

Notes and Queries

Dragging Cats through Streams

According to Joseph Wright's south Worcestershire correspondent H[amilton] K[ingsford], that county was home to an old game or practical joke called *whipping the cat*, described by Kingsford as follows: "A wager was laid by a confederate party with some one person that a cat could draw him across a pool or stream. He was then fastened securely to one end of a cord on one side of the water, and a cat tied to the other end on the other side. The cat was then whipped up, and of course the one cat power achieved nothing; but it was supplemented by many a willing human hand, and the hapless victim was dragged through the water." (*English Dialect Dictionary*, 6, p. 463).

Much the same practice was known in Lancashire and Yorkshire (*EDD*, 6, p. 463), but also in Hampshire, as we see from an account provided by William Holloway in his *A General Dictionary of Provincialisms* of 1839 (*EDD*, 1, p. 537). What is perhaps more surprising is that the prank is referred to in Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair*, which was first staged on October 31st, 1614. Here, speaking of an unpleasant experience with a no less unpleasant person, a character called Wasp says: "... afore I will endure such another half day with him, I'll be drawn with a good gib-cat, [tom-cat] through the great pond at home, as his uncle Hodge was."! (Act 1, Scene iv, lines 95-97, in Helen Ostovich, ed., Ben Jonson, *Four Comedies*, 2nd edn, London and New York, Routledge, 2013).

If we now extend our range somewhat, we shall find that the English custom, or at least the saying, had counterparts in the German-speaking world. Thus a modern collection of dialect idioms from Hesse gives us: "Die Katz dorch die [sic] Bach ziehe" ("to pull the cat through the stream"), glossed as "to put oneself in danger for others"; "to do something unpleasant." (Hans Friebertshäuser, *Redensarten aus Hessen*, Husum, Husum-Verlag, 1990, p. 11) Compare a Swabian expression, courtesy Peter-Michael Mangold (www.schwäbisch-schwätza.de), for "That is a very unpleasant affair": "Des isch widdr wia d'Kaddz durch da Bach schloifa". In standard German this is: "Das ist wie die Katze durch den Bach zu schleifen", and it translates as: "That is like dragging the cat through the stream."

In fact, a version of this Swabian idiom crops up in, of all places, a work on the conservation of energy, Robert von Mayer's *Robert von Mayer über die Erhaltung der Energie. Briefe an Wilhelm Griesinger nebst dessen Antwortsschreiben aus den Jahren 1842-1845* (Berlin, Gebrüder Paetel, 1889, pp. 129-130, footnote 20): "Da muss man mit der Katze durch die [sic] Bach," translatable as "In such cases you have to go through the stream with the cat." The following equivalents are given: "You have to go through thick and thin, overcome all kinds of unpleasant obstacles, hack your way through, make short work of it". There then follows the comment of a correspondent to the effect that the related saying "Ich muss die Katze durch die [sic] Bach schleifen", ("I must drag the cat through the stream") means "I'm condemned to deal with a certain unpleasant matter, which others have burdened me with, whether or not it all began with some fault of my own."

Tracing our family of idioms further back, we light upon a work on forestry, on the pseudo-acacia, *Robinia pseudoacacia*. It is F. J. Medicus's *Unächter Acacien-Baum* (Leipzig, Gräff, 1796), where (vol. 1, p. 163) there is an account of the difficulties arising from the complex chain of command on great estates. It continues: "Und wer muss da die Katze durch den Bach schleppen als der arme Jäger?" Literally this is: "And who has to drag the cat through the stream but the poor gamekeeper?"

A search for the earliest known records of the saying takes us to the Reformation and, for instance, the work of the satirist and translator of Rabelais, Johann Fischart (1546-1590). In his *Flöhhatz* ("Flea-Hunt") of 1573 we find (lines 1825-1826): "und wer da ist am meisten schwach/der zieh die Katz dann durch den Bach" ("and whoever is the loser [literally 'is weakest'], let him then draw the cat through the stream.")

In his *Lexicon bipartitum, Latino-Germanicum, Germanico-Latinum* (Stuttgart, Metzler, 1715, vol. 2, p. 208), Erich Weismann gives us against the headword *Katz* the by now familiar saying "wir müssen mit der Katz durch den Bach", which he glosses "exedendum nobis jam est, quod intrivimus". Compare Terence's *Phormio*, where in Act 3, Scene i we find at line 318 the somewhat similar "Tute hoc intristi, tibi omnest exedendum." *Intristi* (i.e. *intrivisti*) is from the verb *interere*, here meaning "to crumble (bread or the like) into soup (or the like)". What all this seems to suggest is that there is an underlying Latin proverbial saying along the lines of "illi exedendum est quod intrivit", literally "he must eat up what he has crumbled [into his soup]". In Karl Dziatzko, *Ausgewählte Komödien des P. Terentius Afer* (3rd revised edn, Leipzig, Teubner, 1898, p. 113), we do indeed find our Latin sentence "Tute hoc intristi, tibi omnest exedendum" recognised as a proverbial saying and matched with the German "Was du dir eingebrockt, das musst du auch aufessen". Compare A[ugust] Otto, *Die Sprichwörter und sprichwörtlichen Redensarten der Römer* (Leipzig, Teubner, 1890, no. 869, pp. 175-176).

