“Watte vocat”: Human and Animal Naming in Gower’s Visio Anglie

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Although it was not long ago that the Vox Clamantis could be termed the “least read” or most “neglected” of Gower’s major works, the text’s fortunes have undergone a radical upheaval over the last decade.[[1]](#endnote-1) In particular, the Visio Anglie which comprises its first book, and which was probably a later addition, has commanded increasing notice: as Maura Nolan states, this “vicious beast allegory” has drawn “the lion’s share” of discussion of Gower, a judgment echoed by Kathryn McKinley, Kim Zarins and others.[[2]](#endnote-2) Yet even against such growing critical favoritism, one passage in the Visio stands out for the attention it has garnered. This is the list of names Gower gives while describing the depredations of the 1381 rebels, citing “Watte,” “Thomme,” “Symme,” “Bette,” and others as perpetrators in the chaos. The sequence has been quoted with such frequency that it has almost gained a life of its own: as early as the seventeenth century it began to be routinely extracted from the rest of the poem, with the antiquaries Weever and Fuller isolating it to show “rebellious insurrection . . .to the life exprest.”[[3]](#endnote-3) It proved similarly popular throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and even now remains a central point of reference in studies of Gower and the revolt alike.[[4]](#endnote-4)

However, despite the copious analysis it has received, important questions still hang over this collection of proper nouns. Particularly unclear is why Gower should have placed these specific names in this part of his text, and why he chose to insert a group of ostensibly human forenames into the setting of a beast allegory. Perhaps owing to the treatment of the passage as a self-contained unit, most interpretation tends to place the names outside the symbolic framework Gower has constructed, treating them as allusions to human participants. Yet, as this article hopes to demonstrate, Gower’s choice of names can not only be reconciled with his allegory but can be seen as an important element within it. At their simplest level, they provide a vital hinge for his analogies, a readymade point at which animality and historical reality come into contact; they also serve as a potent satiric resource, allowing Gower to drive home his verdict on the rebels and their destruction. But understanding Gower’s selection of names also has onomastic as well as purely aesthetic implications. As will quickly become apparent, his use of these terms sheds light on medieval language more widely, giving direct insight into the appellations medieval culture thought appropriate for animals, and into the attitudes implicit in these choices. In particular, it serves as a corrective to some engrained assumptions about animal naming in the period, dispelling ideas that have managed to weather even the recent “animal turn” in medieval studies.[[5]](#endnote-5) This paper will tackle the text on both of these fronts, offering a fresh reading of Gower’s catalogue of forenames both in terms of its functions for the text and in terms of the larger naming practices it reflects.

Gower’s list of names appears in the eleventh chapter of the Visio. It occurs after its narrative has reimagined the rebels as pigs, foxes, birds, frogs, flies, and other beasts, and pictured each species wrenching free from its natural station: dogs break their chains and are no longer content to eat at their masters’ tables, poultry commingle with predatory owls, and cats join with foxes to break into storerooms and gaols. Indeed, the names act as something of a capstone to these violations, merging their various disparate rebellions into a grand explosion of noise, confusion, and violence:

Watte vocat, cui Thomme venit, neque Symme retardat,

Bette que Gibbe simul Hykke venire iubent:

Colle furit, quem Geffe iuuat, nocumenta parantes,

Cum quibus ad dampnum Wille coire vouet.

Grigge rapit, dum Dawe strepit, comes est quibus Hobbe,

Lorkyn et in medio non minor esse putat:

Hudde ferit, quos Iudde terit, dum Tebbe minatur,

Iakke domos que viros vellit et ense necat:

Hogge suam pompam vibrat, dum se putat omni

Maiorem Rege nobilitate fore:

Balle propheta docet, quem spiritus ante malignus

Edocuit, que sua tunc fuit alta scola.[[6]](#endnote-6)

(Watte calls out, Thomme goes to him, nor does Symme hesitate, Bette and Gibbe as one bid Hykke to come: Colle runs wild, Geffe helps him, causing trouble, Wille vows to join with them both in devastation. Grigge snatches, as Dawe screeches, Hobbe is their companion, and Lorkyn thinks no less to be in the midst of the fray: Hudde strikes at those whom Judde tramples, as Tebbe menaces, Jakke demolishes houses and men, and slaughters with a sword: Hogge flaunts his pomp, while he thinks himself to be superior in nobility than any king: Balle the prophet teaches them, as an evil spirit educated him before, and then fabricates his profound learning.)

