

color is ...

BY JUDE STEWART

Between Red States & Blue States, Royalty & Beggars, Hysteria, Fancy & Revolt:

Purple Bleeds Outside the Lines

To Dye For

A dog emerges streaming from the sea, chewing mollusks, its mouth stained livid purple.

So writes Julius Pollux in the second century B.C. of Hercules' dog, who discovers the fabled purple dyes of Phoenicia and Tyre by going a little heavy on the *escargots aux naturels*. Like so much high-priced pampering today—liposuction, high-colonic enemas—the desirability of the prized dye belied the sausage-factory process that yielded it: the exhausted little snails, expiring in mountains of carcasses; the unholy stink of vats well outside of town—a garlicky, spring-onion scent as fade-resistant as the dye. On the slippery backs of pooped-out snails strode forth the great Roman emperors, purple rippling in their wakes.



KING PURPLE

"You Empty Champagne Bottles!"

A withering but apt designation for students at Cambridge, whose academic dress was, as *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* puts it, "a gaudy purple and silver gown, resembling the silver foil round the neck of a champagne bottle. Very few of these wealthy magnates took honours." Presumably, many nursed magnificent hangovers.



Born to the Purple

A leader born into a ruling dynasty—as contrasted with those who hack-sawed their way to power—can be said to be "born to the purple." The Byzantine empress Zoe coined the term by birthing her son in a room lined from top to toe with a dully brilliant purple stone, porphyry. A litter of scions followed, all named Porphyrogenitos, a tease-magnet name that practically demands a vast royal entourage to quell all the haters.



PURPLE TO THE PEOPLE

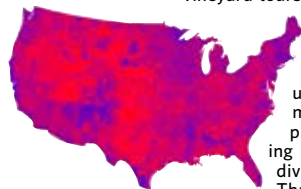
The Mauve Craze

In his 2001 book *Mauve*, author Simon Garfield paints a scene of accidental, super-profitable purple. In 1856 British teen-chemist William Perkin was busy swishing coal tars in test tubes—you know, science stuff—when he stumbled on a handsome, remarkably durable purple dye he dubbed *mauveine*. He had wanted to synthesize artificial quinine to tackle malaria, but defending the British Empire from mosquitoes more or less faded from view when Queen Victoria wore mauve to her daughter's wedding in 1858, and "mauve measles" broke out all 'round London-town. The discovery not only jump-started industrial dye-making as big business, but also represented an early salvo for applied science.



Purple States of America

The 2000 U.S. presidential election boiled down to a bitter color war, "red" states versus "blue." In the December 2001 *Atlantic* article "One Nation, Slightly Divisible," writer David Brooks racked up the differences between red-state and blue-state cultures. To characterize the divide, he settled finally on a mobility metaphor: "Everything that people in my neighborhood do without motors, the people in Red America do with motors. We sail; they powerboat. We cross-country ski; they snowmobile. We hike; they drive ATVs. We have vineyard tours; they have tractor pulls. When it comes to yard work, they have rider mowers; we have illegal aliens."



Even though red signifies left-wing solidarity worldwide, and blue stands for free-market conservative, Americans stuck with their curiously inverted red/blue scheme until deepening rancor after the 2004 elections prompted many Americans to push for a more blended union: a purple America. Spurred by more nuanced graphics of U.S. voting patterns (see the image), citizens realized the red/blue divide was nowhere near as starkly drawn as they'd thought. That may make 2008 the Year of Purple: The site Purple America.com sponsored a nationwide campaign to unite Americans around bipartisan values; *The New York Times*' "Purple States" coverage (www.purplestates.tv) puts citizen journalists with hard-to-pigeonhole politics on the campaign trail. Hundreds of electorally inclined bloggers colored their postings distinctly purple in outlook. Does graphic design matter? You can bet your purple-patchwork America, it does.

