

Medieval Anglo-French, English, and Scots Names for Gulls

WILLIAM SAYERS

The sea gull (*Larus canus*) has many local names in England and Scotland but one with the deepest historical roots is *mew*.¹ The *Oxford English Dictionary* notes a first attestation in a Latin-Old English glossary (“*Larum, meu vel megi*”),² while an early use in a more specific context is met in the poem *The Seafarer*: “Hwilum ylfete song dyde ic me to gomene, ganetes hleoþor ond huilpan sweg fore hleahtor wera, mæw singende fore medodrince” (“I took to myself as pleasure the gannet’s noise and the voice of the curlew instead of the laughter of men, the singing of the gull instead of the drinking of mead”).³ The name is now limited to regional speech in England, while the apparently related term *maw*, often as *sea maw*, is still common in Scotland.⁴ The etymological entry for *mew* in the *OED* suggests a straightforward descent from a common Germanic term to Old English *mæw*, this commonest of sea birds:

Etymology: < the Germanic base of West Frisian *meau*, *mieu*, *miuw*, Middle Dutch *mēwe* (Dutch *meeuw*), Middle Low German *meve* (> early modern German *mew*, German *Möwe*), Old Icelandic *már*, *mór* (plural *mávar*, *máfar*; Icelandic *már*: other North Germanic languages have only suffixed forms). Further etymology uncertain and disputed.

Although Middle English orthography is notoriously variable, the vocalism of the forms *meau*, *meaw*, *meav*, *meawe*, *meue*, *mew*, *moue* gives pause and invites the question whether there is another, as yet unrecognised, factor at work.⁵

In light of the history of medieval English, Old French immediately suggests itself. The form *mouette* is found in the modern language. The concluding syllable is ostensibly a diminutive and this leaves the intriguing root *mou-*, which readily lends itself to a comparison with the range of Middle English forms. The *Trésor de la langue française*, a historical lexicographical work along the lines of the *OED*, has this entry (here lightly edited): “Fin XIII^e-début XIV^e s. *moette* ... 1422 *mouete* Diminutive de l’anglo-normand *mave*, *mauve* ... suffixe *-et*, *-ette*.”⁶ Although traced to the province of Normandy, no origin in either Latin, Gaulish, nor the Germanic of the Rhineland and Low Countries is advanced. However, in a separate *TLF* entry for *mauve*, a regional term for sea gull met in northern Brittany, we read: “Emprunté, en anglo-normand au vieil anglais *maew*.” The authority for this putative loan from Old English into northern Old French is the prestigious *Französische etymologisches Wörterbuch*.⁷ Unlike the mobile *mew*, however, medieval cross-channel loans in the west to east direction are very rare and this derivation commands little credence.⁸

Mave, *mauve*, “gull”, is met in the medieval Norman dialect of French (bordering Brittany) and in its derivative, Anglo-French (a term now generally replacing Anglo-Norman).⁹ The best known instance is in the *Fables* of Marie de France from the late twelfth century (the range 1180 to 1215 is still the subject of debate). In the fable of “L’aigle, l’autour et la grue”, the disgraced crane decides to go into exile: “Quant ele fu en mer entree, Si ad une maue encuntree” (“When she went to sea, she met a mew”).¹⁰ The term *mave* also

figures in the *Bestiaire* of the Norman Philippe de Thaon, dated to 1121-1134, in which the bird *caladrius* is likened to a mew in form.¹¹ Philippe is judged to have been resident in England at the time of this composition. Other early Anglo-French attestations of *mave* are limited to glossaries, which were aids to learning Latin.¹² Although Latin is not implicated, one such instance that has not been fully exploited in reference works on Anglo-French lexis is in the Valmadonna manuscript containing the Hebrew bible. It is reliably dated to 1189, a year before the massacre of the Jews of York and the plundering of their goods. In the outer margin of page 143 of the manuscript the scribe has listed Hebrew names and Norman French equivalents for fourteen birds classified in Leviticus xi, 13-19, as unclean.¹³ Among sea birds is the osprey and, last in the list, the gull, מאלבא, here given as *malve* in roman transliteration (see below for comment on this orthography).

