ANIMAL NAMES IN THE OED

It has often been observed that the names applied to pets and other animals show a striking level of fluidity. Over time, the proper nouns commonly applied to individual creatures can develop much wider meanings, moving from the specific to the generic, coming to denote genders, breeds, or even entire species. Present-day English contains several of these expanded terms: examples include such colloquial designations as ‘moggy’ or ‘dobbins’, compounds such as ‘jenny wren’ or ‘jackass’, and even terms that have managed to replace the original species name altogether, such as ‘robin’, which overtook the earlier ‘redbreast’ during the late sixteenth century. Nevertheless, it can often be difficult to identify the point at which an animal name has undergone such widening. For this reason, there are a number of instances where the OED is imprecise in dating the emergence of these curious labels, often assigning too late a date to their appearance. Some of these entries are listed below, with a number of witnesses predating the earliest examples given in the dictionary.

Billy goat. While the earliest source in the OED is Thomas Love Peacock’s Gryll Grange (1861), the term can be found in various forms throughout the first decades of the nineteenth century. It appears at numerous points in the work of the Bradford Methodist William Atkinson, usually as a single word: hence one treatise of 1822 attacks Walter Ramsden as ‘a tame Billygoat, led here and there’, while another of 1823 denounces polygamy as ‘the billygoat system, of palming and caterwauling’. Other comparable sources include a mock military memoir of 1823, which has a character ‘jump like a billy-goat’ after receiving ‘a prick in the netherlands with a bayonet’, and a scathing notice of Owen, Prince of Powys, a

play variously attributed to Jane Porter and Samson Penley, which describes an actor as ‘a wandering billy-goat on his hind legs’.\(^4\) James Bell’s poem ‘The Stork’, printed in 1820, likewise has ‘Twas but a simple scar he caught/ Once playing with a billy-goat’.\(^5\) But its earliest usage in print may be a folksong published in 1815: this contains the lyric, ‘she had a lang beard, for aw t’warl like a billy goat’.\(^6\)

**Gib cat.** This term for a male cat, in some cases a neutered male, is an extension of Gib, the name conventionally applied to cats in the late Middle Ages.\(^7\) The *OED* suggests that ‘gib cat’ first appears as a separate form in 1598, when Shakespeare has Falstaff declare himself ‘melancholy as a gib cat’ (*Henry IV*, part 1). This is however antedated by John Jeffere’s *The Bugbears*, an adaptation of Grazzini’s *La Spiritata* (1561), written shortly after its source. In one passage a bogus astronomer describes the ability of witches to ‘pluck/ mony owt of ons chest, the breath owt of ones body/ as it wear an old Gibbe catte’.\(^8\)

**Gill.** The *OED*’s single source for this obsolete name for a mare is Nathaniel Ward’s *Discoliminium* (1650). Nevertheless, it can be traced back at least to the previous century. Four sources from the early sixteenth century employ the term: Skelton’s ‘Elinour Rummyng’ in c.1522 (‘gup gylly/ She could not lye styllly’), Palsgrave’s *Lesclaircissement de la langue francoyse* in 1530 (‘What gyppe gyll with a galde backe’), Heywood’s *Proverbs* in 1546 (‘Gup! with a galled back Gill, come up to supper!’), and William Keth’s anti-Catholic ballad ‘Ty the mare, tom boy’ in c.1550 (‘Gyll now to name her,/ A mare of good mold’).\(^9\) Each of these Gills can be clearly identified as a horse, owing to the accompanying references to ‘gup’ and ‘galled back’: the former is the medieval equivalent of ‘giddy up’, a call to spur on a horse, while the latter describes an outbreak of sores and lesions caused by wearing a saddle for too long a period. The similarity between them also indicates that Gill is proverbial

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\(^6\) Robert Anderson, *Ballads in the Cumberland Dialect* (Wigton, 1815), 56.


