

A Christmas alphabet

A is for the angels that brought tidings of peace and goodwill toward all men and women.

B is for Betjeman, the only poet to introduce into a nativity poem the Dorchester Hotel in Park Lane.

C is for Chesterton the schoolboy, whose poem about a wild-eyed savage ended with a line that was to summarize his future attitude to spiritual matters: "The savage prays to the presence within him that has prompted the heart to pray."

D is for Dickens, who when he looked up at the Christmas tree saw also the tree of Calvary, and imagined that he heard a voice saying: "This, in commemoration of the law of love and kindness....This, in remembrance of Me."

E is for the evangelists Matthew and Luke and the amazing narrative economy with which they compress the events of the Nativity and Epiphany into less than 1,000 words.

F is for the field mice in *The Wind and the Willows*, who sing a carol about the stable at Bethlehem and maintain that the animals present there were the first to cry Nowell.

G is for ghosts, of which Dr. Johnson declared that all argument was against them, but all belief for them.

H is for George Herbert, the seventeenth-century poet, who decided to add his horse to the animals at the crib.

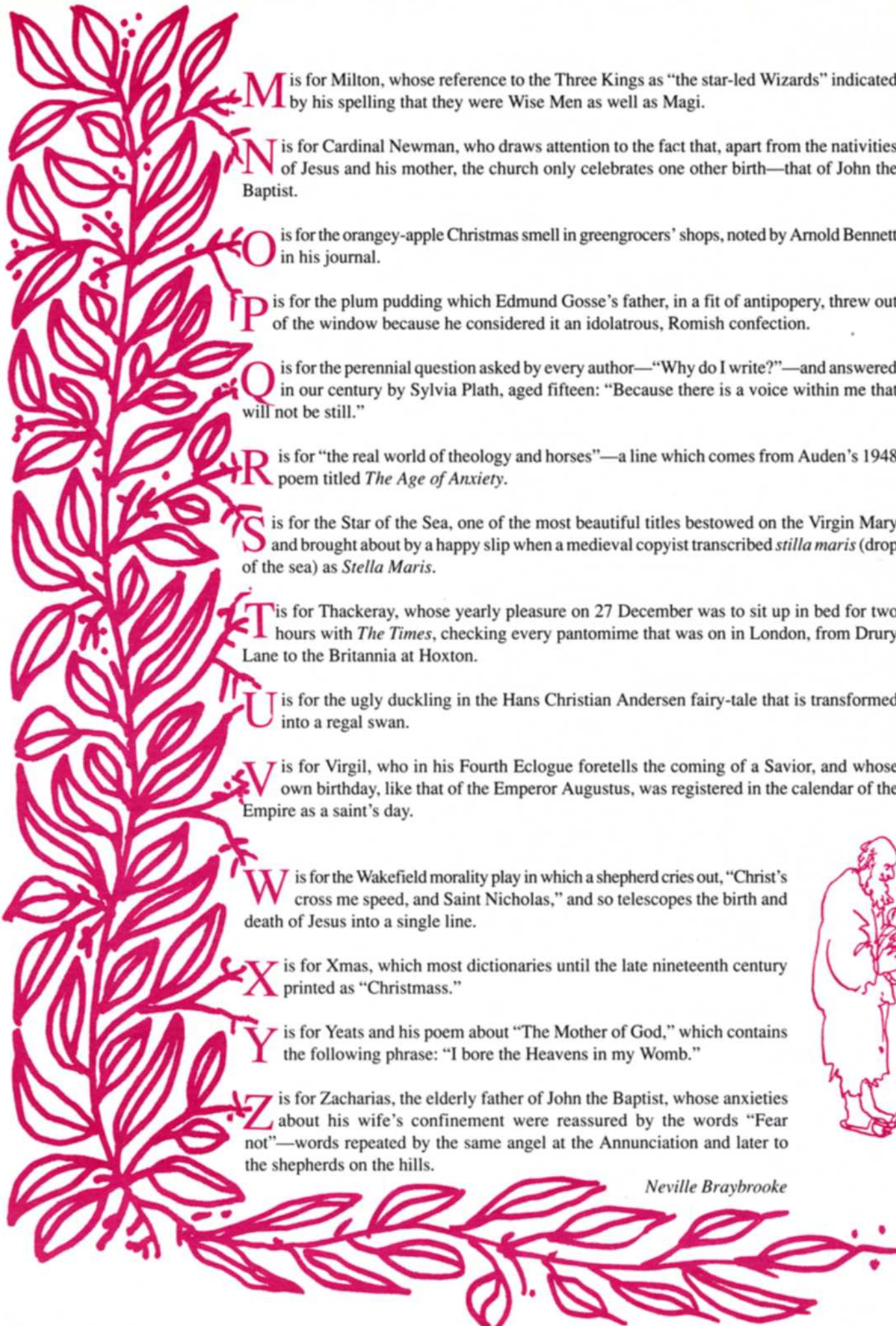
I is for the Incarnation, whose effect on a materialist society is vividly described by Forster in *Howard's End*: "How many of these vacillating shoppers and tired assistants realized that it was a divine event which drew them together?"

