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## *Bastard* and *Basket*: The Etymologies Revisited

William Sayers

The *Oxford English Dictionary* continues to derive *bastard* in its purported original meaning of 'one begotten and born out of wedlock; an illegitimate or natural child' from Old French *bastard* (cf. Mod. Fr. *bâtard*, Prov. *bastard*, It., Sp., Pg. *bastardo*), this in the sense of Fr. *fil de bât*, 'pack-saddle child' (Old Fr. *fil de bast*), to which the "pejorative suffix" *-ard* would have been added.<sup>1</sup> The meaning of Old Fr. *bast*, Mod. Fr. *bât* 'pack saddle' is beyond question, although the emergence of what is clearly an extended or figurative use is difficult to justify or explain at this historical remove. One might have imagined a more plausible image to have been an illegitimate child as conceived on the impromptu bed of a saddle-cloth.

Other lexicographical works are less content with the traditional derivation as found in *OED*. Its nearest French counterpart as a historical dictionary with exemplification, early attestations, history, and etymology is *Le Trésor de la langue française*, completed in 1994 and now available online as *Le Trésor de la langue française informatisé (TLFi)*. With some irony, we find listed there the first attestation of *bastard* as one born out of wedlock in the *Domesday Book*.<sup>2</sup> The term also appears in medieval Latin as *bastardus*, earliest in a Catalonian legal context where offspring are listed in a will.<sup>3</sup> It appears in the Latin of Britain in 1139 and all the early attestations are from a quasi-legal context, that is, it is not a term of pejoration but one relating to status.<sup>4</sup> The designation of William of Normandy as *bastard* must also have penetrated to Britain some years before the Conquest, when his ambitions were first recognized.<sup>5</sup> In this regard, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* notes: '& Harold cyng, his broþor, gegædrade swa micelne sciphære & eac landhere swa nan cyng her on lande ær dyde, forþam þe him wæs gecyðd þæt Wyllelm Bastard wolde hider & ðis land gewinnen, eallswa hit syððan aeode' (And King Harald, his brother, gathered a greater raiding ship-army and also raiding land-army than any king here in the land had ever done before, because he was informed that William the Bastard wanted to come here and win this land, just as it afterwards came to pass).<sup>6</sup> Other

French examples show *bastard* linked with proper names, although it also had independent status, as when the mid-twelfth-century *Roman de Thèbes* equates 'fil a putain' ('whoreson') with 'bastart'.<sup>7</sup> Figurative uses appear somewhat later; for example, the term is applied to cross-bred horses and raptors perceived as not of true race, a judgment based more on hunting criteria than on speciation.

*TLF* ultimately concedes that the origin of *bastardus* is 'obscure'. Hans Sperber derived *bastard* from a putative Germanic \**bansti* 'barn' (cf. Gothic *bansts*), the bastard then being one conceived under less than formal circumstances.<sup>8</sup> This derivation found favour with *Romanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*.<sup>9</sup> Friedrich Dietz promoted the connection with Old Fr. *bast* 'pack-saddle' and fantasised casual relationships between muleteers and the serving girls at inns where they stopped.<sup>10</sup> Generally seen as more plausible is Lothar Wolf's hypothesis of the derivation of a legal term from primitive Germanic through a western dialect such as Old Frisian, in which *bost* is found with the signification 'marriage union'.<sup>11</sup> His argument is founded on a single textual reference in the Upstallsbom laws from 1323. 'Hwaso een kneppa ieffta famna bynna aefta to bosta iout ieffta nymt buta reed dis mondis and dis sibsta eerwa, dera wrberth ayder hondert merka.' (Whoever gives or takes in marriage a young man or young woman within a year of the law [as a minor] without the authorization of the guardian and of the closest heirs forfeits a hundred marks to each of them).<sup>12</sup> Wolf hypothesizes a loan into, or cognate in, Frankish, where his reconstructed form is \**banstu-*. It is proposed that the archaic Germanic term, ultimately traceable to the Indo-European root \**bhendh-* 'to link, tie',<sup>13</sup> would have been a quasi-legal designation for a second marriage or semi-formal union with a woman of lesser rank than the first or principal wife.<sup>14</sup> Even more speculatively, Wolf suggests that the later negative affect, apparent in the suffix *-ard*, is the result of Christian judgments on supposed Germanic polygyny. While this does not of itself constitute proof, an etymology that highlights legal status after birth rather than the impromptu circumstances of conception—pack-saddles, inns, barns—is much more in keeping with early medieval concerns and values as we reconstruct them.

