JANUARY, A New Year

What does *January* mean?

January, as we know, is the first month of the year and contains 31 days. The term originated before the year 1000 from Middle English, ultimately deriving from the Latin noun use of *Jānuārius,* equivalent to *Jānus*.

Who was *Janus*?

In ancient Roman culture, *Jānus* was a god of doorways, beginnings, and the rising and setting of the sun. His name comes from the Latin *jānus,* meaning "doorway, archway, arcade."

Fun fact: the closely related Latin word *jānua,* meaning "door, doorway, entrance," ultimately gives us the word *janitor,* which originally referred to a door attendant or porter before evolving to its more familiar sense of "custodian."

There were many gateways in Rome where ceremonial entrances and exits were made, especially for the departure of the army on an expedition. As the god of transitions, Janus is often depicted with two bearded heads that face in opposite directions, looking to both the future and the past.

After 153 BCE, *January* (*mensis Januarius* in Latin) became the first month of the Roman calendar (which we adopted), the figure of Janus a perfect symbol for new beginnings.

What does *Janus-faced* mean?

This ancient deity Janus has found his way into modern English in more ways than one. And as you might expect, his other lexical contributions are not entirely straightforward.

The versatile word *Janus-faced* can refer to someone or something's capricious or seemingly contradictory nature. Or, it can be used with a more negative undertone to describe someone as deceitful and, well, two-faced.

What is a *Janus word*?

The two faces of Janus are also evident in the term *Janus word,* "a word that has opposite or nearly opposite meanings," such as *cleave* and *dust.* (These are also called *contronyms*.)

To *cleave* something can mean to adhere closely to that thing, but it can also mean its opposite: to split, divide, or cut off. As a verb, *dust* can refer to the removal of dust, or the addition of it. (Think *dust the cookies with confectioners' sugar*.)

Duality is embedded into all of Janus's words, including the very language we use to talk about the beginning of the calendar year: *January.*