Some two centuries later, in a poem on hunting and falconry by Gace de la Buigne, a Norman chaplain who followed King Jean to captivity in England, *malve* is also found.¹⁴ At about this same time, *mewe* is being used in Middle English. The term figures in a simile in a didactic work from about 1475. In Peter Idley's instructions to his son, which incorporate a number of anecdotes, a witch replies to a bishop that, with her little charm, the matter in question "will goo as smothe as a mewe."¹⁵

Not mentioned in the lexicographical works cited thus far is the fact that in the modern Norman dialect of French the usual term for sea gull is *mâove*.¹⁶ This is most plausibly traced to Old Norse *már*, plural *mávar*.¹⁷ It is proposed that *már/mávar*, and not Old English *mæw*, is also at the origin of medieval Norman and Anglo-French *mave/mauve*, by way of a derivation – a kind of back formation – from the plural form. The "non-etymological" *-l-* of *malve* in the Valmadonna glosses appears to have been introduced to render the long, velar, and slightly nasalised *-a-* of the source language, Old Norse. But since *a + l* in Vulgar Latin was regularly realised in Old French as *au*, the *-l-* (here as *lamed*) may be an instance of hypercorrection, although this would be more likely to occur with a learned term derived from Latin.¹⁸ Judeo-Norman *malve* and Anglo-French *mauve* are simply orthographical variants.

In contrast to the received opinion of a unilinear development of *mew* from Old English, Middle English *meue* and its manifold variants represent a hybrid formation, in which Old English *mæw* is overlaid, but not substantially altered in either phonology or semantics, by Norman *mave*, *malve*, *mauve* from Norse *már*, *mávar*. It was conceivably affected even earlier by the cognate, more specifically Old Danish, form that was introduced into the Danelaw. There were unlikely to have been significantly different cultural values attached to the gull in Normandy and England, in contrast to what might have been the case with, for example, the duck, both hunted and eaten. We must imagine a situation in which many people in Britain would have heard the word for gull on a frequent basis in both Anglo-French and Middle English (*mauve/meawe*), with little more than the vocalism as difference.

Scots *maw* represents a different outcome of *már*, where the Old Norse term seems to have totally supplanted the Northumbrian Old English form.¹⁹ In the satirical poem *The Buke of the Howlat* from about 1450, the assembly of fowl, to which the owlet appeals, includes two kinds of gull: "The se mawis war monkis ye blak & ye quhyte The goule was a gryntar"

(“The sea mewes were monks, the black and the white; the gull was a grinter (granary supervisor).”²⁰ In about 1513 and in the poem entitled “Ballat Abbot of Tunland”, William Dunbar writes: “Thik was the clud of kayis and crawis, Of marlezonis, mittanis and of mawis.”²¹ Here the mew is met in the company of jackdaws, crows, merlins, and some other kind of hawk.

To summarise, both English *mew* and Scots *maw* reflect the influence on Old English *mæw* of Old Norse *már*, *mávar*, “gull”, in the latter case directly, in the former via the Norse-inflected *mauve* of Anglo-French.

The other most common English name for the mew is, of course, *gull*. Once again, the history seems relatively straightforward, although commentary in lexicographical reference works is, as often, elliptical. The *OED* suggests a loan from Welsh *gŵylan* or Cornish *guilan*.²² The underlying Celtic root seems to refer to weeping and the name then characterises the bird’s cry. Since *gull* is not attested in English before 1430, it seems unlikely that the word was loaned from the British Celtic language that the invading Angles and Saxons met on the island. An Old English adaptation, if such were to have occurred, might be expected to figure in one of the many glossaries of the period.²³ Early use of the name for this sea bird in Scots is exemplified in the previously seen citation from *The Buik of the Howlat*: “The se mawis war monkis ye blak & ye quhyte, The goule was a gryntar.”

A rather similar situation obtains in France, in which the loan of Breton *goelann* yielded *goëland* in modern French, although this seems not to have been recorded until the late fifteenth century.²⁴ This would preclude a loan from either Breton or French into Middle English, or even earlier, from Norman French. Another bird name, *puffin*, is judged to have originated in Cornish and this may well be the case with *gull*.²⁵

In English and Scots, both *mew/maw* and *gull/goule* were early accompanied by *sea* or other qualifiers, as if some semantic attrition in the base words had occurred. More likely is a combination of the trend toward an elaboration of taxonomy and its terminology, and the prior presence of homonyms: in English, *mew* as place of concealment (used of raptors but also figuratively), in Scots, *maw* as “belly, stomach” and “mallow”.²⁶ Over time, *gull* achieved generic status in English, so that the list of qualifiers is now a long one, invoked to identify species: “grey gull, hooded gull, hovering gull, long-billed gull, Pacific gull, red-legged gull, white-headed gull, white-winged gull, etc.” (*OED*). The terms *mew* and *gull* seem not to have been in any true competition and a study of geographical distribution might well reveal only local preferences as dictated by history – Norsemen and Normans in the east, Celts in the west. *Mew* appears to have a corresponding verb, *to mew*, but it was early used only of cats, and its application to the cry of the gull seems a later phenomenon, but one in line with the supposed onomatopoeic origin of Old English *mæw*. To gull or make a gull of someone may be a figurative expression based on snaring gulls, but other “gulls” should also be considered.

