



This is not a squirrel (see p. 44).
Detail from *Allegorical "Millefleurs" Tapestry with Animals*,
c. 1530–45, Bruges, Belgium. *The Minneapolis Institute of Arts*,
Gift of Mrs. C. J. Martin in Memory of Charles Jairus Martin.

WORD ORIGINS

... and How We Know Them

Etymology for Everyone

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2005

Chapter One

in which the author introduces himself, assumes a confidential tone, and suggests that etymology and entomology are different sciences, or

The Object of Etymology

Jacob Grimm's hours of leisure.—Heifers as moving forces in the progress of etymology.—Pride before the fall.—The simple-minded Nathan Bailey.—Who else if not I?—Past fame counts for nothing.—The search begins.—Words and bugs.

One evening, nearly twenty years ago, I was reading a description of a German dialect. Jacob Grimm, of fairy tale fame, the elder of the two brothers¹ and the founder of just about everything in the science of historical linguistics, used to copy Anglo-Saxon manuscripts before going to bed, but doing so would nowadays be a waste of time, because all Anglo-Saxon, or Old English, texts exist in multiple editions. German dialects have also been discussed in such detail since the Grimms' days that hardly a village remains whose vernacular is not known from a dissertation by a native speaker. It was, therefore, not my goal to copy anything. Like ancient manuscripts, though, tales of rural life told in the peculiar idiom of a remote hamlet have a soothing, even soporific, effect and are good to read after midnight.

In an anecdote recorded in Hesse (the Germans call this province Hessen) and included in the book I had in front of me, the word *Hette* (goat) occurred. Although familiar to me from my earlier studies, it suddenly set me thinking, for at that time I was trying to discover what the Old Scandinavian name *Heiðrún* means ($\delta = th$, as in Engl. *this*; $ú$ means "long *u*" as in Engl. *who*). According to a myth preserved in a medieval Icelandic lay, *Heiðrún* is a goat from whose

udder a never-ceasing stream of mead flows. Each part of *Heiðrún* is transparent (*heið-* [brightness of the sky] or [heath], or [honor], and *rún* [rune]), but the whole makes little sense when applied to a goat. Yet a heavenly goat is a character in many myths, along with she-bears, horses, and harts, so that *Heiðrún*'s name could not be bestowed upon it by chance or by mistake.² "Is it possible," I asked myself, "that *Hette* is in some obscure way related to *Heiðrún*?" If this conjecture had turned out to be correct (it did not), *Heiðrún* would have emerged as meaning "goat," a most appropriate name for a goat.

While searching for the origin of *Heiðrún* and *Hette*, of which only the first interested me seriously, I remembered the English noun *heifer*. At present, it rhymes with *deafier* and *zephyr*, but judging by its spelling, at one time it must have had the vowel of *chafer-safer-wafer*. The original meaning of animal names is often "soft," "furry," "horned," "producer," and the like, and for that reason they can be transferred from one creature to another (this subject is discussed at length in Chapter 10). Perhaps "a young cow" in one language, but "goat" in two others?

I looked up *heifer* in Skeat, the *Oxford English Dictionary*,³ and a few other easily available books. They offered conflicting solutions and gave no references to their competitors or predecessors. Some cited the Old English form *heahfore* and stopped there, others ventured to gloss (that is, translate) *heahfore* as "high-farer" (a puzzling gloss even for a frolicsome calf, let alone a cow that has not calved), but most made do with the unassailable verdict "origin unknown." I kept reading and half a year later came up with a conclusion that was at best half-correct.

It proved to be hard to find any scholarly literature on *heifer*. My adventure began before the Internet became part of everyone's life, but even today I would not have been better off than I was in the eighties, for what do you search for if you are interested in the origin of the word *heifer*? Information is hidden where you least expect to find it. For example, the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* has an entry *HEIFER*, all of which is devoted to the etymology of the word! Surprisingly, the *Britannica* etymology is different

from every other one I have seen. More sources presented themselves almost by chance.

In 1721 Nathan Bailey brought out *An Universal Etymological English Dictionary*, a useful book with a misleading title, because it is not a dictionary whose sole purpose was to discuss word origins, but a dictionary in which words are supplied with concise etymological notes.⁴ Since 1721 most English lexicographers felt it to be their duty to say something about the origin of every word. In most cases, they were not equal to the task. Bailey did not realize that etymology should be left to etymologists, partly because in the eighteenth century, anyone could indulge in etymological speculation and be taken seriously. Neither did his immediate followers, but the harm was done, and we are still paying the price for his naiveté and sticking to the format he invented.