While grudging credence is given to Wolf's hypothesis,<sup>15</sup> it is recognized that there are few loans (if loan this be) from the North Sea dialects of West Germanic (Old Frisian, Old Saxon, etc.) into the Frankish that was carried to northern Gaul. And no reflex of this instance of Frisian *bost* is found, for example, in Old Saxon or Old English (or Gothic). We should also have to explain why a word for an (admittedly unspecified) marital union should experience such marked semantic pejoration and—the larger social and legal issue—why a term for a marriage union would be reassigned a slot farther down on the socio-legal scale and come to

designate, in a sole surviving derivative, the offspring from a union with other than a first wife. Last among reservations, if *\*banstu-* is the reconstructed Frankish root, the *-n-* in this consonant cluster would not normally have been lost in an evolution in Gallo-Romance.<sup>16</sup>

At this juncture, given that archaic Rhineland Frankish was lexically influenced by continental Celtic, for example as spoken by the neighbouring tribe of the Belgae, we might scan the scant evidence of Gaulish for some comparable term.<sup>17</sup> But neither is the Indo-European root *\*bhendh-* 'to link, tie' represented by a reflex in Gaulish nor do we have any recorded terminology for marital and other unions, or their offspring. Similarly, none of the Old Irish or Old Welsh terminology for male-female unions as found in the very comprehensive archaic law tracts—ranging from contracts with the family of a first wife to unions based on abduction or rape—has any suggestive vocabulary.<sup>18</sup> Medieval Irish, however, does have a figurative term for an illegitimate child, *mac muine* 'son (child) of the brake' (e.g. brambles) that is suggestive, at least, of the disparaging imagery later found in French *fil de bast* 'pack-saddle child'.<sup>19</sup>

In the following pages a different origin is proposed for English *bastard*, French *bâtard*, and their antecedents and congeners, although it will reference some now familiar elements. English *bast* is a term still current among craftspeople and historians for the inner bark of the lime or linden and, more generally, for flexible fibrous barks put to utilitarian purposes. In earlier societies, this pliable bark was cut into strips to yield a coarse thread, wound into cord and rope, and served as raw material in wickerwork for a variety of practical purposes such as baskets and panniers. *Bast* is a common Germanic word, with earlier forms or cognates in OE *bæst*, MHG, Mod.G., MDu., and Mod. Du. *bast* as well as ON, Da., and Sw. *bast* (but not found in the Gothic corpus). While perhaps not bearing directly on the development of *bastard*, an Old English example from the Samson story in *Judges* will establish *bast* as a term of early English technology: 'Hig ða hine gebundon mid twam bæstenum rapum & hine gelæddon to þam folce' (They then bound him with two ropes of bast and brought him to the people, reflecting the Vulgate, 'Ligaveruntque eum duobus novis funibus, et tulerunt eum de Patra Etam').<sup>20</sup> *Bastum/basto* is well attested in the Latin of medieval Britain, in particular in royal accounts, where there is frequent mention of bast used for ships' ropes. Did the translator misread 'duobus novis funibus' (with two new ropes) and mistake 'novis' for 'navis', with the result that he used a term perhaps indicating ship's ropes?<sup>21</sup>

Earlier German lexicographers, e.g. Friedrich Kluge, pronounced *bast* of

obscure origin (Herkunft dunkel).<sup>22</sup> Nor does *bast* figure in Julius Pokorny's extensive list of Germanic terms traceable to IE roots. I would propose a tie with IE \**bhasko-* 'bundle, clutch (of objects)', reflexes of which are Latin *fascis* 'bundle of sticks', *fascia* 'band, bandage', Gaulish *bascauda* 'basin, bowl' (to which I return below), Old Irish *basc* 'object in wickerwork'.<sup>23</sup> In the case of Gmc *bast* it would initially have referenced the inner cylinder of bark of the lime and comparable trees.