It would thus appear that modern German idioms along the lines of "die Suppe auslöffeln (ausessen) müssen, die man sich eingebrockt hat", roughly translatable as "to have to sup up the broth that one has concocted for oneself" have classical prototypes. As indicated above, the verb *einbrocken*, which translates the Latin *interere*, suggests the act of crumbling something, reducing it to crumbs; compare the noun *Brocken*, meaning "crumb". In his *Lexikon der sprichwörtlichen Redensarten* (Freiburg, Herder, 1973, 4, p. 1051) against the headword *Suppe*, Lutz Röhrich gives no modern or classical prototypes for "die Suppe ausessen, die man sich eingebrockt hat" and variants. As for genetically related versions in English, I can find none. In his translation of Terence's *Phormio* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Wilson, 1894, pp. 28-29), M. H. Morgan resorts to "you mixed this mess, and now you've got to eat it all yourself".

Although, as we have seen, relevant German sayings are quite numerous, descriptions of the actual custom of dragging cats through streams are hard to come by. For the moment, we shall have to content ourselves with Grimm's remark in his *Deutsches Wörterbuch* against *Katze* that *Katzbach* and *Katzenbach* are common names for streams in German-speaking

countries. We can only hope that at some point local historians will provide documentary evidence linking such a name to the custom under discussion.

J. B. Smith

On the Significance of Wisps, Wands, and Withies

Traditionally, small pieces of vegetation such as wisps of hay or straw, wands, or withies have been used to convey simple messages where words would be impossible or inappropriate. Take for instance the information that in Caithness to be first at a well on New Year's morning was to get the *cream* of the well. This meant beauty and happiness for whoever secured the *cream*. That person would leave a wisp of straw in the well, indicating to the next comer that her efforts and those of her successors were in vain (Grant, *Scottish National Dictionary, SND*, <https://dsl.ac.uk/>).

An Ulster custom (*SND*, J. W. Byers in *Northern Whig*, Lecture iv, 1901) has a *wisp* of hay or straw performing an entirely different function:

“It used to be customary ... on both Christmas and New Year's Day ... when the mistress of the house appeared in the morning in the kitchen, for one of the servants to meet her, and while saying ‘My new year's gift,’ to throw gently at her a small wisp of hay or straw. In case the missile hit the mistress, the gift – like a forfeit – was earned, and it consisted of what was called ‘a butter bannock,’ that was an oaten cake very thickly covered with butter.”

A wand, peeled or otherwise, could be equally significant in a variety of contexts. For example, in Stevenson's *Kidnapped* (1886, p. 266) we read: “We entered a small change-house [ale-house, tavern], which we only knew to be a public by the wand over the door.” Here the wand seems to be performing the same function as the traditional bush or wisp, as in the proverb *Good wine needs no bush/wisp*. At the same time, a peeled wand outside a door can apparently be intended as a sign that those within do not wish to be disturbed. Thus in Scott's *Rob Roy*, 1818, chapter 28: “And did she na see by the white wand at the door, that gentlemans had taken up the public-house on their ain business?” Compare also, from p. 233 of Neil Munro's *The Lost Pibroch* (4th edn, Edinburgh, Blackwood, 1901): “Such people as passed her way would have gone in, but the withie was aye across the door, and that's the sign that business is doing within that no one dare disturb.”

Withies provide the imagery for some traditional sayings. For Argyll we have for instance, from Neil Munro's *Doom Castle* (1901, p. 295): “My grief! We must steep the withies and go ourselves to the start of fortune like any beggars.” On p. 24, *The Lost Pibroch* yields “Steep we the withies and go!” Another story by the same author, *Shoes of Fortune*, gives us in chapter 39: “It's time you were steeping withies to go away, as we say in the language.” *SND* explains the idiom *to steep the withies*, “to get ready, to prepare to start”, as a translation of Gaelic *bogadh nan gad*, “the soaking of willow wands”, i.e. to make them pliable for use as

harness. Compare an example of Highland usage taken by *SND* from T. R. Barnett, *Road to Rannoch* (1924, chapter xv): “Steep the withie, draw the door, and turn the rusty key.” The commentary is as follows: “To steep or soak withies in water, bend them and nail them to a closed door is a sign that the householder has left home suddenly.”

Compare now *SND peel*¹, “to strip”, recorded as southern Scots in 1965 in the saying *to peel one’s wands*, used figuratively for “to commence any enterprise, to start something new”, this probably being a metaphor from basketmaking, specifically used “of a newly-married couple starting life together, or of the beginning of an apprenticeship or the like”. Note in this connection the Northumbrian “He’s oney peelin his wands yit”, entered in Joseph Wright’s *English Dialect Dictionary* against *wand*, “willow wand, osier”, and glossed as “only making essay yet”.