At their most immediate level, these names are obviously drawn from the corpus of common forenames in medieval English culture. With the exception of the surname of the agitator John Ball, all are hypocoristic versions of Christian names used throughout the Middle Ages, attested abundantly in contemporary legal and literary discourses.[[7]](#endnote-7) Some are immediately recognizable from modern-day diminutives: “Wille” is clearly derived from William, “Grigge” from Gregory, “Geffe” from Geoffrey, “Watte” from Walter, “Iakke” from John, and so on. While others are perhaps less readily identifiable, lacking any obvious counterpart in present-day English, they nonetheless follow the same pattern: “Dawe” is a shortened form of David, just as “Colle” is taken from Nicholas, “Tebbe” from Isabel, “Hogge” from Roger, “Gibbe” from Gilbert, “Lorkyn” from Laurence, “Hudde” from Hugh, “Hykke” from Richard, “Bette” from Bartholomew, “Judde” from Jordan, and “Hobbe” from Robert.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Most readings have been content to accept the names in these terms, viewing them simply as a collection of given names for men and women. They have generally been treated as more or less straightforward allusions to the participants in the disorder, at least as Gower has chosen to caricature them. Although few commentators would now agree with Robert Henry and see the passage as a direct “catalogue of the leaders of the insurgents,” it is still taken to refer to the rioters as a broad social group.[[9]](#endnote-9) Thus the sequence has frequently been mined by linguists looking for naming patterns among the English peasantry. Beginning with the work of Lower and Bardsley in the late nineteenth century, it has often been cited as evidence of “nick forms” among the “middle and lower classes,” or to show how certain nominal forms became “vaguely generic” markers of the lower strata of society.[[10]](#endnote-10) Much the same idea also informs historicist readings of the poem that concentrate on the names’ social resonances. David Aers, for instance, sees them as “distinctively plebeian” and compares them to the similar roll-call of Gloton’s associates in Langland’s Piers Plowman.[[11]](#endnote-11) Emily Steiner likewise refers to “Gower’s list of plebeian names” while Andrew Galloway sees them as part of a tactic to smear the rebels, both emphasizing their rusticity and alienating them from official discourse: “the stultitia of peasants is expressed even in their vernacular names — jarringly intruding into his Latin couplets.”[[12]](#endnote-12) In short, many commentators have tended to see this sequence as a moment when Gower’s allegory recedes, allowing human political reality to appear divested of symbolism. Most have shared the assumption that Malte Urban has voiced, reading the passage as a point at which “Gower has to mention or at least imply the humanness of the rebels.”[[13]](#endnote-13)

In all important respects, these readings are entirely tenable. Pet names of this kind are of course an established device in medieval literature for describing low-born boorishness. Before Gower, they can already be seen playing such a role in the “Satire on the Consistory Courts” (ca. 1300) and “Lutel Soth Sarmun” (ca. 1250): in the former the narrator describes the “lewed” girls he has seduced as “Magge ant Malle,” while the latter rails against “lechurs and horlinges” named “Malekyn,” “ianekyn,” “watekin,” “wilekyn,” “Robyn,” and “Gilot.”[[14]](#endnote-14) The Gower passage also resembles other contemporary accounts of the chief agitators in the rebellion. Many of his names can be matched up with similar catalogues given in Walsingham’s Chronica Majora and an anonymous continuation of Higden’s Polychronicon. Especially close is the Latin poem “Lines on the Time of Jack Straw” which also sees the perpetrators as a chaotic jumble of familiar names and rustic caricatures, counting off “Jon Wrau, Thom Myllere, Jak Strawe,/ Erle of the Plo, Rak to, Deer.”[[15]](#endnote-15) In one sense at least, therefore, the names simply reflect the class Gower is portraying. Nevertheless, the question remains whether this is the only set of meanings at work in the passage, given the particular inflection Gower lends them. Elsewhere in the Visio, other names have evidently been selected for their symbolic import above all. Some are literary allusions, such as “Burnellus” (ll. 201-2), the donkey-hero of Nigel Wireker’s Speculum Stultorum; others reinforce particular meanings through wordplay, such as the two dogs “Cutte que Curre” (l. 395), a likely pun on currere (run) and “cut down.”[[16]](#endnote-16) In fact, Gower takes considerable care to accentuate both the bestial and human tracks of meaning in this sequence. In the first place, he attributes recognizably brutish actions to the mob: while the rioters might brandish weapons and looted “pomp,” they are also shown trampling men (terere), running mad (furere), and being summoned by calls. Furthermore, the following section makes it even clearer that animalism has not dropped out of view. Here Gower describes the mob producing various inhuman, irrational noises, presumably in contrast to his own lone vox raised against their madness.[[17]](#endnote-17) He reports that “quidam sternutant asinorum more ferino,/ Mugitus quidam personuere boum;/ Quidam porcorum grunnitus horridiores/ Emittunt, que suo murmure terra tremit. . . . Latratusque ferus urbis compresserat auras,/ Dumque canum discors vox furibunda volat” (they bray in the wild manner of asses, bellowing in a continuous boom; they emit the frightful grunts of swine, and the earth trembles with their rumbling. . . . wild barking stifles the breath of the city, while the furious voice of the warring dogs is let fly) (ll. 799-806). While this maneuver purposefully “erases any trace of verbal performance on the part of the rebels,” as Steven Justice notes, it also serves to re-emphasize their animality.[[18]](#endnote-18) After all, the systematic denial of reasoned speech is also a denial of one of the traditional hallmarks of humanity, according to a philosophical truism that stretches back at least to Aristotle.[[19]](#endnote-19) Gower therefore takes pains to ensure that the rioters are presented as simultaneously bestial and human. While it cannot be denied that the social reality is permitted to peek through the veil of symbolism here, it does not rend it altogether; rather, human and non-human dimensions are visible at once. As Megan Palmer Browne reminds us, the metaphoric level of the allegory remains at work: the passage is filled with clear “insistences that its central characters are non-human animals.”[[20]](#endnote-20)

