanessa wearing butterfly wings on its front cover!) These sixteen authors all seemed to be following the account of Flora Haines Loughhead, whose 1933 book on names explained *Vanessa* as "Greek, a butterfly, the name originating from a mystic divinity in the Orphic system" (227).

Since Loughhead's book was characterized in Elsdon Smith's standard bibliography as "carelessly and poorly done" (45), it was tempting simply to dismiss the butterfly interpretation. However, I then discovered that Eric Partridge (274) quoted Charlotte Yonge, the original British expert on first name origins, who explained *Vanessa* as "the generic title of our finest English butterflies." More importantly, *Vanessa* is indeed the name of a genus of butterflies in the family *Nymphalidae*; in fact, the Painted Lady or Cosmopolite, the most widely-distributed butterfly species on earth, has the scientific name of *Vanessa cardui* (Opler & Krizek, 159). Is this merely a coincidence, or is it possible that there is some connection between the given name and butterflies after all?

To answer this question, it is necessary to discover how the butterfly genus came to be called *Vanessa*. Klots (107) notes that the genus was named by Fabricius. A quick trip to the *Dictionary of Scientific Biography* (Volume IV, 512-513) finds that Johann

## 278 Names 41.4 (December 1993)

Christian Fabricius was born in Denmark in 1745 and died in Kiel, Germany, in 1808. He was one of the most widely-respected scientists of his day, and traveled extensively throughout Europe, visiting London every summer between 1772 and 1775. He is best remembered for the fact that he named and described 10,000 different insect species in his lifetime! According to Ferris and Brown (342), Fabricius named the genus *Vanessa* in 1807, the year before he died.

This information immediately settles the question of priority: Swift's poem was written ninety-four years before Fabricius named the genus, so *Vanessa* existed as a female given name in English before it was associated with butterflies. But why did Johann Fabricius choose that particular name for his new genus?

First, it is clear that Fabricius did *not* name the genus from the Greek word for "butterfly." The classical Greek word for butterfly is *psuka* (*The Classic Greek Dictionary*, 41); the modern Greek word is *petalouda* (Pring, 152). So the common interpretation in American name books that *Vanessa* is from the Greek word for butterfly is simply incorrect, and the result of a misunderstanding of Loughhead's original idea.

To complicate things, the entomologists Opler and Krizek offer their own etymology for the genus name *Vanessa*: "The genus may be derived from a combination of the Dutch *van*, 'from,' and the Greek *nesos*, 'island.' (Also, *Vanessa* is a feminine name)" (158). This has all the earmarks of an "explanation" found by arbitrarily searching through dictionaries for words that resemble the name, and it is quite unlikely. Why would a Dane living in Germany who was accustomed to using Greek and Latin in naming suddenly use a Dutch preposition to form a scientific name? More importantly, remember that the genus *Vanessa* includes the most widely-spread butterfly species in the world. *Vanessid* butterflies are found throughout continental Eurasia, Africa, and North America, and have no particular connection with islands, as Opler and Krizek's own book makes clear. It is highly improbable that a scientist of Fabricius' stature would give an important genus such an inappropriate and misleading name.

## How Vanessa Became a Butterfly 279

Is it possible then that Fabricius named the genus after the Orphic deity mentioned by Loughhead? He certainly chose many of the names for his 10,000 species from classical mythology. For example, he named butterfly species after the Greek goddesses Cybele and Aphrodite, the Roman goddess Bellona, and Numitor, the legendary grandfather of Romulus and Remus (Opler & Krizek 132, 133, 138, 222).

The deity Loughhead had in mind is Phanes, as is implied in her own book (209) and later made clear by Evelyn Wells (156). In Orphic myth Phanes is the first creator deity. He hatches from an egg, and has four eyes and golden wings (Warden, ix). In other words, he has some attributes of a butterfly (though he has other qualities, such as the "voice of a bull and of a glaring lion," that don't fit as well). So Loughhead's association of Vanessa with Phanes looks like a possibility for the butterfly genus, if not for the origin of the female name.