by this point. Nonetheless, the term could predate even these texts. An earlier occurrence might be found in the romance Ipomadon, dated to 1390-1400 by its most recent editor.\(^{10}\) The protagonist’s horse is twice named as ‘Gille’, as the narrative describes him carrying ‘be hynde hym bowes & arrowes...for drede of gille’ and stating ‘My hors my sellff kepe I will...Come hedyr to me, gille’. Since this last statement is treated as a cause of particular hilarity, causing the court to ‘loughe...all arighte’ at Ipomadon’s antics, Gille seems to be something other than knight’s charger; this in turn might indicate that it already refers to a humble mare, possibly a cart-horse or farm-horse.\(^{11}\)

Gillot. John Palsgrave’s reference to Gill also has bearing on Gillot, a further, related name for a horse. The OED treats Gillot strictly as a Middle Scots word, defining it as ‘Sc. A mare’, and citing its appearance in Dunbar, Henryson, and the Legends of the Saints in Scottish Dialect. Palsgrave however shows that it was known in sixteenth-century England as well. His French translation for ‘what gyppe gyll’ reads: ‘hey, de par le diable, Gilotte’.\(^{12}\)

Grimalkin. The OED’s first record for this archaic cat’s name is Shakespeare’s Macbeth (c.1606), where the term is spelled as a hyphenate, ‘Gray-malkin’ (1.1.8). This is followed by the dedication to John Taylor’s Works (1630), where the term is spelled as a single word. There are a number of earlier occurrences, however, spelling the name in either fashion. In Dekker’s Satiromastix, entered into the Stationer’s Register in 1601, a character states: ‘Ile name thee no more Mother Red-cap upon paine of death, if thou wilt Grimalkin’.\(^{13}\) The word also appears in Heywood’s How A Man May Choose a Good Wife from a Bad (1602): ‘had not grim Malkin stampt and star’d’.\(^{14}\) The ultimate source of the term, however, or at least the text responsible for popularising it, is William Baldwin’s Beware the Cat, first printed in 1570, although apparently composed 1552-53.\(^{15}\) The name is used throughout to refer to a

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\(^{10}\) Rhiannon Purdie, Ipomadon, EETS o.s. 316 (Oxford, 2001), liv-lx.

\(^{11}\) Ipomadon in drei englischen bearbeitungen, ed. Eugen Kölbung (Breslau, 1889), 183-84, 71.

\(^{12}\) Palsgrave, L’éclaircissement, 224.


\(^{14}\) Thomas Heywood, How a Man May Chuse a Good Wife from a Bad, ed. Adriaan Ernst Hugo Swaen, Materialien zur Kunde des älteren englischen Dramas 35 (Nendeln, 1974), 35.

dead queen of cats: for instance, ‘Grimalkin and her line is as esteemed and hath the same dignity among cats as either the humble or master bee hath among the whole hive’.  

Jackdaw. Although the OED names John Bale’s Romysh Foxe (1543) as earliest witness to this compound, Bale’s text is predated by Rastell’s Interlude of the Four Elements, issued from his own press in 1520. In this play, Sensuall Apetyte performs mock-absolution on Studyous Desyre, stating: ‘For thy soth saws stande up Jack daw/ I be shrew thy faders sone’.  

However, an earlier allusion might occur in the titles of the interlinked treatises Jack Upland and The Reply of Friar Daw Topias, generally dated to the first decade of the fifteenth century. At least, Wendy Scase points out that these pieces might best be considered a ‘jangling...“Jack-Daw” debate’ whose choice of titles refer to the bird.

Jenny. This term for a female ass is in use a little before the OED’s first record. The dictionary cites Richard Surflet’s translation of Estienne’s L’agriculture ou la maison rustique (1600). Yet Henry Porter’s comedy Two Angry Women of Abingdon, printed for William Ferbrand in 1599, contains a clear reference to the term: at one stage a character abuses another with the line ‘what needst thou to care, whipper-jenny’.