Unlike the rather simple-minded Bailey, modern editors of English dictionaries are heirs to a tradition whose beginning, in England, goes back to the seventeenth century. Guesses on the origin of English words fill thousands of pages. A footnote on the derivation of *dwarf* appears in a lengthy article with the uninformative and uninspiring title "Arica XIV,"⁵ and another article contains a reasonable explanation of why a certain plant is called *henbane*, though its subject is a forgotten god of death.⁶ Since the titles of those excellent contributions do not mention dwarves and poisonous plants, no bibliography of English words will include them, unless someone screens every journal in the world. The authors of etymological dictionaries cannot look through the entire Library of Congress chasing its dusty rainbows; as a result, many crumbs of wisdom will remain undiscovered. It took me half a year to collect an insufficient bibliography of *heifer*, and I shuddered at the thought that the next project would be even more time consuming.

However, etymological dictionaries in which one can find a survey of at least the main ideas on the prehistory of words exist. Goths, once a powerful tribe, were converted to Christianity in the fourth century, and part of the Bible in their native language has come down to us. The best etymological dictionary of Gothic is a model of scholarship:⁷ every word in it is discussed with great care, the literature is

sifted, and the author's opinion concludes each entry. Similar dictionaries have been written for Sanskrit, Ancient Greek, Latin, and several living languages.⁸ The multivolume etymological dictionary of French takes up three shelves.⁹ Its Spanish counterpart is less expansive but equally useful.¹⁰ Among the European languages only English stands out as an etymological orphan. The *Oxford English Dictionary* never neglects the questions of origin, but it was written to present the history rather than the undocumented prehistory of English words. The *heifer* episode filled me with great sadness. I decided that, since no one had taken the trouble to write a dictionary comparable to those used by students of Latin, French, and Spanish enjoy, it was my duty to do so.

Self-inflicted wounds hurt the most. Numerous prefaces contain a statement to the effect that if the author had known how long the work would take, he or she would never have undertaken it. But I had no illusions about the magnitude of the enterprise on which I was embarking. The most formidable task consisted in reclaiming as much as possible of what had been said about the origin of English words, from *grig* (a young eel) to *paling man* (a person who sells eels). And this was to be only the first step, for a good bibliography is not a goal but a means to an end. Those who consult an etymological dictionary expect a solution rather than an exhaustive survey.

All the obvious etymologies were discovered long ago. If after so many efforts the origin of *heifer* is still obscure, unknown, uncertain, or disputable, as dictionaries put it, how good was the chance that I would be able to break the spell? And how many such heifers are there? Will all or most of them come home? It is too early to answer this question, but the bibliography, a labor of many years, is ready. Both *grig* and *paling man* are there, among 13,000 other English words, common and rare, recent and archaic, stylistically neutral and slangy. About 17,000 articles, notes, and reviews in 20 languages have been analyzed and put to use.

Quite naturally, I have not done all the work alone. Over fifty volunteers leafed through popular and semipopular periodicals, about as many smart undergraduates examined linguistic journals, and I skimmed three centuries' worth of articles in every language I know

and in a few languages I don't. No one expected that we would hit a gold mine, but we did. Thought-provoking conjectures, clever parallels, and persuasive solutions turned up by the hundred. They lay buried in stray notes and fugitives magazines with titles like *The Cheshire Sheaf* and *The Nineteenth Century*, in notes on Faroese bird names, and in observations of Dutch school slang. At all times some people believe that they can coax an etymology out of a word by looking hard at it. Amateurs do not like to be told that historical linguistics is an area for specialists, and specialists seldom agree on anything. The journals mentioned above contain tons of etymological chaff, but even erroneous ideas are useful to know, for when dealing with an inscrutable word, people tend to offer the same wrong explanation of its origin over and over again, and it will do them good to learn at the outset that they are wasting their time.

