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COLLIE AND CHAUCER'S 'COLLE'

The origins of the word collie are obscure. Various possible derivations have been advanced over the past two centuries, from the word coaly or coal-black, to coll in the sense of cunning, to the Scots Gaelic word cuilean or whelp.¹ A further theory cites colley, a dialect term for a 'certain Highland sheep', whose name was supposedly transferred over time to the dog used to herd it.² While each of these proposals has its strengths and weaknesses, one misconception surrounding the word can be fairly decisively ruled out. This is the pervasive assumption that collie is related to the medieval pet-name Colle. Such a conclusion is at least as old as John Jamieson's dictionary of Scots English, where the 'vulgar name for a shepherd's dog' is linked, albeit tentatively, to the fact that 'Coll appears to have been a common name for a dog' in the later Middle Ages.³ After Jamieson, the same idea is restated with increasing confidence by a number of nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars, working both in the fields of lexicography and natural history: thus Ernest Weekley sees the derivation from Colle as 'most probable', while Eric Partridge argues that this 'etymology is the correct one' and unilaterally rules out other alternatives.⁴ The possibility that Colle is the etymon of the breed-name has also made its way into more recent scholarship. While it is not given by Onions or Ayto, who both prefer coaly, the dog-name is cited by Ernest Klein as a

¹ For coaly, see Walter W. Skeat, An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language (Oxford, 1910) and Eric Partridge, Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English (London, 1966); for coll meaning 'fox-like in form or disposition' see Henry H. Gibbs, 'Col In Col-Fox, Col-Tregetour, etc.', N&Q, series 5, i (21 February 1874): 141-42; for cuilean, see H. Krebs, 'Collie-Dog and its Derivation', N&Q, series 9, viii, 11 (18 August 1903): 309, William Burnley Lockwood, 'Collie and porbeagle: Two Celtic Loans in English', Bwletin Y Bwrdd Gwybodau Celtaidd 26 (1976): 411-13.

² See T.C. Turner, 'Scotch Collies and Sheep Dogs', Art and Archaeology 9 (1919): 83-85 (84); Hugh Dalziel, The Collie: Its History, Points, and Breeding (London, 1889), 1; Hugh Dalziel, The Collie as a Show Dog, Companion and Worker (London, 1904), 4.

³ John Jamieson, An Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language (Edinburgh, 1808), sig. Kk v.

⁴ Ernest Weekley, An Etymological Dictionary of Modern English (London, 1921), 333; Eric Partridge, Name Into Word: Proper Names that Have Become Common Property (London, 1950), 111. See also Edward C. Ash, Dogs: Their History and Development (London, 1927), I, 274; Ferelith Hamilton and Arthur Jones, The World Encyclopedia of Dogs (New York, 1971), 67.

likely origin of collie.⁵ The OED entry for collie also lists Colle as a possible root, although points out that all proposed origins are equally conjectural.

But what makes this connection problematic is that discussions tend to focus on one source alone as evidence of its medieval usage. From Jamieson to the OED, Chaucer is usually given as the lone witness to Colle as a medieval dog's name. The relevant passage comes at the climax of the Nuns' Priest's Tale, as the fox seizes Chauntecleer and is pursued by the entire farmyard:

Ran Colle oure dogge, and Talbot and Gerland,
And Malkyn, with a dystaf in hir hand;
Ran cow and calf, and eek the verray hogges,
So fered for the berkyng of the dogges.⁶

While the passage is fairly explicit about the identity of Colle, it says comparatively little about the nature of 'dogge' the name actually describes. There is, for instance, nothing to indicate the specific breed Chaucer has in mind, or even its probable gender. Nevertheless, its placement in the context of a farm has allowed commentators to assume that it refers to a dog used in husbandry, and might therefore be the same breed later called collie. While such an assumption underpins most of these discussions, it is at points directly stated. Hence in her recent monograph on medieval pet-keeping, Kathleen Walker-Meikle regards Colle as 'a reference to the herding collie landrace'.⁷ Stephen Knight reaches a similar conclusion: although he reflects that 'Talbot and Gerland are rather aristocratic dogs' names, traditional for hunting dogs', he places Colle in the 'humble' world of farming and livestock.⁸

Attractive though this idea is, it runs into problems when the scope of the inquiry is expanded beyond Chaucer. It is certainly true that Colle is a relatively common dog-name in medieval and early modern sources, but its usage does not seem to have been confined to sheepdogs in the way that these readings suggest. When further instances of the name are examined, this point becomes clear. After Chaucer the earliest allusion to the name occurs in the mid fifteenth century, as it appears in the satirical ballad 'The Five Dogs of London'. The 'Five

⁵ C. T. Onions, G.W.S. Friedrichsen, and R.W. Burchfield, The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology (Oxford, 1966); John Ayto, Bloomsbury Dictionary of Word Origins (London, 1990), 119-20; Ernest Klein, A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language (Amsterdam, 1966): 1:313.