J is for Joseph, the foster-father of Jesus, who has often been allowed to fade into the background and about whom there is not even one poem in the *New Oxford Book of Christian Verse*.

K is for Martin Luther King, Jr., who once preached in a winter sermon in London that a street-sweeper should sweep streets as Shakespeare wrote poetry—and then exhorted the congregation: "Be the best, whatever you are."

L is for Lucy, the saint whom the children of Lombardy invoke to have their New Year wishes granted and whom Eliot included in his last published Ariel poem, called *The Cultivation of Christmas Trees*.





M is for Milton, whose reference to the Three Kings as “the star-led Wizards” indicated by his spelling that they were Wise Men as well as Magi.

N is for Cardinal Newman, who draws attention to the fact that, apart from the nativities of Jesus and his mother, the church only celebrates one other birth—that of John the Baptist.

O is for the orangey-apple Christmas smell in greengrocers’ shops, noted by Arnold Bennett in his journal.

P is for the plum pudding which Edmund Gosse’s father, in a fit of antipopy, threw out of the window because he considered it an idolatrous, Romish confection.

Q is for the perennial question asked by every author—“Why do I write?”—and answered in our century by Sylvia Plath, aged fifteen: “Because there is a voice within me that will not be still.”

R is for “the real world of theology and horses”—a line which comes from Auden’s 1948 poem titled *The Age of Anxiety*.

S is for the Star of the Sea, one of the most beautiful titles bestowed on the Virgin Mary and brought about by a happy slip when a medieval copyist transcribed *stilla maris* (drop of the sea) as *Stella Maris*.

T is for Thackeray, whose yearly pleasure on 27 December was to sit up in bed for two hours with *The Times*, checking every pantomime that was on in London, from Drury Lane to the Britannia at Hoxton.

U is for the ugly duckling in the Hans Christian Andersen fairy-tale that is transformed into a regal swan.

V is for Virgil, who in his Fourth Eclogue foretells the coming of a Savior, and whose own birthday, like that of the Emperor Augustus, was registered in the calendar of the Empire as a saint’s day.

W is for the Wakefield morality play in which a shepherd cries out, “Christ’s cross me speed, and Saint Nicholas,” and so telescopes the birth and death of Jesus into a single line.

X is for Xmas, which most dictionaries until the late nineteenth century printed as “Christmass.”

Y is for Yeats and his poem about “The Mother of God,” which contains the following phrase: “I bore the Heavens in my Womb.”

Z is for Zacharias, the elderly father of John the Baptist, whose anxieties about his wife’s confinement were reassured by the words “Fear not”—words repeated by the same angel at the Annunciation and later to the shepherds on the hills.



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