

Notes and Queries (1)

***Pixilated*: A Somerset word?**

Folklorists have long understood that “pixilated” should be connected to pixy-lore and that the word means “to be pixy-led”.¹ Linguists have long known, meanwhile, that “pixilated” is first attested in American English. “Pixilated” appeared in a political pamphlet in Salem in 1848 (the *OED*’s first instance);² and in the same year was written down by Hawthorne in his notebook (this reference seems to have gone unnoticed).³ It appeared in a Marblehead novel, *Agnes Surriage*, in 1886, interestingly for a straying boat,⁴ and it was first placed in a folklore context in 1891.⁵ It even had an outing in a hit Hollywood film of 1936, *Mr Deeds Goes to Town*,⁶ after which it enjoyed brief international celebrity.

However, there has been no proper attempt to explain the derivation of the word, other than noting the obvious correspondence with “pixy-led”. “Pixy-led”, though, should have produced “pixilet”/“pixileted” in America (or some such word). Nor are we in sympathy with Gillian Edwards’s suggestion that the word was “an alteration, modelled maybe upon the many verbs of action ending in -late, such as emulate, accumulate, speculate and so on.”⁷ Nor, is an (admittedly tentative) attempt to derive “pixilated” from Dutch in the least convincing.⁸ Still less, should the folk etymology “pitch-belated” be taken seriously!⁹ The most probable explanation is that “pixilated” was not based on “pixy-led”, but on one of the other south-western words for the same phenomenon: “pixy-laden” or “pixy-laid” or, most interestingly, “pixy-laided”.

This last form is poorly attested but it did apparently exist, in Somerset, despite the absence of “laided” as a participle for “lay” in the *OED*. In 1904, a Somerset reader wrote to his local newspaper with the following question:

“Can any reader say if they have ever heard a person, or persons, being ‘Pexelated’? I only give the word as I have heard it spoken. I have heard old persons declare that they have been ‘Pexelated,’ and have been unable to follow their own inclinations, as if a power was holding them back. I have heard of charms being used to ward off the danger of being ‘pexelated.’”¹⁰

Various readers wrote in with the folklore relating to being pixy-led, but only one attempted to explain the word in linguistic terms:

“It is fully expressed by the true form of the word as pronounced – Pixy-laided ... a more forcible expression than Pixy-led.”¹¹

The idea of an extra “ed” reinforcing is not conventional, nor convincing. But “pixy-laided” could have been coined as “pixy-laid” ceased to be familiar, the added “ed” creating, in the minds of users, an adjectival participle. The linguistic progression might be expressed as: “fairies pexelaid [to use the reader’s spelling] Joe Bloggs”, “Joe Bloggs was pexelaited by fairies”.

As to the use of an identical word in New England, broadly speaking there are two possibilities. First, a parallel process took place in the New World and in Somerset: a process that should be connected to the collapse of the pixy tradition in both regions.¹² Second, “pixilated” was brought across to New England, not from Cornwall, from which one would have expected, in any case, “piskey-led” or “piskilated”, but from Somerset, where the lore of being “pixilated” continued, in the Mendips, well into the 1920s.¹³ The word “pixilated” is found, incidentally, in Somerset as late as 1946: or was this the influence of *Mr. Deeds* in British cinemas?¹⁴

Any other instances of “pixilated” from Somerset or Dorset would be gratefully received.

Notes

1. For the folklore of being pixy-led, see Katharine M. Briggs, *A Dictionary of Fairies*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1977, pp. 330-331, Simon Young, “Pixy-Led in the South West”, *Transactions of the Devonshire Association*, 148, 311-336, Simon Young, “Four Neglected Pixy-Led Sources from Devon”, *The Devon Historian*, 85 (2016), 39-49.
2. Fannie Hardy Eckstorm, “Pixilated: A Marble Head Word”, *American Speech*, 16 (1941), 78-80, at 79.
3. “Passages from Hawthorne’s Note-Books”, *Atlantic Quarterly*, 18 (1866), 682-697: “Pixilated”, A Marblehead word meaning bewildered, wild about any matter. Probably derived from pixy a fairy.”
4. Edwin L. Bynner, *Agnes Surriage*, Boston and New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1886, pp. 56-57.
5. Alice Morse Earle, “Waste Basket of Words”, *Journal of American Folklore*, 4 (1891), 159-160.
6. Eckstorm, “Pixilated”.
7. Gillian Edwards, *Hobgoblin and Sweet Puck: Fairy Names and Natures*, London, Geoffrey Bles, 1974, p. 160.
8. Helen Mansfield, “Essex County Dialect”, *Bulletin of the Essex Institute*, 26 (1894), 167-178, at 174.
9. Eckstorm, 79.
10. Aniso, “Pexelated”, *Taunton Courier and Western Advertiser* (November 30th, 1904), 4. The form must have existed because a second reader asked the same question fifteen years later: W. G. Willis Watson, “Pixylated”, *Taunton Courier and Western Advertiser* (July 30th, 1919), 6.
11. “Pexylated”, *Taunton Courier and Western Advertiser* (December 28th, 1904), 4.
12. Peter Muise, and Simon Young, “Pixy-Lore in Massachusetts”, *Devon and Cornwall Notes and Queries*, 41 (2015), 219-220.
13. F. W. Mathews, *Tales of the Blackdown Borderland*, London, Somerset Folk Press, 1923, pp. 55-64.
14. L. H. Dopson, “Pixies in Somerset”, *Taunton Courier* (April 27th, 1946), 2: “I knew a man who was pixilated like me when he was coming home late after courting over Staple way... This was just the region where I got pixilated in 1944.”

Simon Young and Peter Muise
simonyoungfl@gmail.com