In lieu of a conventional conclusion on the histories of *mew* and *gull*, it seems more urgent to call attention to the volume of philological and linguistic work still to be done in the study of the regional and mainstream English lexis of the natural world. Everywhere is to be

found all the complexities and tangles otherwise expected in the history of upscale vocabulary often seen as cultural loans. Various overlaps in words for gulls have been adumbrated in the preceding discussion, and these certainly reflect both history and regional use. But just where is the ornithophile to begin the attempt to tease word histories apart, when the *English Dialect Dictionary* lists *gull-maw* as the English name for a bird called *guillemot* in French, a name attested from 1555 and explained by the *TLF* as a diminutive formed on the name *Guillaume*?²⁷

Notes

1. The present brief essay complements an earlier note in these pages (Sayers) devoted to comparable terms for the osprey and, like it, draws evidence from a little consulted Judeo-Norman text that was written in England.
2. *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, s.v. *mew*, n.³; *Latin-Old English Glosses*, in *Old English Glosses: A Collection*, 44/1.
3. Klinck, vv. 19-25.
4. *Dictionary of the Scots Language (DSL)*, s.v. *maw*, n.².
5. *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. *meue*, n.2.
6. *Trésor de la langue française (TLF)*, s.v. *mouette*.
7. *Französisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 16, p. 495b. The *Dictionnaire étymologique de l'ancien français* has not yet published etymologies for words with initial *M-*, although the online edition has a full list of attestations of this ornithonym under the headword *moe*.
8. A loan from Frankish into Gallo-Romance could be entertained; cf. Middle Dutch *mēwe*.
9. *Anglo-Norman Dictionary (AND)*, s.v. *mauve*¹. Another bird, possibly the song-thrush, blackbird, fieldfare, or redwing, was designated in Anglo-French *mauviz* (modern English *mavis*). In a commentary under the headwords *mauve* and *mauviz*, the *AND* notes: “For the general problem about bird-names, which is endemic in Anglo-Norman and especially in the gloss materials, see further Trotter, ‘Tote manere d’oiseaus: les noms d’oiseaux en anglo-normand’, *Cahiers de lexicologie* 103 (2013), 125-143.”
10. Marie de France, Fable 80, vv. 29-30.
11. Philippe de Thaon, v. 2146.
12. Examples are gathered in Hunt, i, p. 419; ii, p. 59.
13. Discussion in Banitt. These and related examples from this Judeo-Norman source will be incorporated in the online edition of the *Anglo-Norman Dictionary (AND)*. The Valmadonna manuscript was not available to Levy.
14. Gace de la Buigne, *Le Roman des deduis*, v. 913, and p. 602, s.v. *mauve de mer*; not noted in *AND*.
15. *Peter Idley's Instructions to His Son*, 2.A.512.
16. De Gorog, 91, No. 109.
17. *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, s.v. *már*; the hypothetical proto-Germanic form is judged an onomatopoeic formation; *Svensk etymologisk ordbok*, p. 500, s.v. *mås*; *Altnordisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, s.v. *már*.
18. Banitt writes: “The un-etymological *lamed* corresponds to the Latin writing, where *l* serves to indicate the velar quality of *a*” (p. 31), which, if I have understood correctly, is not quite accurate for either medieval Latin in France or early Gallo-Romance.
19. *Dictionary of the Scots Language*, s.v. *maw*, n.2. For Scots examples see also the *OED* entry for *maw*, n.³.
20. Holland, *The Buke of the Howlat*, l. 179.

21. Dunbar, xxxiii, p. 90.
22. *OED*, s.v. *gull*, n.¹.
23. Sea gull seems an unlikely culinary treat but the sequence “Pyions. Venysoun Rostyd. Gullys. Curlew” (“pigeons, roast venison, gulls, curlew”) is met in a cook book from about 1430 as a suitable second course of a banquet; *Two Fifteenth-century Cookery-books*, p. 62. Perhaps a dish with some other foodstuff has been shaped to look like a gull and decorated with plucked feathers.
24. *TLF*, s.v. *goéland*.
25. See Breeze.
26. Scots even has the collocation *goul mau*, “some species of gull” (*DSL*). Note, too, Orkney *fulmar*, a bird of the petrel family. The name is transparently Norse, *ful* + *már*, the first element to be referred to the foul smell of the bird.
27. Wright, II., pp. 758-759, s.v. *gull*; *TLF*, s.v. *guillemot*, attested from 1555, and, as a loan in English, from 1678. A hybrid from an abbreviated Breton *goelann* plus Gallo-Romance *moe* could be imagined but is unlikely.