But is this the real solution? If Johann Fabricius had wanted to name a butterfly genus after the Orphic deity Phanes, why didn't he just call it *Phanes*? He certainly used the normal Greek or Latin forms of the names of mythological characters for the naming of other species. Even if he wanted to feminize the god's name, the result would have been something like *Phanesia* rather than *Vanessa*. Could the butterfly have something to do with Swift's poem after all?

The answer to this question is found in the poem *Cadenus and Vanessa* itself. Remember that the genus *Vanessa* is part of the family *Nymphalidae*. The other genus that *Vanessa* is most closely related to was named *Nymphalis* by another entomologist, Kluk, five years before Fabricius named *Vanessa* (Ferris & Brown 334). The first two lines of *Cadenus and Vanessa* are:

The *shepherds* and the *nymphs* were seen  
Pleading before the Cyprian queen.  
(Ross & Woolley 334)

More importantly, *Vanessa* herself is called a nymph at least eleven times in the course of the poem.

## 280 Names 41.4 (December 1993)

It now seems probable that, in 1807, Johann Fabricius, near the end of his life, found that he needed a name for a new genus of butterfly. He may have thought to himself "this genus is related to *Nymphalis*; maybe I should name it after a nymph." But he had already named almost 10,000 species of insects, giving a great many names from classical mythology. He may have had trouble thinking of the name of a classical nymph that hadn't already been used. But then — a thought. What was that poem he had read, the one about a nymph by that English author? What was she called? Vanessa! That would be the perfect name for this new genus. We might even add the psychological conjecture that as a sixty-seven-year-old professor Fabricius may have been especially likely to remember a poem about a beautiful young woman falling in love with an older intellectual man.

The evidence is of course largely circumstantial; one would need to find references to *Cadmus* and *Vanessa* in Fabricius's surviving papers to be absolutely sure. But as a widely-traveled European intellectual of his day, one who had visited England several times, it is probable that he would have been able to read poetry in English, if by that time Swift's poetry had not already been translated into German or Danish. In any event, the prominence of nymphs in the poem simply makes the theory that Fabricius named the butterflies after Swift's character much more likely than the theory that he altered the name of the god Phanes.

One final note: the basic research described in this article took only about an hour's work in a small college library. Why then do so many American baby name books continue to simply repeat one another and say that *Vanessa* is the Greek word for 'butterfly?' Evidently the authors don't know how to do research, or don't have any real curiosity about names, being content to accept the first explanation they find. In other words, they haven't learned anything from the real interdisciplinary experts in the field, people like Leonard R. N. Ashley.

Works Cited

- Ashley, Leonard R. N. *What's in a Name?* Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1989.
- Bailey, Sandra Buzbee. *Big Book of Baby Names & Announcements*. Tucson: HPBooks, 1983.
- The Classic Greek Dictionary*. Chicago: Follett, 1962.
- Consumer Guide Editors. *Unusual and Most Popular Baby Names*. Lincolnwood, IL: Publications International, Ltd., 1988.
- Dictionary of Scientific Biography*. New York: Scribner's, 1971.
- Dunkling, Leslie, and William Gosling. *Everyman's Dictionary of First Names*. London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1983.
- Ferris, Clifford D., and F. Martin Brown. *Butterflies of the Rocky Mountain States*. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1981.
- Hanks, Patrick, and Flavia Hodges. *A Dictionary of First Names*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990.
- Klots, Alexander B. *A Field Guide to the Butterflies*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1951.
- Loughead, Flora Haines. *Dictionary of Given Names With Origins and Meanings*. Glendale, CA: Arthur Clark, 1933.
- Opler, Paul A., and George O. Krizek. *Butterflies East of the Great Plains*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1984.
- Partridge, Eric. *A Dictionary of Traditional First Names*. Ware, England: Wordsworth Editions, 1992.
- Pring, J.T. *The Oxford Dictionary of Modern Greek*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965.
- Ross, Angus, and David Woolley (eds.). *Jonathan Swift*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984.
- Smith, Elsdon C. *Personal Names: A Bibliography*. New York: The New York Public Library, 1952.
- Warden, John. "Introduction." *Orpheus: The Metamorphoses of a Myth*. Ed. John Warden. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1982.
- Wells, Evelyn. *What To Name the Baby*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1946.
- Withycombe, E. G. *The Oxford Dictionary of English Christian Names*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977.