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was·sail  (wɒs əl, wɒ-sāl)

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n.

1.

a. A salutation or toast given in drinking someone's health or as an expression of goodwill at a festivity.

b. The drink used in such toasting, commonly ale or wine spiced with roasted apples and sugar.

2. A festivity characterized by much drinking.

v. was·sailed, was·sail·ing, was·sails

v.tr.

To drink to the health of; toast.

v.intr.

To engage in or drink a wassail.

[Middle English, contraction of *wæshæil*, be healthy, from Old Norse *ves heill* : *ves*, imperative sing. of *vera*, to be; see **wes-**¹ [in the Appendix of Indo-European roots](#) + *heill*, healthy; see **kailo-** [in the Appendix of Indo-European roots](#).]

was sail·er *n.*

Word History: *Wassail* is an English holiday drink consisting of spiced mulled wine, ale, or some other fermented beverage such as hard cider or mead. The word is also used as a verb: to drink someone's health, especially in the course of traveling around one's neighborhood, singing songs at neighbors' houses and receiving food and drink in return, is to *wassail*—as in the traditional carol "Here We Come A-Wassailing."¶Both the noun *wassail* and its associated verb come from one of the most popular expressions used in medieval England in toasting someone's health. The Middle English toast *Wæshæil!* comes from the Old Norse salutation *Ves heill!* which had been brought to Britain by the invading Danes in the 9th Century AD. The Anglo-Saxons, for their part, had a corresponding salutation, *Wes þū hāl!* which they used as a general greeting—variations of it can be found in *Beowulf* (*Wæs þū, Hroðgar, hāl!* says the young hero when he meets King Hrothgar) and in the West Saxon Gospels (at the Annunciation, the angel Gabriel greets Mary with *Hāl wes þū!*).¶These greetings and toasts literally mean "Be healthy!"—a sentiment that survives in the Modern English toast *To your health!* and in many toasts in other languages, such as the Spanish *Salud!* and the French *Santé!* which both simply mean "health." The Old English *hāl*, incidentally, means not only "healthy" (it is the origin of Modern English *hale*) but also "undamaged, entire" (it is also the origin of the word *whole*).

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Indo-European & Semitic Roots Appendices

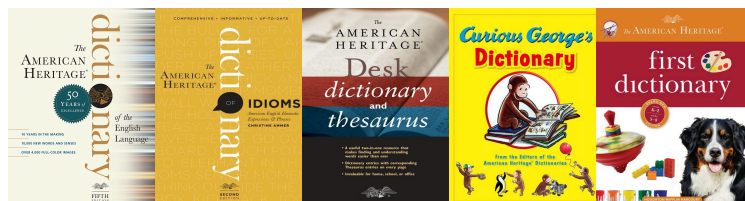
Thousands of entries in the dictionary include etymologies that trace their origins back to reconstructed proto-languages. You can obtain more information about these forms in our online appendices:

[Indo-European Roots](#)

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The Indo-European appendix covers nearly half of the Indo-European roots that have left their mark on English words. A more complete treatment of Indo-European roots and the English words derived from them is available in our [Dictionary of Indo-European Roots](#).

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