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"FEASTING IN EXCESS": A FINGERPRINT PHRASE IN QUOTATIONS OF GREGORY NAZIANZEN ON THE NATIVITY

I came across this (rather useless) [page](#), which contained the curious claim:

In 389AD, St Gregory Nazianzen, one of the four fathers of the Greek Church criticized customs of '*feasting in excess*' and "*dancing*" at Christmas. This criticism arose because these festive excesses were hangovers from the pagan midwinter festivals like Saturnalia when celebrants suspended normal life and pleasure ruled.

The second sentence is the opinion of the writer, who is trying to tie Christmas to paganism somehow. But what is the reference to Gregory?

If we search for "'feasting in excess" "dancing" Gregory Nazianzus' in Google we get a longer phrase, "feasting **to** excess, dancing, and crowning the doors" - note the change from "in" to "to" - from the Daily Telegraph and the [Times Literary Supplement](#) in 2016. The latter is reviewing (mainly) Mark Forsyth, *A Christmas cornucopia : the hidden stories behind our Yuletide traditions*, also 2016, and quoting from it. This in turn seems to derive from Ronald Hutton, *Stations of the Sun*, 2001, which uses the exact same words, and gives a reference to "Golby and Purdue, *Modern Christmas*". But we can jump back to 1902, with W.F.Dawson, *Christmas: Its Origin and Associations*, whose quote is longer still:

against feasting to excess, dancing, and crowning the doors (practices derived from the heathens); urging the celebration of the festival after an heavenly and not an earthly manner.

In turn we find William Sandys in 1833 (*Christmas Carols, ancient & modern*, p.xiii) exactly the same words, but not in quotes, but as Sandys' own words. It is delightful to find, popping up here, the practice of turning indirect speech into direct speech, so common in bogus quotations.

Further back yet, in 1808, we find a quotation at some length in the works of Bishop Hall, although not containing the "excess" bit:

Amongst the rest, that of Gregory Nazianzen is so remarkable, that I may not omit it; as that, which sets forth the excess of joyful respect, wherewith the Ancient Christians were wont to keep this day. " Let us," saith he *, " celebrate this Feast; not in a panegyric but divine, not in a worldly but supersecular manner: not regarding so much ourselves or ours, as the worship of Christ, &c. And how shall we effect this ? Not by crowning our doors with garlands, nor by leading of dances, nor adorning our streets; not by feeding our eyes; not by delighting our ears with songs; not by effeminating our smell with perfumes;

not with humouring our taste with dainties; not with pleasing our touch; not with silken and costly clothes, &c. not with the sparkling of jewels; not with the lustre of gold; not with the artifice of counterfeit colours, &c. let us leave these things to Pagans for their pomps, &c. But we, who adore the Word of the Father, if we think fit to affect delicacies, let us feed ourselves with the dainties of the Law of God; and with those discourses especially, which are fitting for this present Festival." So that learned and eloquent Father, to his auditors of Constantinople.

The reference is to the "Oration upon the Day of the Nativity of Christ". But this itself is a reprint as there is [an edition from 1738](#).

Earlier yet, in 1725, we find in Henry Bourne's *Antiquitates Vulgares*, [p.154](#):

Gregory Nazianzen, in that excellent Oration of his upon Christmas-Day, says, Let us not celebrate the Feast after an Earthly, but an Heavenly Manner; let not our Doors be crown'd; let not Dancing be encourag'd; let not the Cross-paths be adorned, the Eyes fed, nor the Ears delighted, &c. Let us not Feast to excess, nor be Drunk with Wine, &c.

And we can go still further, with the same quotation in the sermons of Hugh Latimer (d. 1555), the protestant Bishop of London burned by Bloody Mary, [here in a 1758 reprint](#), on p.782.

I would guess, therefore, that we are looking at a passage of the sermon of Hugh Latimer, which has been transmitted to us, through a side-channel of quotations and re-quotations for nearly 500 years. It has not been transmitted unaltered, but somehow it has come through.

By contract we can find the NPNF translation of Gregory's *Oration 38: On the Nativity*, [here](#). It seems to have influenced these popular works not at all.

Therefore let us keep the Feast, not after the manner of a heathen festival, but after a godly sort; not after the way of the world, but in a fashion above the world; not as our own but as belonging to Him Who is ours, or rather as our Master's; not as of weakness, but as of healing; not as of creation, but of re-creation.

V. And how shall this be? Let us not adorn our porches, nor arrange dances, nor decorate the streets; let us not feast the eye, nor enchant the ear with music, nor enervate the nostrils with perfume, nor prostitute the taste, nor indulge the touch, those roads that are so prone to evil and entrances for sin; let us not be effeminate in clothing soft and flowing, whose beauty consists in its uselessness, nor with the glittering of gems or the sheen of gold or the tricks of colour, belying the beauty of nature, and invented to do despite unto the image of God; Not in rioting and drunkenness, with which are mingled, I know well, chambering and wantonness, since the lessons which evil teachers give are evil; or rather the harvests of worthless seeds are worthless. Let us not set up high beds of leaves, making tabernacles for the belly of what belongs to debauchery. Let us not appraise the bouquet of wines, the kickshaws of cooks,

the great expense of unguents. Let not sea and land bring us as a gift their precious dung, for it is thus that I have learnt to estimate luxury; and let us not strive to outdo each other in intemperance (for to my mind every superfluity is intemperance, and all which is beyond absolute need), – and this while others are hungry and in want, who are made of the same clay and in the same manner.

VI. Let us leave all these to the Greeks and to the pomps and festivals of the Greeks, who call by the name of gods beings who rejoice in the reek of sacrifices, and who consistently worship with their belly; evil inventors and worshippers of evil demons. But we, the Object of whose adoration is the Word, if we must in some way have luxury, let us seek it in word, and in the Divine Law, and in histories; especially such as are the origin of this Feast; that our luxury may be akin to and not far removed from Him Who hath called us together.

There is probably a more modern translation, but these too have most likely stood forth in a void.

It is interesting to see this alternative form of transmission. Probably the same process is the origin of many a “fragment” in late authors.
