

## History of the Word : Toilette

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Did you know that spiders have their place in history? There's a well-known story of Robert the Bruce: he watched a spider spinning its web and each time a thread broke, the spider set out to make a new one. Inspired, Bruce started again, and persisted until the English were driven from Scotland at the battle of Bannockburn. But I want to stick with the spider for today's word. In French, a spider's web is '*une toile d'araignée*' and in familiar language, the word '*la toile*' is also used for the World-Wide-Web, which you access with your computer. But in earlier times, '*une toile*' was simply any piece of woven material. Back in the eighteenth century for example, ladies covered their clothing with a piece of material before they began attending to their hair, just as a modern hairdresser will drape you with something around your shoulders before going to work with the scissors. Intriguingly, it wasn't only the person's clothing that was covered with '*la toile*', but also the accompanying table, where stood the mirror, the brushes and combs and powder and make-up. We might have called this a dressing-table in English. But the French called the table, and even the room where it stood, '*une toilette*'.

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because of the cloth drapes. And this sense of the word remains today in such phrases as '*eau de toilette*' for perfume or '*une belle toilette*' when someone is immaculately dressed. It was only in the nineteenth century, and probably in the United States, that the word began to be used as a polite euphemism for visiting the lavatory, which the Americans, of course, also called a powder room. So the next time you visit the hairdresser and are cocooned with a protective gown, you'll be able to reflect how one thing in languages, often leads to something completely different.

Thanks for listening.

À bientôt

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