Nevertheless, attempting to read Gower’s selection of names in light of animalism immediately runs into one key problem. A major obstacle is the view that sees medieval naming practices as rigidly stratified, arguing that people in the Middle Ages shied away from giving animals names like their own. This conception is a formidably pervasive one. Despite a renewal of interest in the language of animals in the wake of Derrida’s final series of lectures, with their insistence that “the animal” can only be understood in light of speech and the definitions it confers, analysis still routinely claims that medieval culture observed a strict division between types of organism.[[21]](#endnote-21) This idea probably appears in its earliest form in the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss on the implicit structures that govern pet naming. Lévi-Strauss argues that human names have historically only been given to animals such as birds, which have a distant, purely “metaphoric” relationship with humankind. Beasts forming “part of human society,” on the other hand, have tended to receive distinctive markers only “rarely borne by ordinary human beings.”[[22]](#endnote-22) After Lévi-Strauss, this idea has been taken up by several later commentators. It makes its way into the work of Robert Bartlett, Keith Thomas, and Dorothy Yamamoto, who agree that “animals are usually given names that are distinct from those given to human beings” in order to avoid “any risk of confusion between animal and human.”[[23]](#endnote-23) Even Stephen Wilson, who finds copious evidence of human names in Old French, concludes that this approach did not spill over into English culture to any significant degree. Carolynn van Dyke also makes the same generalization in her recent, subtle remarks on medieval animal identities.[[24]](#endnote-24)

However, in spite of the popularity of this view, it does not hold up to close scrutiny.[[25]](#endnote-25) Alongside calling-names such as “Puss,” or descriptive nicknames such as “Eateal” and “Lightfoote,” human personal names form a sizeable subgroup of the labels given to medieval pets, livestock, and other animals.[[26]](#endnote-26) This is not to say that these designations behave the same way across the species boundary or that anthroponyms were given to animals with total indifference; nevertheless, the period does yield up considerable evidence of non-human creatures carrying human forenames. On occasion documents allow individual cases to come directly into view. Among the gifts given by Edward the Black Prince in 1352, for instance, are horses named “Lucien” and “Saul,” while a 1474 letter by John Paston II mentions his mother’s fearsome dog “Hankyn.”[[27]](#endnote-27) Likewise, the 1524 will of John Brent bequeaths “an ambling horse named Symon” to an unnamed “cosyn,” and the 1413 will of John Cousins lists a “horse called Cutt” among Cousins’ possessions; presumably the horse’s given name is, like the medieval surname “Cutte,” a shortened version of “Cuthbert.”[[28]](#endnote-28) Similar cases are also encountered in poetic discourse: examples include Skelton’s “Philip Sparrow,” the hare addressed as “Wat” or “Watte” in the anonymous Mourning of the Hunted Hare (ca. 1475), Hoccleve’s jackdaw “Magge,” Ipomadon’s mare “Gille,” Chaucer’s sheep “Malle” and “Wylkin” and his two horses named “Scot,” among other instances.[[29]](#endnote-29)

But beyond these scattered witnesses, wider use of anthroponyms can be inferred from the colloquial language of the late medieval and Early Modern period. A significant proportion of the popular vocabulary for animals seems to have developed out of names of this kind that eventually became common nouns in their own right. Chaucer’s “Wilkyn” provides one illustration of this tendency. By the later fifteenth century the term seems to have become an informal synonym for a male sheep, as it was transferred metaphorically to pile-driving equipment, such as the “Rammes of Yron called Wylkins” or “the ghynne callyd the Wilkynn Ramme of bras” mentioned in fifteenth-century municipal records.[[30]](#endnote-30) Likewise, “Watte” grew into a collective term for hares as a species by the same date: hence a lyric in the commonplace book of Richard Hill describes a schoolboy wishing that his “master were a watt/ And my boke a wyld catt,” while the henpecked narrator of The Complaynte of them that ben to late maryed (ca. 1505) compares his own “dolours and crayntes” to those of a “wat after the hounde.”[[31]](#endnote-31) A similar process can be seen in the name “Martyn.” On the one hand it serves as a conventional name for a tame monkey, a fact commemorated in the fifteenth-century arms of the Martyn family of Dorset, which incorporate an ape in collar and chain.[[32]](#endnote-32) However, at some point it came to function as a generic term for an ape. Hence a Wycliffite gloss on Isaiah 34.14 refers to its onocentauri as “martyn-apis,” while King Alisauder (ca. 1330) describes the inhabitants of Ethiopia as “visage after martryn apen . . . ful eouel y schapen.”[[33]](#endnote-33) Many terms still current in English are visibly rooted in names of this kind that also widened from the specific to categorical over time. For example “robin,” first found in the Parlyament of Birds (ca. 1520), developed out of the medieval “Robert redbrest” or “robynette”; similarly “magpie,” first documented in the 1580s, seems to have started life as a compound of the bird-name “Magge” and the Middle English “pye.”[[34]](#endnote-34) Each of these terms points back once again to the use of human names to identify particular animals, if only as fanciful or playful descriptors; but at same time, they also signal the general acceptability of such a practice. For names to expand into informal labels for entire species, genders, or breeds, they must have been widely intelligible not merely in their own terms, but as part of a larger convention. A proper noun could hardly be conflated with its referent if identifying an animal by a human name were an eccentric or anomalous custom. The connection between the name “Robin” and the songbird, or between “Wylkin” and a male sheep, would need to be comprehensible to a large number of speakers to start denoting these beings as a group. As a result, these collective nouns are doubly important. Not only do they allow us to reverse-engineer earlier naming conventions, but they also testify to the popularity and normality of giving appellations of this kind to non-human beings.