Magpie. According to the OED, the earliest record of this compound is the Praxis medicinae uniuersalis (1598), Jacob Mosan’s translation of Christof Wirsung’s medical handbook. The term can however be found in the previous decade. In 1589 it occurs in Mar-Martine, a tract possibly written by Thomas Nashe, which includes the couplet: ‘magpy teacheth them to chat,/ And cookow soone doth hit them pat’.

Nanny goat. The OED cites Arthur Murphy’s farce Upholsterer (1758) as the first recorded instance of this term. Nevertheless there are a cluster of earlier examples in the work of the printer and translator Peter Motteux. Thus Motteux’s rendering of Don Quixote, published in 1712, includes a goatherd addressing one of his flock as ‘you little wanton Nanny...as if the

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Goat understood his Resentments’; later in the same work there is a reference to ‘the pretty Nanny-Goats, who are as sweet and fine as so many Marigolds’. 22 Earlier still, Motteux uses the term again in his continuation of Urquhart’s Rabelais, printed in 1694: ‘Suppose a Herd of Goats were all scampering...put a bit of Eringo into the Mouth of the hindmost Nanny, and they will all stop stock-still’. 23

Polly. This conventional name for a parrot evidently evolved out of the earlier Poll, a form first recorded by Jonson’s Every Man Out of His Humour (1600), as the OED states and other sources confirm. 24 The OED claims, however, that Polly appeared as a distinct form in the 1820s, giving William Hone’s Every-day Book (1822) as the first locatable usage. There are at least three earlier references to Polly. In 1792 James Lackington reports an anecdote in which a devout Methodist family are given a foul-mouthed parrot by a ship’s captain: after the bird repeatedly interrupts their meals and prayers with obscenities, Lackington states ‘the good lady of the house made it a point of conscience to have Polly converted’. 25 This in turn is preceded by Bellamy’s translation of the Fables d’Ésope en quatrains, printed in 1768. 26 The twenty-fifth of Bellamy’s quatrains reads: ‘A Parrot chatter’d all the livelong day;/ An Ape too...Nor Pug, nor Polly, had one grain of wit’. 27 An earlier reference still occurs in 1743, in a letter to the Universal Spectator signed by ‘Noisy Nonsense’. This describes how ‘Lady Syllabub repeated an Epigram, which was given her that Afternoon, on her Parrot’s being sick’; the epigram is then quoted, beginning with the line ‘While Gratia view’d her beauteous Polly dead’. 28

Tom cat. Although the earliest witness in the OED is Benjamin Heath Malkin’s 1809 translation of Gil Blas, the term is at least four decades old by this point. It seems to have been commonplace by the end of the eighteenth century. It is especially pervasive in the satires written by John Wolcot under the name Peter Pindar, beginning with Peter’s Prophecy in 1788, in which the President of the Royal Society is said to be ‘sunk from a Lion to a tame

23 Francois Rabelais, Pantagruel's voyage to the oracle of the bottle being the fourth and fifth books of the works of Francis Rabelais, trans. Peter Motteux (London, 1694), 244 (Wing R107).
25 James Lackington, Memoirs of the Forty-Five First Years (London, 1792), 166.
28 ‘Noisy Nonsense’, Universal Spectator no.763 (4 June 1743), fol. 1v.
Tom Cat’. Other comparable sources produced around the same time include an ‘Epitaph on a Tom Cat’ in the Gentleman’s Magazine for 1794, a reference to ‘three sprats, a tom cat, and a pipkin o milk’ in George Colman the Younger’s Surrender of Calais, first staged at the Haymarket in July 1791, and a curious article in Sporting Magazine dated 1777: this gives account of ‘a shepherd at Beverley, in Yorkshire, for a bet of five pounds...who was to devour a living cat. The one produced was a large black Tom cat’. However, probably the earliest two records, both from Ireland, are dated to 1770 and 1767 respectively. The former is a reminiscence in the Dublin Mercury describing ‘an old lady at Hampstead’ and her fondness for ‘a Tom tabby cat, which always purred to the old lady’s soliloquies’; the latter is a letter by Sterne dated 11 August, in which the author laments, ‘I sit here alone as solitary and sad as a tom cat, which by the bye is all the company I keep’.