⁶ Chaucer, Nun's Priest's Tale, 3383-86, Riverside Chaucer, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Oxford, 2008), 260.

⁷ Kathleen Walker-Meikle, Medieval Pets (Cambridge, 2012), 16.

⁸ Stephen Knight, 'The Nun's Priest's Tale', Essays on the Art of Chaucer's Verse, ed. Alan T. Gaylord (London, 2001), 407-32 (430).

Dogs' can be dated with a degree of precision: the ballad itself was apparently mounted before the London residence of the Bishop of Salisbury during the night of 19 September 1456, with each of its verses set in the severed head of a dog.⁹ In the verses themselves 'Colle' is given as the name of the 'primus canis londonie', the first of the unfortunate animals. A few decades after this macabre episode, 'Colle' appears in a unique list of 'the names of all maner of houndis after the a.b.c.', appended to a late fifteenth-century manuscript of Edward of York's Master of Game (c.1414).¹⁰ While the current whereabouts of the manuscript are unknown, as it was sold to an anonymous buyer at Christie's in January 2006, it is usually dated to c.1460-80.¹¹

Moving into the Tudor period, 'Colle' provides the punch line for one of John Rastell's Hundred Mery Tales, a jest-book issued from his own press in c.1529. The story in question concerns a bishop who attempts to teach a boy elementary logic: he tells the boy 'Noye had thre sonnes, Sem, Came, and japhete', before posing the question 'who was Japhetes father'. The pupil cannot answer, and is sent home. His father, seeing his son's difficulty, offers a homelier parallel: 'Thou knowest well, Colle my dogge hathe these iii. whelpes, Ryg, Trygge and Tryboll. Muste nat all my dogges nedes be syre to Tryboll?' As a result of this clarification, when the boy returns to school and is asked again who was father to Japheth, he responds 'Colle my fathers dogge'.¹² In 1567, 'Cole' features amongst the hunting pack that turns against Actaeon in Arthur Golding's version of the Metamorphoses. Translating lines 3.206-18 in Ovid, Golding writes: 'His houndes espyde him where he was, and Blackfoote first of all...And Tempest best of footemanshippe in holding out at length,/ And Cole and Swift, and little Woolfe, as wight as any other'.¹³ The name is a probably an uninflected version of Colle. Since Golding includes in this passage several established English names as well as literal translations, and 'Cole' is only an approximate version of Ovid's Melaneaus ('Dark-coloured'), it is most likely a further witness to the English dog-name.¹⁴

⁹ Rossell H. Robbins, Historical poems of the XIVth and XVth Centuries (New York, 1959), 189-90. On the episode, see Wendy Scase, 'Strange and Wonderful Bills: Bill-Casting and Political Discourse in Late Medieval England', New Medieval Literatures 2 (1998): 225-47 (236).

¹⁰ David Scott-Macnab, 'The Names of All Manner of Hounds: A Unique Inventory In A Fifteenth-Century Manuscript', Viator 44 (2013): 339-368 (357).

¹¹ See Rare Book Review 33.1, February/March 2006: 20.

¹² John Rastell, A. C. Mery Talys, in Shakespeare Jest-books, ed. W. Carew Hazlitt (London, 1864), 98-99.

¹³ Arthur Golding, Ovid's Metamorphoses, ed. John Frederick Nims (New York, 1965), 68-69.

¹⁴ Anthony Brian Taylor, 'Arthur Golding and the Elizabethan Progress of Actaeon's Dogs', Connotations 1 (1991): 207-33 (209-11).

In the following century, 'Good-Cole' appears in the royalist pamphlet A New Bull-Bayting (1649). The name is given to one of the dogs set on Old Noll 'the Bull of Ely', an obvious caricature of Cromwell: 'Here's another grizly Cur of the same breed; Set him on.... Come along Good-Cole; how he fawns, as if he would suck Eggs'.¹⁵ While Cole might refer to Thomas Cole (1622-81), a young but leading member of the Hampshire commission conspicuous for his Puritanism, it is doubtless playing with the similarity between Cole's surname and the common dog-name; at least other dogs in the text have such conventional appellations as 'Towzer' and 'Archy'.¹⁶ Finally, in 1685, 'Cole' appears on a list of dog's names and their Latin counterparts in the Nomenclatura clericalis, a student glossary compiled by the Northallerton lawyer George Meriton.¹⁷ On the list Cole is glossed as 'Asbolus' ('Soot'). While this name is also taken from Ovid (Metamorphoses 3.222), it seems unlikely that Meriton is simply emulating Golding, given that his pairing of classical and English names differs from that of the earlier writer.