Returning to Gower’s list of proper nouns specifically, almost all seem to have been used in this way at some stage. Several of the names he gives the rioters are recorded as the name of a particular medieval creature, and many more appear as popular synonyms for types of organism. The Visio in fact provides a fairly comprehensive cross-section of the anthroponyms thought suitable for animals in the period. One of the best attested is the opening name in his catalogue, “Watte.” This name also embodies the temptation to read the passage in straightforwardly allusive terms. At one level it obviously refers to the notorious ringleader of the revolt, Wat Tyler, who was routinely placed among its chief instigators from the fourteenth century onwards. But at the same time, Gower is also tapping into a set of animalistic connotations embedded in Tyler’s given name. Introducing the figure, he characterizes Tyler as a jay: the heading of the chapter in which Tyler first appears begins, “Omnes predicte furie in vnum extiterant congregate Graculus auis, anglice Geay, qui vulgariter vocatur Watte, presumpsit sibi statum regiminis aliorum” (all of the foresaid rioters gather together in one mass, as the bird graculus, in English ‘jay,’ commonly called ‘Watte,’ assumes for himself a position of command over all the others) (l. 679). Of course, this particular bird is at least partly selected for its symbolic value. The connection between jays and empty or deceptive speech is proverbial: the similes “iangle as a iay” or “clater as a Iay” are used by Rolle, Chaucer, and numerous others.[[35]](#endnote-35) Watte’s power to command the other rioters obviously calls on this conception. Gower specifically describes Tyler as “graculus vnus erat edoctus in arte loquendi” (one jay alone educated in the arts of speech) (l. 681). However, the link is further reinforced by the name “Watte” itself, as this was conventionally given to jays as well as hares in the later Middle Ages. Clear traces of this habit occur in an anonymous bird-debate composed shortly after 1400, in which the “rusti chateryng of þe iay” is introduced with the lines “þus watte gan syngyn in his lay.”[[36]](#endnote-36) Chaucer likewise refers obliquely to the same custom, comparing the rote learning of the Summoner to a jay that “kan clepen ‘Watte’ as wel as kan the pope,” probably referring to a bird taught to recite its own name.[[37]](#endnote-37) In fact, Gower’s phrasing makes the usage even clearer. His statement “the bird graculus, in English jay, commonly called Watte” treats the three terms as a sequence of synonyms, distinguished only by their descending formality. Gower’s characterization of Tyler as a jay is not simply invention on his part. Rather, it draws on an established association between his forename and a bird popularly kept as a pet.[[38]](#endnote-38)

These same species-specific meanings also adhere to other names in the list, most notably “Gibbe,” “Colle,” and “Hobbe.” As scholarship has frequently observed, “Gibbe” functions as an archetypal name for a cat from at least the late fourteenth century.[[39]](#endnote-39) Two of the earliest examples are the third fragment of the English Roman de la Rose, where Fals Semblant compares his “bigilyng” to that of “Gibbe oure cat,” and the seal used by Gilbert Stone from 1392, which features a cat mauling a mouse with the motto “Gret wel Gibbe oure cat.”[[40]](#endnote-40) The same custom is found in several other late medieval and Early Modern texts, which almost invariably assign the name “Gibbe” to cats: examples include Lydgate’s and Henryson’s versions of Aesop, the nemesis of Skelton’s Philip Sparrow, popular lyrics such as “Ten Wives on their Husband’s Ware” (ca. 1475) and “Marriage of the Frogge and the Mouse” (ca. 1580), and popular drama such as Gammer Gurton’s Needle (ca. 1562) and Fulwell’s Like Will to Like (ca. 1568).[[41]](#endnote-41) “Gib” is in fact so widely associated with cats that it stretches into a generic term by the early sixteenth century. Thomas Heywood in ca. 1528 describes the breath of “a woman . . .so vgly” as a “gybbes fest,” while other sources around the same date claim that cunning wives “playeth the gyb” or act “most like a suttle gib,” or “scratche like to some villanous gibb.”[[42]](#endnote-42)