A rather different usage is to be found in Alexander Fordyce’s *A Country Wedding* (Lanark, 1818). Here, in a note on p. 230, we see the following words addressed to a bridegroom; “An’ see that your bra’ white wand be peel’d.” This is explained as follows: “The ‘white wand’ is commonly a sprig of willow or hazel, stripped of its bark, and carried by the bridegroom till married, when he hands it in to one of the company whom he thinks most likely to be next in the same situation.”

Wands are of course traditionally associated with magical practices. In his *Notes on the Folk-Lore of the Northern Counties of England and the Borders* (London, Longman, 1866, pp. 79-80), William Henderson tells us of a presumably northern English or Scots custom that involved the use of a willow wand for divination. A girl must take a willow wand in her left hand and, without being observed, slip out of the house and run three times round it, whispering, “He that’s to be my gude man come and grip the end o’t.” During the third circuit of the house, the likeness of the girl’s future husband will appear and grasp the other end of the wand. Henderson adds, “A sword is sometimes used instead of a wand, but, in this case, it must be held in the right hand.” He does not locate the custom or place it on the calendar, but Hallowe’en or New Year’s Eve will presumably have been suitable occasions.

A peeled wand or stick also features in a Welsh custom recorded by W. Meredith Morris in his *A Glossary of the Demetian Dialect of North Pembrokeshire* of 1910 (rpt Felinfach, Llanerch, 1991, p. 133) against *ffon-wen*, which is glossed “a white walking-stick”, following which we read:

“A stick presented to a young man who has been jilted by his sweetheart. The stick is usually of ash, denuded of its bark, and is sent anonymously by any wag who is acquainted with the young man’s love affairs. When a young fellow receives the *ffon-wen*, he becomes the object of much good-humoured banter.”

The commentary given in the online Welsh dictionary *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru* varies slightly from this:

“stick (usually of hazel), freshly peeled of its bark to expose the white stem, and sent anonymously to a young man or woman, jilted by his or her sweetheart, on the wedding-day of the former lover (lit. white stick).”

Here now is another custom associated with peeled sticks. In Kentish dialect there was a verb *to shin* meaning “to seek an engagement as a farm servant”, and generally used in the phrase *to go shinning*. Wright’s *EDD* correspondent for the county, D. W. L[ewin], provides the following quotation: “He was going shinning, with a peeled stick in his hand.” A man who went round to farmhouses at Michaelmas time seeking work as a farm-servant was a *shinner*, as in the quotation provided by Wright’s correspondent P. M[aylam]: “I had three shiners come this morning.” The peeled stick with which the shinner advertised his services was the *shining-stick* (thus spelt), as in the oldest relevant quotation, dated c. 1821: “He said der was a teejus [long, protracted] fair Dat lasted for a wick; An all de ploughmen dat went dair Must car [carry] dair shining-stick.” According to W. D. Parish and W. F. Shaw in their *Dictionary of the Kentish Dialect and Provincialisms* of 1887, the shining stick (with diphthong [ei·] in the first syllable) was “a thin peeled stick, formerly carried by farm labourers at statute fairs, to shew that they sought work for the coming year”.

A different way of indicating one’s availability for work seems to have obtained at the opposite end of the country. In his *Ballads in the Cumberland Dialect* (Wigton, R. Hetherington, 1808), Robert Anderson has in his Ballad 24, entitled “Watty”, on pp. 55-58, the line, “At Carel [Carlisle] I stuid wi’ a strae i’ my mouth.” On p. 221, note 27 we find the following commentary:

“In Cumberland, servants who are employed in husbandry are seldom engaged for a longer term than half a year. On the customary days of hiring, they proceed to the nearest town, and, that their intentions might be known, stand in the market-place with a sprig or straw in their mouths.”

EDD has under *straw* the phrase *to stand with a straw in one’s mouth* for “to stand at a fair to be hired as a servant”. A reference that follows is from Wright’s authority on matters Cumbrian, M. B[entinck-S[mith]], who writes: “Still customary at ‘statute fair’ of Carlisle, though somewhat fallen in abeyance.” His comment probably dates to around 1900. A Northumbrian reference against *EDD*, 5, p. 808 and dated 1892-94 runs: “At a hiring, the hinds who are waiting for an engagement are distinguished by their having a small piece of strae in the mouth.”

Relevant here is an entry in *EDD*, 3, p. 173 against headword *hire*, similarly originating from the Northumbrian authority R. O. H[eslop]:

“Those who are in want of employment stand with a straw in the mouth. As soon as an engagement has been made, the lads or lasses adjourn to the various attractions which attend a hiring. The usual proclamations are headed ‘A hiring for hinds’, or ‘A hiring for female servants will be held’.”

Are we to assume that a straw was worn in the mouth by women as well as by men wishing to be hired?

J. B. Smith