

Eliot's Naming of Cats

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Abstract

Most of the names of the cat characters in T. S. Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* are of the "peculiar, and more dignified" type, rather than everyday names, and depend either on sound or on meaning, occasionally on both. For nonsense names, Eliot was influenced by Edward Lear.

Of T. S. Eliot's poetry Hugh Kenner has written: "... scholarship has barely omitted to scrutinize a line (unless perhaps 'jug jug jug' ...)" (ix). An exception to this, however, has recently come to my attention: despite the enormous popularity of *Cats*, little attention has been paid to the genesis of Eliot's cat names in *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*. Although this book was not published until 1939, an early version was announced by Faber and Faber, Eliot's publishers, in the spring of 1936 as "Mr Eliot's Book of Pollicle Dogs and Jellicle Cats as Recited to Him by the Man in White Spats" (Ackroyd 251). Clearly, this "Man in White Spats" was "Bustopher Jones in white spats" of the present *Old Possum's Book* (T. S. Eliot 45).

In "The Naming of Cats" Eliot discusses the principles of naming cats: a cat must have, first, an everyday name; second, a "name that's peculiar, and more dignified"; third, a name "that no human research can discover—/But THE CAT HIMSELF KNOWS, and will never confess" (1). The "everyday names" may be names also used for persons, such as Peter or George, or perhaps classical names, like Plato or Demeter; the "peculiar... and more dignified names" are invented by Eliot, mostly on the principles of sound or word association: "Munkustrap, Quaxo, or Coricopat, / ... Bombalurina, or else Jellylorum ..." (1). Most of the names used by Eliot in *Old Possum's Book* and elsewhere are of this "peculiar, and more dignified" type.

Let us take up "Jellicle" and "Jellylorum." In a letter to his godson, Tom Faber (January 20, 1931), Eliot describes and sketches "Lilliecat" or "Jellylorum," an imaginary cat (Valerie Eliot 7). "Jellylorum" may be related to "Jellicle." Eliot's invented words "Pollicle" and "Jellicle"

for dogs and cats, respectively (17, 19), are reminiscent of Edward Lear's invented words, such as "runcible" (not, strictly speaking, an invented word but one used by Lear as a nonsense word). Eliot, according to Peter Ackroyd, "considered Lear to be a great poet" (251), so it is plausible that, in inventing nonsense words and names, he was influenced by Lear. The *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* gives the following definition of *runcible*:

r[uncible] spoon kind of fork for pickles curved like a spoon and having three broad prongs (one with a sharp edge). XIX [century]. First used by Edward Lear as a nonsense word in *r[uncible] cat*, *r[uncible] hat*, *r[uncible] spoon*; supposed to be alt. of *rouncival*, which has been used in many senses of obscure origin, and has been identified with the place-name *Roncesvalles* (*Rouncevaux*). (777)

Whether Eliot was aware of this derivation, or whether he simply imitated the sound of *runcible* because of his admiration for Lear, I do not know. The suffix *-icle* (*-ical*) forms adjectives from nouns and seems to mean "having the character of," as in *spherical*, *clerical*, etc. "Jellicle" would hence mean "jelly-like," which does not seem at first to fit here; we are told that "Jellicle Cats are black and white, / Jellicle Cats are rather small ... Jellicle Cats are roly-poly ... " (17). Perhaps they reminded Eliot of jellybeans. "Jellylorum" is also reminiscent of "Cockalorum," which is defined in *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* as "a self-important little man." Jellylorum might be a self-important black-and-white cat, although in Eliot's sketch in the letter he is spotted.

In "The Old Gumbie Cat," the cat's name, *Jennyanydots*, must refer to her coat pattern, which is described as "of the tabby kind, with tiger stripes and leopard spots" (5). What, however, is a "Gumbie Cat"? This word sounds like "gummy," and indeed the cat sticks, or sits, in the same place all day long. "She sits and sits and sits and sits—and that's what makes a Gumbie Cat!" (5)

Probably Eliot's most famous Practical Cat is "Macavity, the Mystery Cat." "Macavity" may derive simply from a need to have a rhyme with "gravity": "he breaks the law of gravity ..." (37). In a letter to Frank Morley, Eliot reveals that Macavity is modelled on Sherlock Holmes' archenemy Moriarty: "I have done a new cat, modelled on the late Professor Moriarty but he doesn't seem very popular: too sophisticated perhaps ..." (Valerie Eliot 8). Both Macavity (in the last line of the

poem) and Moriarty (in "The Final Problem," Doyle 330) are described as "the Napoleon of Crime."

A few other names, such as "Growltiger" and "Griddlebone," are obvious and are based on meaning rather than sound. (The Lady Griddlebone is a tasty morsel.) "Mr. Mistoffelees" is a variant of "Mephistopheles." "Old Deuteronomy" is an appropriate name for a cat that has "lived a long time ... many lives in succession" (25). "Skimbleshanks" is descriptive of the cat's appearance, and "Cat Morgan" of the cat's piratical nature. "Bustopher" must be a blend of "Christopher" and "Buster." "Gus" is a human name. "Mungojerrie," "Rumpelteazer," and "The Rum Tum Tugger" seem to have been invented for the sound, but the last two have meaning-connotations as well. "Rumpelteazer" suggests a cat with tail held high, while "Rum Tum Tugger" sounds vaguely piratical.

Were any of the Practical Cats based on real cats of Eliot's, and how did Eliot name his cats? They had "names like Pettipaws, Wiscus and George Pushdragon ... " (Ackroyd 251). "Pettipaws" suggests "little paws," "George Pushdragon" perhaps a cat that pushes to obtain a comfortable place on a sofa, while "Wiscus" seems to be a variant of "Whiskers." Eliot wrote in another letter to Tom Faber:

Its name was MIRZA MURAD ALI BEG but I said that was too big a name for such a small flat, so its name is WISKUSCAT. But it is sometimes called The MUSICAL BOX because it makes a noise like singing and sometimes COCKALORUM because it looks like one. (Have you ever seen a Cockalorum? Neither have I). (Valerie Eliot 7)

In conclusion, Eliot's cat names seem to be derived partly from meaning and partly from sound; sometimes there is a blend of the two, or Lear-like words and blends may be used. His real cats seems to have been named on the same principles as his imaginary cats, but the imaginary names are, as one would expect, more imaginative. They depend more on sound and less on meaning than did the names of the real cats, and there is a swashbuckling flavor about many of them.

Works Cited

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ANS NAME SPOTTERS

Myra J. Linden, 290 Sunrise Drive, Apt. 3-L, Key Biscayne, FL 33149, watches running magazines for names of *Mile Runs*. (See *Names* 35 [1987]:138.) Last fall, she notes, the *Market Street Mile* was run in Frederick, MD (*Running Times*, March 1990) and a race called the *Miracle Mile* took place in New York City (*East Coast Runner*, March 1990)

Anne M. Avakian, 2727 Parker Street, Apt. H, Berkeley, CA 94704, took note of the first names of ANS members as listed in ANS Bulletin No. 82. She discovered that *John*, with 33 instances, is the most popular, followed by *William* (20) and *James* (17). Among female members, *Anne*, *Anne*, or *Anna* leads, but with only 7, and *Elizabeth* has 6. Ms. Avakian notes that the relative age of ANS members probably accounts for the paucity of names like *Michael* and *Jessica*.