“Hobbe” tells a similar story, carrying if anything even deeper and more abiding echoes of its use as an animal name. It seems to be an established name for a small or working horse by the middle of the fourteenth century. Hence in 1352 Edward the Black Prince made a gift to a godson of “Lyard Hobyn,” most likely a foal or pony, while the 1458 will of John Wrygh lists a horse named “Hobbe” as one of three in his possession.[[43]](#endnote-43) Between these two dates, the term has already started to function as a common noun for a small mount. In the Laud Troy Book (ca. 1400) it appears in the description of the Grecian cavalry, amongst “mule and Fryson,/ Hoby, stede, and gode rounsi.”[[44]](#endnote-44) The 1420 will of Sir Roger Salwayn records another instance, again as a bequest to a child, when Salwayn pledges a nameless “hoby” to the “litill” son of an associate.[[45]](#endnote-45) Slightly later, a “hobby but fable” is described in Holland’s “Buke of the Howlat” (ca. 1440s), and Lord Berners describes Philip VI fleeing from battle “on a hobby” in his 1523 translation of Froissart.[[46]](#endnote-46) The term is in fact preserved by a number of words still current in present-day English, including “dobbin,” “hobby,” and “hobby horse,” this last from the “hobyhorse players” of festive entertainment.[[47]](#endnote-47)

A similar course is followed by “Colle,” which appears as a dog’s name around the same time that “Gibbe” first enters the records. Chaucer is again the earliest witness to this convention: “Colle oure dogge” joins the rest of the farmyard in pursuit of the fox in the “Nun’s Priest’s Tale” (ll. 7.3383-86). After Chaucer, the next mention comes in the grotesque episode of the “Five Dogs of London” (1456), a series of bills posted in Fleet Street in the severed heads of dogs, the first of which identified its unfortunate bearer as “Colle.”[[48]](#endnote-48) Less gruesomely, “Colle” is included in a list of “names of all maner of houndis” appended to a manuscript of the Master of Game (ca. 1470); it also features in the punchline of a story in Rastell’s Hundred Mery Talys (ca. 1526), which ends with a confused schoolboy telling his master that Shem, Ham and Japheth were sired by “Colle my fathers dogge.”[[49]](#endnote-49) As well as being a conventional dog name, there is some suggestion that it gained a proverbial value. While the name never carried quite the same broad, collective sense as “gibbe” or “hoby,” despite resembling the Victorian breed-name “collie,” it is used in at least one instance to symbolize domestic dogs as a group. In 1476 it appears in a curious expression used by John Paston II to describe the weakened defenses at Caister Castle, when Paston states: “ther is no mor in jt but Colle and hys mak.”[[50]](#endnote-50) Although early editors assumed that the remark referred to the Pastons’ retainer Richard Calle, despite the difference in spelling, it probably pertains to a household dog, most likely a lone watchdog. As a result, it might show “Colle” becoming sufficiently commonplace to typify a sort of canine, much as “Gibbe” and “Watte” represent cats and jays as a group.[[51]](#endnote-51)

The other names in Gower’s collection are less generously documented, but many do appear in medieval records in conjunction with animals, either in the forms Gower uses or in closely related variants. Hence “Judde” and “Huwett” also feature in the list of dog names attached to the Master of Game, and “Dow,” “Huwet” and “Better” appear among the Black Prince’s horses; likewise, a dog with “Iakke” carved on his collar is incorporated into the 1448 monument of Sir Brian de Stapleton.[[52]](#endnote-52) A grant of land from 1398 might preserve “Lorkyn” as a name for horses or livestock, since it refers to a patch of grazing land near Dunstable as “Lorkyn acre.”[[53]](#endnote-53) Still more of the names appear in the Early Modern period: “Tom” as an Elizabethan fighting bear, “Jeoffry” as Christopher Smart’s cat-companion during his confinement, and “Dick” as “a Blacke-bird that is kept in a Cage” in an anti-Puritan pamphlet.[[54]](#endnote-54) The witch trials of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries yield still further instances. Among the supposed “familiar spirits” owned by the accused are dogs named “Tom” and “Tibb,” frogs named “Tom” and “Jack,” mice named “Tibb,” “Will,” and “Jack,” birds named “Tibb,” “Tom,” and “Will,” and cats named “Jack,” “Will,” “Tom,” “Jude,” “Tibb,” “Dick,” and, inevitably, “Gibbe.”[[55]](#endnote-55) But by far the richest record of Gower’s names is provided by popular generic terms for animals, even if these show markedly less fidelity to particular species than “Gibbe” or “Colle.” “Tibb,” for instance, is used as a cant term for geese by 1566, at least according to Haman’s glossary of the “lousey language” spoken by “bawdye Beggers”; it also appears as slang for a female cat and a “bare nagge” by the end of the century.[[56]](#endnote-56) “Jack” occurs as a prefix in several sixteenth-century common nouns: “iacke napes” from 1519, “jack daw” from 1520, and “jack-dog” from ca. 1597.[[57]](#endnote-57) “Grygge” likewise develops a similar pattern of usage. In his 1589 dictionary, Rider defines “a Grigge” as a “shorte legged henne,” while an indenture for a fisherman’s apprentice from 1577 promises the boy six “grygge wieles” (eel traps), and a ballad of ca. 1624 refers to “pretty Girgs [sic] and Eeles.”[[58]](#endnote-58) These terms might again point back to naming conventions that began in the Middle Ages. Presumably, they developed along the same lines as “Gibbe,” functioning as conventional appellations for animals that became synonyms over time, as their association with particular species gradually strengthened. As a result, they might well testify to naming conventions in the preceding period: since they must have built on established habits, they hint at the existence of these habits in the centuries before their appearance in written sources.