Tom-tit. The earliest usage of Tom-tit in the OED is a piece printed by Richard Steele in the Tatler in 1709. Nevertheless, the Tatler piece is predated by a number of sources, stretching back to the middle of the seventeenth century. At the turn of the eighteenth century, a correspondent to the British Apollo in 1708 wonders ‘why there are more Larks than Tom Tits, when Tom Tits frequently hatch 24 young ones at a time’, while a piece in the Observator for 1702 decries new statutes that would outlaw using ‘a Gun to Shoot a Robin Red-Breast or Tom-Tit’. In the 1690s, there are three further occurrences: in 1692 John Dunton’s Athenian Gazette asks ‘why should a Tom-Tit, being the least of Birds, generally have more young Ones than another’; in 1691 the vogue for satirical bird-allegories produces one featuring ‘Tom Tit, Clerk of the Crown’; also in 1691, the comedy The Bragadocio, possibly the work of Henry Higden, has a character declare ‘this Morning I saw a Tom-Tit perching upon a Bough’. Earlier still is the warning in Thomas Cock’s Kitchin-Physic

29 Peter Pindar, Peter’s Prophecy; or the President and Poet (London, 1788), 9; Peter Pindar, ‘Ode to the French’, The Royal Tour and Weymouth Amusements (London, 1795), 43.
31 Dublin Mercury no.544 (17-19 April 1770), fol. 1; Laurence Sterne, Letters, 1765-1768, ed. Melvyn New and Peter Jan de Voogd (Gainesville, FL, 2009), 610.
32 British Apollo or Curious Amusements for the Ingenious no.109 (23-25 February 1708), fol. 1v; Observator, no.71 (16 December 1702), fol. 1v.
33 Athenian Gazette or Casuistical Mercury, no.19 (27 September 1691), fol. 1v; The Tryal and Examination of those two Notorious Criminals the Magpie and Black-bird (London, 1691), sig. A (Wing F2338A); The bragadocio, or, The bawd turn’d Puritan (London, 1691), 47. On the Tryal and Examination, see Stephen Parks, John Dunton and the English Book Trade: a Study of his Career with a Checklist of his Publications (New York, 1976), 202. On the possible authorship of the Bragadocio, Nicoll judges the play ‘somewhat similar’ to
(1676) to ‘take no more notice of thy Phanatick Freeks and frisking Seminalities of thy brain, than if a Tom-tit-mous...had flown over Westminster’, and a reference to ‘the little Tom-Tit-mouse’ in Matthew Stevenson’s satirical almanac Twelve Moneths (1661). But probably the earliest recorded usage occurs in the lengthy georgic ‘My Happy Life’ by Mildmay Fane, Earl of Westmorland, which contains the couplet: ‘The Whitetail, and Tom Tit obey/ Their seasons, bill and tread, then lay’. This text is difficult to date precisely: despite the recent recovery of some five manuscripts of Fane’s verse, the autograph copy of this particular poem is not amongst them. As a result, it cannot be dated any more precisely than 1648, the year in which it appeared in the printed volume Otia Sacra.

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BEN PARSONS

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34 Thomas Cock, Kitchin-physick, or, Advice to the poor (London, 1676), 14 (Wing C4792A); Matthew Stevenson, The twelve moneths, or, A pleasant and profitable discourse of every action, whether of labour or recreation, proper to each particular moneth (London, 1661), 46 (Wing S5510).


36 Tom Cain, Poems of Mildmay Fane, Second Earl of Westmorland (Manchester, 2001), 1, 25.

37 Earl of Westmorland, Otia sacra: optima fides (London, 1648), 137 (Wing W1476).