Although these sources are perhaps most striking for the varying degrees of affection and cruelty they demonstrate, they are no less revealing on the question of breed. Four of these sources are relatively explicit about the type of dog they associate with the name Colle, and reasonable conjectures can be made about the remaining two. Most of the texts are clearly referring to hunting dogs of some form, as they connect Colle with the pursuit of quarry. Hence the list in the Master of Game places Colle specifically amongst the 'houndis names' rather than in any of the other categories it offers: there are no similar names among the 'tereris names' or 'greyhoundis names'.¹⁸ Likewise, Golding's Cole is obviously a hunting dog, set as he is amongst Actaeon's pack that 'ouer hill and dale in hope of pray doe clyme'. While Meriton is far less specific, listing the name under the general heading 'Of Doggs', he also seems to have the same sort of animal in mind: the fact that he 'translates' the term with a name from Ovid is at least suggestive of this point. The other texts add details of a different character, identifying Colle by breed rather than function. The most explicit of all is Rastell:

¹⁵ A New bull-bayting, or, A Match play'd at the town-bull of Ely by twelve mungrills (London, 1649), 9 (Wing N587).

¹⁶ See Christopher Durston, Cromwell's Major-Generals: Godly Government During the English Revolution (Manchester, 2001), 62; Basil Duke Henning, The House of Commons, 1660-1690 (London, 1983), 105.

¹⁷ George Meriton, Nomenclatura clericalis, or, The young clerk's vocabulary in English and Latine (London, 1685), 175-77 (Wing M1807). On Meriton, see Ralph Thoresby, The Diary, ed. Joseph Hunter (London, 1830), II, 426.

¹⁸ Scott-Macnab, 'The Names of All Manner of Hounds', 357-68.

in the jest, the boy's father starts the lesson by 'call[ing] his spanyels before hym'.¹⁹ A Bull-Baying also presents Good-Cole in similar terms, describing his mother as 'a Spannel Bitch'.

Of the six, Colle of the 'Five Dogs' proves the most cryptic, and so warrants slightly lengthier consideration. It is clear from Robert Bale's chronicle that these 'certein dogges hedes with scriptures in their mouthes' were some sort of protest against Richard of York: at least, Bale connects their appearance with 'the Duk of York being ther than lodged in the Bisshop of Salisbury place'.²⁰ While there is some debate over what exactly triggered the gruesome spectacle, with theories ranging from acrimony between the Duke and the court, to the conduct of his followers in Wales, to the aftermath of a riot against Italian merchants, it seems most likely to be a comment on the duke's treatment of his household.²¹ Scattergood suggests that the heads represent 'servants who had been sacrificed to his ambitions', a verdict borne out by the verses themselves: Colle, for instance, is made to lament 'My mayster ys cruell and can no curtesye', while Slugge is given the lines 'Wat planet compellyd me, or what signe,/ To serue þat man that all men hate?'.²² If this reading is correct, for the identification between dogs and servants to function, Colle and the others must have belonged to a domestic rather than working milieu. The text therefore connects the name with dogs attached to a household, possibly even kept as pets.

Ultimately, these sources show little evidence that medieval and early modern culture connected the name Colle with dogs used in herding. On the contrary, three of the texts directly link Colle with hunting, two assign the name to spaniels, and one allocates it to a household dog. It might even be possible that all six have the same sort of dog in mind, given that spaniels were kept in the period as both lap-dogs and hunting dogs: hence Malory can use the simile 'fawnyng as a spanyel', while Edward of York can devote an entire chapter to the breed's usefulness in retrieving and tracking game.²³ Even Chaucer's Colle begins to look doubtful as a herder of livestock in light of this: he is more likely to be a pet of some sort, if not also a spaniel, associated as he is with the widow's daughter Malkyn and the affectionate

¹⁹ Rastell, A. C. Mery Talys, 98.

²⁰ Robert Bale, Chronicle, in Six Town Chronicles of England, ed. R. Flenley (Oxford, 1911), 144.

²¹ See Ralph A. Griffiths, The Reign of King Henry VI: the Exercise of Royal Authority 1422-1461 (Berkeley, CA, 1981), 796; Michael Hicks, Warwick the Kingmaker (Oxford, 1998), 130; Rossel Hope Robbins, 'The Five Dogs of London', PMLA 71 (1956): 264-68.

²² V.J. Scattergood, Politics and Poetry in the Fifteenth Century, 1399-1485 (London, 1971), 178.

²³ Sir Thomas Malory, Le Morte Darthur, 17.4, ed. H. Oskar Sommer (London, 1889), 649; Edward of York, Master of Game: the oldest English book on hunting, ed. William A. Baillie-Grohman and F. Baillie-Grohman (London, 1909), 119-21.

phrase 'oure dogge'. At any rate, the evidence is against Colle being the prototype of collie, as the name is routinely associated with breeds and spheres of activity beyond the world of husbandry. Although there is no guarantee that any of the other proposed etymons are any more valid, collie is on balance unlikely to stem from Colle.

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