It should now be obvious that the proper nouns listed in the Visio cannot be read simply as “rustic” human names, as though Gower has dispensed with allegory altogether in this passage. The names certainly possess a straightforward human sense, but they also bear traces of animality through their wider patterns of usage. Even those that leave only faint evidence in medieval or Early Modern sources are reminiscent of the world of beasts. “Symme” perhaps recalls simia, “Bette” might resemble bête or bestia, while “Hogge” and “Daw” are homonymous with common terms for pigs and birds. Indeed, the resemblance between the forename “Daw” and “a tame chowghe” is recognized elsewhere in medieval literature, being one of the central insults used against Friar Daw in Upland’s Rejoinder (ca. 1420).[[59]](#endnote-59) Precisely why Gower should wish to bring these meanings into his text is in many respects obvious. At its most immediate level, his deployment of these names is clearly aligned with one of his main objectives in the Visio, his desire to “dehumanize the rebels as completely as possible.”[[60]](#endnote-60) This sequence of names reinforces the degraded, bestial character he attributes to the rioters: it is tantamount to calling them “Fido,” “Tiddles,” or “Buttercup,” marking their slippage from full humanity. Yet the names also resonate with other currents in his text. The fact that they are applicable to both humans and animals, effectively closing the gap between species, recalls the general collapse of order Gower sees in the uprising. Since they themselves transgress the boundary between human and beast, these nouns encapsulate the “legibus excussis iura furore ruent” (overthrowing of statutes, laws ruined by madness) that the rising precipitated and expressed to his mind (l. 896). At the same time, however, they also enable Gower to navigate one of the central tensions in his poem, one that David Carlson has identified and discussed at length.[[61]](#endnote-61) By calling on these names, Gower shelters his work from depicting the rebellion as part of a more innocent, natural order, even as he characterizes the rioters as bestial. Because the nouns are simultaneously human and non-human, they do not drive their recipients across the species boundary completely. Rather, they place them in a conceptual borderland between beast and man, and between reason and unreason. Consequently, the behavior of the rebels is not presented as instinctual or natural, as it might be if they were fully animalized; while they undergo bestial degradation, they retain a sense of human culpability. Gower, in short, is exploiting the inherent properties of these names to support his satire. Through them, he is able to denounce the rising as both subhuman and contra natura at one and the same time.

But Gower’s use of these names can be approached as more than a polemic technique. What is perhaps most interesting here is the way in which he deploys these nouns, as his usage sheds considerable light on their general qualities. One remarkable feature of the passage is the loss of specificity among the rebels. Up until this point, Gower has maintained fairly clear behavioral and symbolic differences between the animalized figures. In their respective chapters, asses resist their bridles, buck off their packs and “cunctos . . . geminant solita voce frequenter yha” (in one body multiply their customary cry y-ha) (l. 189-90); oxen shrug off the plough and run amok with their horns; pigs gorge themselves on delicacies, wine, and human blood; and dogs refuse to have their backs stroked or heads cradled, and “irati semper denudant nam tibi dentes” (in rage invariably bare their teeth) (l. 411). In each case, their rebellion is a recognizable subversion of the animal’s characteristic habits. Gower founds his allegory on the observable behaviors of these creatures or on the social uses to which they are put. Nevertheless, this passage marks the end of such an approach. At this stage, any distinctions between the animals and their actions are erased and all become part of a single homogenous pack. Beyond the fact that Watte “calls out,” hinting at the traditional loquacity of the jay, or that Colle “runs wild” or Dawe “screeches,” there is little systematic attribution of species-specific conduct to the figures. It is impossible to discern what creatures “Tibbe,” “Hobbe,” or “Iakke” – or even “Gibbe” or “Colle” – are intended to represent. At this stage in the text, the verse has evidently stopped working along the lines of a bestiary or beast fable and has instead submerged its creatures into one general mass. Ironically, the very act of naming these beasts seems to deprive them of any identity as peculiar organisms.

This loss of distinction is by no means cosmetic or incidental: it is best seen as Gower exploiting the potential offered by these terms. As we have seen repeatedly, these names do not describe single referents when they are applied to animals but instead confer a more generalized, even miscellaneous identity. Whereas human forenames by their very nature serve to personalize their bearer, marking their uniqueness as a subject, once those same names are transferred to animals their range of reference seems to expand. They might be said to work in the “general singular” mode, following Derrida’s observations on language and its encounters with the animal. As Derrida predicts, they treat their referent as “this irreplaceable living being” even as they use them “to represent, like an ambassador” their “species . . . genus or kingdom.”[[62]](#endnote-62) This process can be seen at a number of levels. In the first place, there is a clear tendency for the names to fluctuate between the particular and generic. For instance, when John Wrygh’s will mentions “Hobbe,” it obviously refers to the specific flesh-and-blood workhorse he wished to leave his wife Alice in much the same way that “John” and “Alice” refer to human agents in this transaction. Yet at the same time, the fact that “Hobbe” is the conventional name for horses of this type means that it denotes a category as much as a singular entity. The same is true of Chaucer’s “Colle” or Stapleton’s “Iakke”: each are simultaneously marked as a specific beast and made interchangeable with any beast that can legitimately bear their name. This is no doubt why these terms can so readily develop into collective nouns: “gib,” “robin,” “iacke nape,” and “watte” are simply names that have lost any pretense of describing individual creatures over time, their wider implications coming to dominate entirely. These medieval anthroponyms do not create a sense of personhood when applied to non-human beings but treat their animal referents in categorical as well as particular terms. By using them to denote a faceless crowd, the Visio is simply calling on one of their innate functions.