*OED* explains the verb *baste*, which I shall define for present purposes as 'to sew loosely with a long running stitch', as adapted from Old Fr. *bastir* (Mod. Fr. *bâtir*), basically 'to build', cf. Sp. *bastear*, *embastar*, It. *imbastire*. It is more plausibly referred to such forms as OHG. *bestan* 'to patch', MHG. *besten* 'to lace, tie', and these in turn have clear ties with the Frankish \**bastjan*, which meant 'to stitch loosely, plait, weave'. With *baste*, we are, in fact, in the domain of bast and the bark of the linden. The term for the material has generated a verb designating uses to which it is typically put. Frankish *bastjan* had a rich heritage in Old French: *bastir* 'fabricate an object; build (a house); surround with fortifications', *bastiment* 'creation', etc.<sup>24</sup> Its fundamental semantics, however, lay with bast, and originally referenced the long, loose stitches and open weave that were characteristic of rough stitching and basketry.

Human sexuality is an area in many languages that is strongly marked by figurative usage. It is then proposed that informal or semi-formal sexual unions that would have produced illegitimate children were designated by a derivative of *bast* or *bastjan* that pointed up the loose nature of such less fixed relationships, viewed as comparable to the looping stitch or open weave characteristic of the use of bast.

The Old Fr. suffix *-ard* has conventionally been seen as of Germanic, more exactly Frankish origin, and its original semantic value would have been 'strong, hard' (cf. English *hard*), as is evident in the many Germanic personal names that incorporate it. While this valence continued in onomastics, the fall in semantic register of the still active French suffix toward pejoration is striking. A development from 'hard' to 'gross' to 'contemptible' must be envisaged. While this question will not be pursued in the present context, it may be time for a fresh, hard look at the origins of the suffix in non-onomastic formations.

The panniers of pack animals would often have been wickerwork, plaited or woven strips of bark from lime, osier, cane, reeds, rushes, etc. Old French *bast* 'pack saddle, pannier' may be assumed originally to have referenced the material of construction and only later, in a narrowing to one specific use, an object so fabricated (the same process evident in the formation of derivatives of Frankish *bastjan*). The later Old French 'unpacking' of *bastard* as *fil de bast* 'child of the pack-saddle' (but

also 'thread of bast'), first attested from the thirteenth century, would then be a back formation under the influence of folk etymology. Seeing *bastard* as allied with *bast* and perhaps still aware of some link to the typical uses and handling of bast cord and rope, the phrase initially referenced the material, later the product. This folk-etymologizing process continued. The later phrasing, steered by both pronunciation and perhaps evolving materials technology, was *filz de bas* /ba/ 'bastard', now assumed to incorporate French *bas* 'low' (< Med. Latin *bassus* 'low') and meaning 'low-born child'. In summary, *OED*'s etymological note is relatively close to the mark, although its reference to *fil de bast* should be pursued past the pannier or pack saddle to its constituent material.

