

The Catskin Carried by Bosch's "Prodigal Son"

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Have you ever wondered why there is a tabby-catskin hanging down from the back-basket carried by the Pedlar on the painting by Bosch now in the Museum Boymans-Van Beuningen in Rotterdam? It seems to me, incidentally, to prove that he is a pedlar and not a more neutral 'Wayfarer' as he is sometimes termed.



H. Bosch - "The Prodigal Son"
Rotterdam Museum

It was a Middle English nickname, Pilecat, that set me thinking about this at first sight — at least to a 20th century viewer — curious detail. Pilecat is one of the names discussed by C. Clark and D. Owen in their

"Lexicological Notes from King's Lynn"¹, who derive it from the ME verb pilen meaning 'strip, skin, pluck' and cat. They compared a Norman byname Pelcat, cited at Pelabon by Dauzat & Morle where it is said to apply to those who were "censes corcher des animaux dont la peau avait peu de valeur". Weekly records a Catteskyne² and note 'Monsire John de Barres, dist Piau de Chat. Chivaler', the special envoy of Philip of France sent to Edward I in 1300.³ From my browsings amongst medieval nicknames in several vernaculars I realized that this was a rather productive type: from 12th and 13th century England we have the present Ricardus Pilecat (1166), Robertus Pilecrowe (from 1175),⁴ Pilemus (1185), Pillegos, (1285), and Pilecoc (1199).⁵

From contemporary France: Poile canem (c. 1172) ('qui tond un chien')⁶ and Poile chien,⁷ and even Pelapoll (c.1120) ('qui tond un pou').⁸ A Jehans Pelecoc is found in the Vieil Rentier d'Audenarde (c. 1275) and a Pelemus [but the second element can hardly be ME mus???) in the Arras necrology (1243). Semantically equivalent, and presumably satirical [cf. traditional names for misers of the English 'skin-flint' variety] are

¹ in Norfolk Archeology 37:1 (1978)

² Surnames, 144

³ C. Bullock-Davies Menestrellorum Multitudo, 123.

⁴ See MED

⁵ P.H. Reaney, Origin of English Surnames London, 1967 p.288 for these last three.

⁶ Lebel 124, citing Documents relatifs a la Champagne 1172-1361 vol.1 (Paris, 1901) ed A. Longnon.

⁷ *ibid.* citing ed. A. Lognon, Role des fiefs du comte de Champagne, 1249-52 (Paris 1877)

⁸ *ibid.*, citing Les plus anciens chartes en langue provençale, XIIe siecle. ed C. Brunel (Paris, 1926)

nicknames with the first element escorche-, such as one Jehan Escorche-Rainne (T1,8) who "fängt sich Frosche und zieht ihnen die Haut ab"⁹ from the Parisian Tax-pay roll of 1292.

With the French 'dog-skinner' names should be compared German Hundschint (Esslingen, 1257; Katzenthal, c. 1400)¹⁰. In 1519 a group of Leipzig students got into a slanging-match with a group of furriers' apprentices whom they abused as katzen-schynder, a term also used in Michael Beheim's Buch von den Wienern (1462) to stigmatize a furrier.¹¹ In Der Renner (1290s) Hugo von Trimberg condemns Katzenschinder.¹²

*Wizzet swer sich underwindet
Daz er eine katzen schindet
Der schindet vil sanfter allen irn lip
Dene daz houpt...*

But archeological evidence for the killing of cats at a year old for their skins comes from the Hausberg at Gaiselberg in Niederösterreich.¹³

But back to Bosch! Late medieval literature provides evidence that catskins were precisely the sort of wares carried around by the lower classes of pedlars, noting in passing Langland's:

*I have as much pite of povere men as pedlere hath of cattes, That
wolde kille hem, if he cacche hem myghte, for coveitise of hir
skynnes.*¹⁴

The significant citation occurs in a 15th century carol:

We ben chapmen lyght of fote,

⁹ Pachnio (1909), 62.

¹⁰ cit Socin (1903) 463.

¹¹ cit Symbole des Alltags (Kuhnel Festschrift), 334 n.65.

¹² ed. G. Ehrismann lines 12, 595-8).

¹³ Kuhnel FS, 595.

¹⁴ Piers Plowman B-Text (1377X9) V.254f.

*The fowle weyis for to fle
 We bern abowtyn non cattes skynnys
 Pursis, perlis, syluer pynnys...*

..... (i.e. the wares of the ordinary pedlar).¹⁵

Gower has two references to cat-skinning, one in French, one in Latin from Le Mirour de l'Omme (c.1376-8) vv.7129ff.¹⁶ and implying that cat-skinning is synonymous with thievery, but being more extreme it cannot go unnoticed even in Gower's harsh times:

*Fuist il soubtils cil q'a l'empire
 Sceust s'excusacioun confire
 De tieu response colouree?
 Certes oil; et pour descrire
 Le temps present, qui bien remire,
 Hom voit pluseurs en tiel degre
 Pilant, robbant leur visinee,
 Et ont leur cause compasse,
 Qu'il semble al oill que doit suffire:
 Mais l'en dist, qui quiert escorchee 7138
Le pell du chat, dont soit furree
 Luy fault aucune chose dire.*

while from his Cronica Tripertita (c.1399), we have

*Et sic qui cati pellem cupit excoriati
 Fingebat causas fallaci pectore clausas
 Like one that flays the cat to get its skin
 His crafty beast feigned causes closed within*

.....

¹⁵ Greene Early English Carols, 416.

¹⁶ ed, G.C. Macaulay The Complete Works of John Gower (Oxford, 1902) The French Works, p. 83.

Notes and News on the Profane Arts

trans A.G. Rigg]

A German literary reference to the ignominy associated with this particular unehrlich occupation is found in Wittenwiler's Ring (c1400) vv.1021ff.

Daz Bertschi hat geschunden

Ein katzen mit der tenggen hand:

Daz ist ein laster und ein schand.

where the fact that it was done with the left hand, presumably makes it all the more shameful and unehrlich.

Evidence for the actual commercial trade in such humble skins and their relative value comes from Etienne Boileau's Livre des mestiers (1268)¹⁷ in which the tax per half dozen pelts of marten, otter, and wildcat is 2 pence, but only 1 penny per six "pelts of private cats, which are called cats of the fireside or of the hearth" — these are presumably the same as the catorum ignium for a thousand imported skins of which, only 4d duty was deducted by the Ipswich customs in 1303 [M pellium catorum ignium iiii].¹⁸

Lastly, as late as the 1628 inventory of the goods in the shop of John Uttinge senior of Great Yarmouth, a linen-drapeer-cum-chapman we find the following valuations:¹⁹

150 polecat skins	0 15 0
400 black Conny skins	10 0 0
2 Otter skins	0 17 0

¹⁷ II. 19 ed. G-B.Depping, Règlements sur les arts et métiers de Paris (Paris, 1837), 326.

¹⁸ cit. Gras 162.

¹⁹ M. Spufford The Great reclothing of Rural England (London, 1984) 40, 185.

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3 English fox skins	0 7 0
5 Island fox skins	0 2 6
60 Cattskins	0 8 0
60 skurrill skins	0 2 6
so many gray Conny skins as sould for	50 0 0

Given this wealth of late medieval evidence, onomastic, literary and historical, I think we may safely conclude that Bosch's painting depicts a fairly humble pedlar. In the illustration below, notice the catskin dangling from his basket.



H. Bosch - "The Prodigal Son"
 Detail
 Rotterdam Museum

