

**FIGURATIVE USES OF  
ANIMAL NAMES IN LATIN  
AND THEIR APPLICATION TO  
MILITARY DEVICES. A THESIS**

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by Eugene Stock McCartney

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FIGURATIVE USES OF ANIMAL NAMES  
IN LATIN AND THEIR APPLICATION  
TO MILITARY DEVICES

A STUDY IN SEMANTICS

BY

EUGENE STOCK McCARTNEY, A.B.

A THESIS

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University of Pennsylvania, in Partial Fulfilment of  
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In armorum generibus milites sumunt ab animalibus nomina.

(*Serv. Aen.* ix, 503.)



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<sup>1</sup>In addition to the books above listed, the various lexica have been consulted.

The abbreviations of Latin works and their authors are those of the *Thesaurus L. L.*, except that *Veg.* is used to refer to the military writer.



## FIGURATIVE USES OF ANIMAL NAMES IN LATIN.

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Of some seven hundred names of animals<sup>2</sup> found in Harper's Latin Lexicon, about one-third are used in significations more or less figurative. This seems a large proportion, but the list is far more imposing when we consider that metaphorically the names of animals are capable of more than one interpretation, attracting to themselves a train of kindred ideas and suggestions whereby language is progressively enriched, an enrichment to which there is hardly a limit. The list becomes even more impressive when we realize that from these names there are formed adjectives, verbs, and even adverbs. Furthermore, an animal name may become a prefix, as *βov-* and *ίρρο-* in Greek.<sup>3</sup>

Not content with representing the vices and virtues of human beings by animal names, writers of comedy and satire further ridiculed the acts of men by the use of verbs which were strictly appropriate to animals alone.<sup>4</sup> Again, allusions to an animal may be present *in extenso* without any mention of the animal.<sup>5</sup>

A glance at Murray's New English Dictionary under the caption *dog, cat, horse, etc.*, will reveal in some measure the extent of the field of this phenomenon in English.

<sup>2</sup> The word *animal* is used in the Latin sense.

<sup>3</sup> Bulimum Graeci magnam famem dicunt, aduerti magnis et amplis rebus praeponeere *βov-*, a magnitudine scilicet bovis. Hinc est, quod grandes pueros *βovραιδας* appellant, et mariscam sicum *βόβυκος*, Paul. Fest. p. 32 Müll. Cf. Varro *Rust.* ii, 5, 4; also the English use of *horse, bull, elephant*, to denote hugeness, strength, loudness, coarseness, as seen in *horse-laugh, horse-nettle, horse-play, horse-ant, horse-sense, bull-frog, bull-fiddle, elephant-folio*.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Omnes . . . sibilent, Plaut. *Merc.* 407; Omnis plateas perreptavi, Plaut. *Amph.* 1011; Nostras aedis arietat, Plaut. *Truc.* 256.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Vergil's figure of winds chafing like steeds at the barriers, *Aen.* i, 52-63.

The citation of a few examples like *blackbird-brig*, *donkey-engine*, *alligator-wrench*, *caterpillar-traction-engine*, *grass-hopper-connecting-rod* will show the flexibility of the English language in the transfer of animal names to mechanical devices and contrivances. Its freedom in other fields is quite as pronounced.<sup>6</sup>

It is interesting to try to ascertain the causes for such freedom and scope in the transferred uses of animal names. Primitive man must have been curious about all phenomena of nature. Probably nothing in his usual round of activities attracted and engrossed his attention so much as the multitudinous manifestations of animal life thronging the air, roaming the fields, and swimming the streams. Even had he not been curious, necessity, stern and inexorable, would soon have compelled him to form an acquaintance with them.

For food and sustenance he was dependent in large measure upon them. To capture them he had to learn their habits and haunts. The more intimate he became with their traits, the better could he provide himself with food, the better could he safeguard his own life. His knowledge of the animal world he purchased at his own expense. By bitter experience he learned which was the dangerous end of a snake or scorpion, which set of extremities of the panther or wild ass it was advisable to avoid. He found out which beasts were best for the spit, and which it was judicious to leave in their own domain.

His clear vision and keen hearing were instinctively exercised in the detection of possible danger, chiefly from the animal world. His hand and brain were busied in fashioning weapons and devices to capture his prey or defend his own life. He had a real and living acquaintance with the manifold animals about him, he recognized their distinguishing calls and cries, he knew their characteristic actions, manners, traits, and dispositions, he located with ease the favorite retreat of the wild beast.

<sup>6</sup> See Greenough and Kittredge, *Words and their Ways in English Speech*, 361 ff., *Words from the Names of Animals*.

He found it both convenient and necessary to designate the various creatures he hunted, whose capture was so essential to him. His interest in the animal world is attested by the large number of onomatopoeic animal names, and verbs representing their cries.<sup>7</sup>

For better protection against man and beast, he allied himself with other men. The clan or tribe was formed. He found greater need of a more extensive medium of communication. He groped about for greater freedom and fullness of expression. He drew upon the resources nearest at hand, the things with which he was by force of circumstances most familiar. He called a man a deer because he was fleet, a sheep because he was timid, a fox because he was sly. The terms might persist and become personal names,<sup>8</sup> or even designate a nation.<sup>9</sup>

In his opinion the animals were capable of communicating and reasoning.<sup>10</sup> He attributed to them various powers of prognostication.<sup>11</sup> He endowed parts of their bodies with magical remedial powers.<sup>12</sup> He went so far as to deify them.<sup>13</sup> The most savage animal might be accepted by a tribe of men as a totem and thereafter be developed into a god.<sup>14</sup>

Not content with fables and myths about well-known animals,<sup>15</sup> he fashioned from his own imagination beasts of fantastic shape.<sup>16</sup>

He forsook his hunting and nomadic life for agricultural pursuits. His observation of the animal world became keener, if possible. It took a long search to find beasts

<sup>7</sup> Mugit bovis, ovis balat, equi hinnunt, gallina pipat. Non. 156, M.

<sup>8</sup> Latin *Asinus*, *Asella*, *Aquila*, etc.; Greek *Ταῦρος*, *Ἴππος*, *Κόραξ*, etc.; English *Crow*, *Fox*, etc.; Indian *Big Bear*, *Hawk Eye*, etc.

<sup>9</sup> *Βοῦρλια ἴσ*, Pind. *O.* 6, 153.

<sup>10</sup> Probably the conversation between Achilles and his horse Xanthus (*Il.* xix, 408 sqq.) is a reminiscence of the naïveté of primitive times.

<sup>11</sup> Plin. *Nat.* viii, 28, 42 (102-103).

<sup>12</sup> Plin. *Nat.* xxx, treats of remedies derived from various animals.

<sup>13</sup> *Ἰχθύων- ὄφθ* of *Σάρος θεὸς ἰχθύων*, Xen. *Anab.* i, 4, 9. Cf. also Ov. *Fasti*, ii, 471 sqq.

<sup>14</sup> A. Lang, *The Secret of the Totem*.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Gubernatis, *Zoological Mythology*. Cf. also, Aesop, Phaedrus, Hyginus, Babrius, etc.

<sup>16</sup> Centaur, unicorn, etc.