Our team worked with sustained vigor and "clenched resolve," to use Stanhope Worsley's phrase, quoted by Skeat. We spent long hours at the library reading and copying. Illegible microfilms were turned into regular books, permission to copy eighteenth-century journals was asked for and granted, and musty tomes came to my office from all over the world, the pages of many of them uncut. Rumors of a new dictionary began to circulate in the neighboring streets. At least once a month perfect strangers sent me orders for the unwritten first volume, and after I published an article on the etymology of the *F*-word, I became the recipient of e-mails I did not dare answer; but the number of volunteers increased, and each of them was exposed to a crash course on etymology.¹¹ It was during one such session that the idea of this book occurred to me. As an author, I had already experienced a few moments of ultimate satisfaction. A copy of my book on Scandinavian linguistics had been stolen from an exhibit at the Faculty Club (a unique case, my publisher assured me), and my other book was twice chosen by students as a Christmas gift (both times I autographed it). I could certainly hope for a larger audience with a subject like etymology.

However, there was a problem. Most people who expressed their interest in my work were unable to distinguish between etymology and entomology. Some said *etymiology*, which added philosophical

or medical dimensions to the science I study. As is known, entomology is all about insects. Etymology also deals with them, but in its own way. For example, the origin of the word *bug* has bothered (one might even say bugged) researchers for decades. However, despite some overlap, etymology and entomology should be kept separate. I was surprised to discover how well everyone remembered what *entomology* meant and how they still thought that I was an entomologist. Ignorant of the causes of the confusion, I ascribed it to some twist of the Midwestern mentality, incomprehensible to an outsider. One can therefore imagine my joy when in looking through the journal *College English*, I ran into an article by James T. Barrs, who in 1962 was an Associate Professor of English at Northeastern University, Boston.¹² This is the beginning of his article.

The title of one of my television lectures over Boston's educational station WGBH-TV back in 1958 was "Folk Etymology." But somewhere along the line the title was garbled, and it appeared on the Station's printed and circulated program as "Folk Entomology." Now, I don't propose to discuss on this occasion the place of insect-study in linguistics; but since the word *entomology* has appeared in the ointment, so to speak, let's look at it for a moment. Its main part is the Greek word *éntomos*, which means "insect" or, literally, "something cut in"—the main part, in turn, of *éntomos* is *tom*, whose root means "to cut or segment;" indeed, the *sect* of the word *insect*, from Latin, means "cut" too.

It appeared that at least on one coast, the confusion is the same as in the state of Minnesota. I realized that I was in good company. *Etymology*, like *entomology*, goes back to Ancient Greek. *Étumos* means "true," and *étumon* referred to the true, or original, meaning of a word. The noun *etumología* has also been recorded.¹³ In the next chapter, it will be shown that the true, or original, meaning of a word is an ambiguous concept, but the etymological ointment contains no fly. Fortified with this knowledge, we can now turn to the history of etymology, its principles, and its methods.

Chapter Two

in which another important distinction, this time between words and things, is made, or

The Thing and the Sign

The day's eye.—Adam in Paradise.—Plato in Greece.—Socrates, Cratylus, and Hermogenes have a talk.—The knowledge of things cannot be derived from their names.—The Greeks' ignorance of foreign languages.—Language and fashion.—"People create."—St. Cecilia and her name.—*Homo* and *humus*, *god* and *good*.

The word *daisy* first surfaced in a manuscript going back to the year 1000, that is, to the time about two centuries after the emergence of the earliest texts in the English language.¹ It had to be coined before 1000, of course, to get into the manuscript, but probably after 450, the date given for the invasion of Britain by Germanic (or Teutonic, to use an old-fashioned term) tribes, since no word like *daisy* has been recorded on the continent. During the period to which we now refer as Old English, people called the daisy *dæges ēage* (pronounced approximately as 'day-ez éay-e, with *ea* as in the French name *Réamur*).² *Dæges ēage* was a phrase that meant "day's eye," either because the daisy resembles the sun (which is indeed the eye of the day) or because it covers the yellow disk in the evening and opens it in the morning.

Who coined this remarkable word? A child discovering the world and, Adam-like, creating naïve and beautiful metaphors?³ Or a farmer who needed a new plant name and used the resources of his mother tongue? The poetry of the Anglo-Saxons and related tribes was full of circumlocutions like *day's eye* (sun); in medieval Scandinavia they were called kennings. But the person who was the first to say *dæges ēage* need not have been a poet: long exposure to kennings and the