However, alongside this feature, a second form of confusion is also visible. As their Early Modern usage makes especially clear, the names can be attached to a wide range of different types of creature. Only a minority are associated more or less exclusively with particular breeds or species. “Iakke” alone is associated at different points with dogs, cats, birds, frogs, donkeys, and apes, while “Tib” is used in conjunction with poultry, cats, horses, and mice. Similarly, “Dick” is allocated to cats and birds, “Grigge” to eels and hens, “Hewet” to horses and dogs, “Watte” to jays and hares, and so on. What can be repeatedly seen in the names, therefore, is an ability to range between species boundaries, not merely crossing from humans to animals but also denoting multiple types of animal. The names seem to have functioned as a canon of general animal names, a collection of appellations that could be given to more or less any non-human creature indiscriminately, rather than a series of species-specific labels. This is no doubt why they branch out into so many different common nouns in the Early Modern period.[[63]](#endnote-63) Thus the names drift not only between humans and animals, but also between animals and other animals. Again, anthroponyms gain a greater breadth when they cross the animal-human frontier, encompassing both the specific and the collective, and drifting between multiple beings. In either case, Gower’s maceration of the rebels into an indistinct group comes in large part from the names themselves. He is simply utilizing properties that are built into the nouns he assembles.

In sum, reading the Visio’s list of names against medieval naming conventions allows a number of significant points to emerge, in relation both to the text and to the norms on which it draws. In the first place, it shows that the sequence does not need to be treated as a suspension of Gower’s allegory since his catalogue calls on the stock of names commonly given to medieval beasts. It also offers evidence against the tenacious view that medieval onomastics separated human from non-human creatures, as the text muddies rather than clarifies this putative divide. Taking a slightly wider view, Gower’s use of these names also brings into view some of the mechanics of animal naming in the period, revealing a complex understanding of naming and its implications. In reaching for these terms while dissolving the rioters into an indistinguishable mob, Gower seems to be utilizing their “general singular” qualities: they allow him to strip the rebels of personhood and specificity at a stroke, simply because they carry out such a process automatically. Alongside these points, however, Gower also gives us access to a further aspect of medieval animal naming, one worth raising as a final point. His inclusion of these sixteen names in this context demonstrates what sort of anthroponym was deemed appropriate for non-human beings. The names he cites carry strong social overtones. After all, it is not for nothing that the names have invariably been read as “plebeian”: there is abundant proof of their association with the peasantry, even at a purely stereotypical level. As a result, Gower’s selection of names indicates that not just any human name could be transferred to beasts. When medieval people applied human names to the animals around them, they reached for names that were customarily associated with the lower social classes. This fact further suggests why the names should prove so attractive to Gower. They already express many of the same judgments formulated by his allegory, being founded on the same sense that “peasants are subhuman ab ovo” that runs through his text.[[64]](#endnote-64) While the Visio shows that the boundary between human and animal was more porous than is sometimes admitted, it also makes clear that this was a limited confusion, and that the points at which the two categories converged were themselves dictated by political factors.