References

- Anglo-Norman Dictionary*, eds William Rothwell, et al., 2nd edn, London, Maney Publishing, 2005.
- Banitt, Menahem, “The glosses in MS. Valmadonna I”, Appendix I, in Malachi Beit-Arié, *The Only Dated Hebrew Manuscript Written in England (1189 CE) and the Problem of Pre-expulsion Anglo-Hebrew Manuscripts*, London, Valmadonna Trust Library, 1985, pp. 29-31.
- Beit-Arié, Malachi, *The Only Dated Hebrew Manuscript Written in England (1189 CE) and the Problem of Pre-expulsion Anglo-Hebrew Manuscripts*, London, Valmadonna Trust Library, 1985.
- Breeze, Andrew, “Puffin, A Loanword from Cornish”, *Notes and Queries*, 52, 2 (June, 2005), 172-173.
- Dictionary of the Scots Language*, <http://www.dsl.ac.uk/>.
- Dictionnaire étymologique de l'ancien français (DEAF)*, eds Kurt Baldinger, Jean-Denis Gendron, and Georges Straka, Québec, Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1971-.
- Dunbar, William, *The Poems of William Dunbar*, ed. Priscilla J. Bawcutt, Glasgow, Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 1998.
- de la Buigne, Gace, *Le Roman des deduis*, ed. Åke Blomqvist, Karlshamn, E. G. Johansson, 1951.
- de Gorog, Ralph Paul, *The Scandinavian Element in French and Norman: A Study of the Influence of the Scandinavian Languages on French from the Tenth Century to the Present*, New York, Bookman Associates, 1958.
- Holland, Richard, *The Buke of the Howlat*, in *The Asloan manuscript; a miscellany in prose and verse, written by John Asloan in the reign of James the Fifth*, ed. W. A. Craigie, Edinburgh, W. Blackwood and Sons, 1923-1925.
- Hunt, Tony, *Teaching and Learning Latin in Thirteenth-Century England*, Woodbridge, Suffolk, Rochester, New York, D. S. Brewer, 1991.
- An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, eds Richard Cleasby, Gudbrand Vigfusson, and William A. Craigie, 2nd edn, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1957.
- Idley, Peter, *Peter Idley's Instructions to His Son*, ed. C. D'Evelyn, *MLA Monograph* 6, Boston, Heath, London, Oxford University Press, 1935.

- Imbs, Paul, ed., *Trésor de la langue française (TLF)*, Paris, Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1971-1994.
- Klinck, Anne L., “The Seafarer”, *The Old English Elegies: A Critical Edition and Genre Study*, Montreal, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1992.
- Kurath, Hans, et al., eds, *Middle English Dictionary*, Ann Arbor, Michigan, University of Michigan Press, 2001.
- Levy, Raphael, *Le Trésor de la langue des juifs français au moyen âge*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1964.
- Marie de France, *Les Fables*, ed. Charles Brucker, Louvain, Peeters, 1991.
- Meritt, Herbert Dean, ed., *Old English Glosses: A Collection*, New York, Modern Language Association of America, London, Oxford University Press, 1945.
- Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd edn, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015; *OED Online*, www.oed.com/.
- Philippe de Thaon, *Le Bestiaire de Philippe de Thaün*, ed. Emmanuel Walberg, Lund, H. Möller, 1900.
- Sayers, William, “Medieval Anglo-French and English names for the osprey”, *Tradition Today*, 6 (2016), 70-73.
- Svensk etymologisk ordbog*, ed. Elof Hellquist, Lund, Gleerups, 1922.
- Trotter, David, “‘Trové l’avum mis en tist’: Comment réduire notre ignorance du lexique de l’anglo-normand”, in Oreste Floquet and Gabriele Giannini, eds, *Anglo-français: philologie et linguistique*, Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2015, pp. 135-150.
- Trotter, David, “*Tote manere d’oiseaus*: les noms d’oiseaux en anglo-normand”, *Cahiers de lexicologie*, 103 (2013), 125-143.
- Two Fifteenth-century Cookery-books*, ed. Thomas Austin, London, Trübner, 1888.
- de Vries, Jan, *Altnordisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 2nd edn, Leiden, Brill, 1977.
- von Wartburg, Walther, et al., eds, *Französisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, Bonn, F. Klopp, 1928-2002.
- Wright, Joseph, ed., *English Dialect Dictionary*, 6 vols, London, H. Frowde, New York, G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1898-1905.