Purple Earth Theory

In the latest instance of science delivering accidental poetry, "purple earth theory" suggests that primitive microbes may have used retinal instead of chlorophyll to extract energy from the sun, empurpleing the seas with violet, proto-plant life. As a 2007 *Live-Science* article explains, "Chlorophyll, the main photosynthetic pigment of plants, absorbs mainly blue and red wavelengths from the Sun and reflects green ones, and it is this reflected light that gives plants their leafy color. This fact puzzles some biologists because the sun transmits most of its energy in the green part of the visible spectrum. ... Being latecomers, microbes that used chlorophyll could not compete directly with those utilizing retinal, but [chlorophyll microbes] survived by evolving the ability to absorb the very wavelengths retinal [microbes] did not use." Chalk up another unlikely association for purple: the color of squatter's rights.



Flow'ring Fronds of Purple-osity

For fine exemplars of purpley prose, hit the seed catalogs. Here, a partial list of frofrou plant names with purple flowers:

- Love-in-Idleness
- Maypop
- Twinberry
- Corn Cockle
- Kudzu
- Bird's Foot Violet
- Horsemint
- Zedoary
- Dame's Rocket
- Hound's Tongue
- Sneezeweed
- Milk Vetch



Deathless Purple Prose

No one can spot purple prose like a writer: breathless, frilled, soaked in syrup and rainbows, with doe-eyed poets gazing heavenward. Two writers square off, pro and con, on the subject: In a *New York Times* op-ed piece, Paul West defended purple prose in distinctly fuschia tones: "Purple is not only highly colored prose, it is the world written up, intensified and made pleurably palpable, not only to suggest the impetuous abundance of Creation, but also to add to it by showing—showing off—the expansive power of the mind itself, its unique knack for making itself at home among trees, dawns, viruses, and then turning them into something else: a word, a daub, a sonata."¹ On the con side, T.E. Kalem rebuked Tennessee Williams in *TIME* with fitting terse-ness: "He sometimes ran a purple ribbon through his typewriter and gushed where he should have dammed."²

"It was a dark and stormy night."

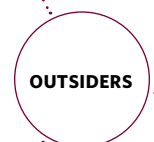
FOOTNOTES:

- ¹ www.bartleby.com/63/79/7579.html
- ² www.bartleby.com/63/83/9183.html



The Purple Shall Govern

When demonstrators protested against apartheid in Cape Town's Greenmarket Square in 1989, the police aimed a water cannon at the crowd and unleashed a juicy surge of purple dye. This virulent hue is used by cops the world over to "tag" protesters for later retribution. In the last 15 years protesters in Hungary, Indonesia, India and Israel have all been purple-soaked. "What about the purple people?" implored a Cape Town editorial the day after the event, which came to be known as the Purple Rain Protest. A bit of graffiti left in the cannon's wake provided an answer: "The purple shall govern."



Queer Matadors ¡Olé!

Mauve shaded from a madly popular color among Victorian-era ladies to a discreet nod from one homosexual to another by the 1890s. Mauve eventually gave way to lavender as the gay *couleur de guerre*, fading even later to pink. In a pleasing coincidence, a *capote* happens to refer to a large, purple-and-yellow cape that a matador uses to lure and mesmerize the bull into fighting. Who's the jefe now, eh? Truman would be beyond tickled pink.



Purple's Two Rhymes

Some lump purple in with orange and silver as a color-word without a natural rhyme in English. But true mavens know purple actually has two rhymes, *curple* and *hirple*. The 18th-century poet Robert Burns mined his Scottish roots in his "Epistle to Mrs. Scott" by strategically employing the word *curple*, a curvily apt synonym for rump. We also have Burns to thank for *hirple's* 15 minutes of literary fame; it means to "walk lamely or hobble, like a hare." Quoth Burns: "November hirples o'er the lea Chill on thy lovely form." (Or on thy lovely curple.)

Womanista

In her 1983 essay collection *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, author Alice Walker (*The Color Purple*) urged black women to frame their own take on feminism, imbued with the twin oppressions of misogyny and racism. She defined the "womanist" movement as one of color value: "Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender."