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45. Fifty Earliest English Wills 1387-1439, ed. F.J. Furnivall, EETS o.s., 78 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1882), p. 53. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Richard Holland, “Buke of the Howlat,” l. 651, in Scottish Alliterative Poems, ed. F.J. Amours (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1897), p. 69; Jean Froissart, The Chronicle of Froissart, trans. John Bourchier, Lord Berners, ed. W.P. Ker, 5 vols., Tudor Translations 27-32 (New York: AMS Press, 1967), I, 295. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. For an early occurrence of “hobbyhorse,” see J. Humpheys, “Transcript of the Estate Book of Robert Caldewell to John Talbot of Grafton Manor, Worcs., 1568-9,” Birmingham Archaeological Society Transactions, 44 (1918), 67. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. “Five Dogs of London,” in Historical Poems, ed. Robbins, pp. 189-90. On the episode, see V.J. Scattergood, Politics and Poetry in the Fifteenth Century (London: Blandford, 1971), p. 178. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. David Scott-Macnab, “The Names of All Manner of Hounds: A Unique Inventory in A Fifteenth-Century Manuscript,” Viator, 44 (2013), 357; John Rastell, A. C. Mery Talys, in Shakespeare Jest-books, ed. W. Carew Hazlitt (London: Willis and Sotheran, 1864), pp. 98-99. See further Ben Parsons, “Collie and Chaucer’s ‘Colle’,” Notes and Queries, 62.4 (2015), 525-29. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Paston Letters and Papers, ed. Davis, Beadle, and Richmond, I, 603. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Original Letters, Written During the Reigns of Henry VI, Edward IV, and Richard III, ed. John Fenn, 5 vols. (London, John Murray: 1789-1823), V, 140-41. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Scott-MacNab, “Names of All Manners of Hounds,” p. 360; Register of Edward, IV, 71; Richard Jones, The Medieval Natural World (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 75. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. A Descriptive Catalogue of Ancient Deeds, ed. H. C. Maxwell Lyte, 6 vols. (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1890-1915), I, 407. Compare Carole Hough, “An Ante-Dating of the OED Entry for Nanny ‘Goat’,” Notes and Queries, 55 (2008), 134-35. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Terence Hawkes, Shakespeare in the Present (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 87; Christopher Smart, “Jubilate Agno,” in Eighteenth-Century Poetry: An Annotated Anthology, ed. David Fairer and Christine Gerrard, 3d ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2015), pp. 498-500; The Arraignment, Tryall, Conviction, and Confession of Francis Deane (London: Richard Harper, 1643), sig. A4 (Wing A3766). [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. James A. Serpell, “Guardian Spirits or Demonic Pets: The Concept of the Witch’s Familiar in Early Modern England, 1530-1712,” in The Animal/Human Boundary, ed. A. N. H. Creager and W. C. Jordan (Rochester, NY: Rochester Univ. Press, 2002), pp. 174-75. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Thomas Harman, “A Caveat for Common Cursetors,” in Cony-Catchers and Bawdy Baskets, ed. Gāmini Salgādo (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 147; Maurice Charney, Shakespeare’s Villains (Madison, NJ: Farleigh Dickinson Univ. Press, 2012), p. 112; Thomas Churchyard, “Tragedy of Shore’s Wife,” in Churchyard’s Challenge (London: John Wolfe, 1593), p. 140 (STC 5220). Harman’s text predates the OED’s earliest entry for “Tib of the buttery” by nearly eight decades. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. Robert Whittinton, Vulgaria, ed. Beatrice White, EETS o.s., 187 (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1932), p. 126; Interlude of the .iiii. elements (London: J. Rastell, 1520), fol. 21v (STC 20722); William Shakespeare, The Merry Wives of Windsor, ll. 2.3.58 and 3.1.75, ed. T. W. Craik, Oxford Shakespeare, 10 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), pp. 107, 142. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. Alan Crossley, Oxford City Apprentices, Oxford Historical Society Publications n.s., 44 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2012), p. 123; The Lamentation of a New Married Man (London: Thomas Symcock, n.d.), fol. 1 (STC 15186); John Rider, Bibliotheca scholastica (Oxford: Joseph Barnes, 1589), col. 684 (STC 21031.5). The OED’s earliest witness to “grig” as a type of fish is 1611. For the date of the ballad, see Barry Reay, Popular Culture in Seventeenth-Century England (London: Croom Helm, 1985), p. 237. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. Upland’s Rejoinder, l. 6, in Six Ecclesiastical Satires, ed. James Dean (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute, 1991), p. 54. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Aers, “‘Vox populi’,” p. 441. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. David R. Carlson, “Gower’s Beast Allegories in the 1381 Visio Anglie,” Philological Quarterly, 8 (2008): 257-75. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. Derrida, The Animal That Therefore I Am, pp. 9, 34. See also Van Dyke, “Names of Beasts,” pp. 32-34. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Although the evidence for them is too late to have bearing on Gower, it is worth noting that the names give rise to still more generic terms during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: “tom-tit” from ca. 1648; “jack-snipe” from 1664; “hob ferret” from 1688; “jackass” from 1695; “dicky bird” from 1744; “tomcat” from 1767. See respectively Mildmay Fane, Otia sacra (London: Richard Cotes, 1648), p. 137 (Wing W1476); Thomas Killigrew, The Parson’s Wedding, l. 3.2, in Restoration Comedy, ed. Alexander Norman Jeffares, 4 vols. (London: Folio Press, 1974), I, 62; Randle Holme, The Academy of Armory (Chester: Thomas Simpson, 1688), p. 136 (Wing H2513); “Alex. Old.,” “To his Ingenious Friend,” in Carlo Moscheni, Brutes Turn’d Criticks, trans. John Savage (London: Daniel Dring, 1695), sig. A12 (Wing M2851); “Myra’s Mirrour,” The London Magazine, May 1744, p. 254; Laurence Sterne, Letters, 1765-1768, ed. Melvyn New and Peter Jan de Voogd, Florida Edition of the Works of Laurence Sterne (Gainesville: Univ. Press of Florida, 2009), p. 610. Again, many of these sources predate the entries in the OED by some distance. Dialect sources yield still further examples, albeit at even later dates, such as “jude” for a ladybird and “willie” for a seal, tadpole, or kestrel: see Francis Kildale Robinson, A Glossary of Yorkshire Words and Phrases (London: John Russell Smith, 1855), p. 93; John Jamieson, Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1808-41), IV, 683. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. Carlson, “Gower’s Beast Allegories,” p. 268. See further Paul Freedman, Images of the Medieval Peasant (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 1999), pp. 140-43; Lee Patterson, Chaucer and the Subject of History (Madison, WI: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1991), p. 263. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)