According to this same lexicographical work *basket* has no cognates in Germanic or Romance. Yet the presence of Old English *bæsten* 'made of bast' encourages us to posit an English cognate of the Frankish verb *bastjan*. Could a form such as *bæsted* have yielded *basket* through a sequence of sound substitutions? Another possibility should also be entertained. A Gaulish term *bascauda* has been deciphered and ascribed the meaning 'basin, bowl'.<sup>25</sup> The suffix *-auda* is elsewhere attested and the root *basc-* is that earlier noted in Old Irish *basc* 'wickerwork object', Latin *fascis* 'bundle of sticks, rods', etc., all deriving from IE *\*bhasko-* 'bundle, receptacle for gathering'. Gallo-Romance derivatives of *bascauda* are Old French *baschoe* and modern Norman *bachol* 'ewer', southern French *bachole* 'hamper for grapes'.<sup>26</sup> In these French examples, we should again understand a term for a material (bast) being applied to objects made of it (baskets), then being extended to similarly shaped objects with comparable purposes, e.g. wooden bowl (cf. the extension of meanings of English *wicker* to 'basket, cradle, chair'). An Old French diminutive *\*baschette*, carried to England before the loss of *-s-*, is then another possible source and could, conceivably, have interacted with a native term for objects made with roughly similar methods and materials.<sup>27</sup>

To stand back, in closing, from this phonological speculation on *basket* and return to *bastard*, why would such a word, if ultimately derived from a Germanic term for a marital union, leave such a small historical imprint, with no attested presence in Frankish, no related forms, nominal or verbal, and no trace of the process represented by the considerable semantic modification from marriage union to offspring of an illegitimate sexual union? A more satisfactory derivation is available in *bast* and its congeners, among which the term *bastard*, at least for the medieval period, continued to be associated with its ultimate etymology, *bast*, and to resonate more widely than at present. Nonetheless, this alternative etymology must recognize

a comparable figurative use and some semantic ins and outs comparable to working in wicker. It seems only appropriate that *OED* should have noted *basket* as a euphemism for *bastard*.<sup>28</sup>

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> On the issue of whether origins should be pursued beyond the entry of a loan word into English, the first editors of *OED* clearly state this as legitimate and of interest.

<sup>2</sup> Noted by F. Hildebrand, 'Über das fr. Sprachelement im *Liber Censualis* Wilhelms I. von England', *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie*, 8 (1884), 321-62 (p. 330) in the entry for Robert Bastard.

<sup>3</sup> Ferran Valls i Taberner, *Els orígens dels comtats de Pallars i Ribagorça* (Barcelona: Casa de Caritat, 1918), p. 38, cited in *Glossarium mediae latinitatis Cataloniae* (Barcelona: Universidad de Barcelona, 1960-), col. 244. The counts of Barcelona were mostly Franks. Here it is more likely that a socio-legal concept rather than a term of disparagement has been carried south.

<sup>4</sup> *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*, ed. by R. E. Latham (London: Oxford University Press, 1975-), fasc. 1, A-B, p. 186, s.v. *bastardus*; cf. *bastardia*.

<sup>5</sup> Adam of Bremen, *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, ed. by J. M. Lappenberg (Hanover: Impensis Bibliopoli Hahniani, 1876), Book 3, p. 52; see further *Mittellateinisches Wörterbuch*, ed. by Otto Prinz and Johannes Schneider (Munich: Beck, 1967-), vol. 2, p. 1391, s.v. *bastardus*.

<sup>6</sup> *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition*, ed. by David Dumville and Simon Keynes (Cambridge: Brewer, 1983-96), Vol. 6: *MS D*, ed. by G. P. Cubbin (1996), 1066.12; *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, trans. and ed. by Michael Swanton (New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 195, 197.

<sup>7</sup> *Le Roman de Thèbes*, ed. by Léopold Constans (Paris: Didot, 1890), p. 150; further exemplification in *Altfranzösisches Wörterbuch*, ed. by Adolf Tobler and Erhard Lommattzsch (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1925-2002), vol. 1, col. 863, s.v. *bastart*.

<sup>8</sup> Hans Sperber, 'Romanische Etymologien', *Språkvetenskapliga Sällskapets Förhandlingar i Uppsala* (1906), 152-54.

<sup>9</sup> *Romanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, ed. by Wilhelm Meyer-Lübke, 3<sup>rd</sup> rev. ed. (Heidelberg: Winter, 1935), vol. 1, p. 77, entry 936, *bansts*. A number of prominent French and English etymological dictionaries continue to promote the association with barns: *Dictionnaire étymologique et historique du français*, ed. by Jean Dubois et al. (Paris: Larousse, 2006); *The Barnhart Dictionary of Etymology*, ed. by Robert K. Barnhart (Bronx: Wilson, 1988); *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*, comp. Ernest Klein (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1966-67).



<sup>10</sup> Friedrich Diez, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der romanischen Sprachen*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Bonn: Marcus, 1887), p. 45. See too Leo Spitzer, 'Apr. *saludar de lonh*-altfr. *fls de bast*', *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie*, 51 (1931), 291ff., who explains the term as *Maultiersattelkind*. R. A. Hall, Jr., 'L'etimologia di bastardo', *Romanische Forschungen*, 74 (1962), 111-12, working (back) from Italian *bastardo*, claims that the term originally designates the mule (on the basis of the packsaddle it carried) and then an illegitimate son.

<sup>11</sup> *Altfriesisches Wörterbuch*, ed. by Karl von Richthofen (Göttingen: Dieterichsche Buchhandlung, 1840), p. 663, s.v. *boste*. This derivation is reflected in *The American Heritage Dictionary* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985).

<sup>12</sup> Karl von Richthofen, *Friesische Rechtsquellen* (Berlin: Nicolaische Buchhandlung, 1840), p. 533, quoted in Lothar Wolf, 'Afr. *bastart* - *fls de bast*: Ein Ingwäonismus im Galloromanischen', *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie*, 81 (1965), 310-24 (p. 316).

<sup>13</sup> Julius Pokorny, *Indo-germanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 2 vols. (Bern: Francke, 1959-69), vol. 1, p. 127, s.v. *bhendh-*. Wolf, 'Afr. *bastart* - *fls de bast*', pp. 316-17, claims that the shift in vocalism, *o* > *a*, and loss of the nasal before a voiceless spirant would have been regular development in "invaeonisch", here Old Frisian. In reviewing the many Italian reflexes of the *bastard* word in a more current lexicographical work, Maria Vòllono posits an original Old Frankish form \**banstu*, but otherwise subscribes to Wolf's thesis.

<sup>14</sup> Jan de Vries prefers a derivation of Old Fr. *bastard* from a medieval Latin *bastum* 'pack saddle', this from an unspecified Germanic term; Jan de Vries, *Altnordisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1977), p. 28, s.v. *bastardr*, which he sees as a loan from Middle English. He also notes V. Günther's effort to trace *bastard* directly to an unattested ON \**bástr*. The most ambitious current French etymological project, *Dictionnaire étymologique de l'ancien français*, ed. by Kurt Baldinger, Jean-Denis Gendron, and Georges Straka (Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval; Tübingen: Niemeyer; Paris: Klincksieck, 1974-), has not yet addressed the letter B.

<sup>15</sup> *Französisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, ed. by Walther von Wartburg (Bonn: Klopp, 1928-), *Germanische Elemente*, A-F, Vol. 15, pp. 72-74, particularly p. 74.

<sup>16</sup> As R. A. Hall, Jr., 'L'etimologia di bastardo', observes, citing OFr. *hanste* 'spear'.

<sup>17</sup> D. H. Green, 'Contacts with the Celts', ch. 8 of his *Language and History in the Early Germanic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 145-63.

<sup>18</sup> Fergus Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1988); *The Welsh Law of Women: Studies Presented to Professor Daniel A. Binchy on his Eightieth Birthday*, ed. by Dafydd Jenkins and Morfydd E. Owen (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1980).

<sup>19</sup> Welsh knew a comparable term, the child of 'a woman of bush and brake': Dafydd Jenkins, 'Property Interests in the Classical Welsh Law of Women', in *The Welsh Law of Women*, ed. by Jenkins and Owen, pp. 69-92 (p. 91).

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<sup>20</sup> 'Judges', *The Old English Version of the Heptateuch, Ælfric's Treatise on the Old and New Testament and his Preface to Genesis*, ed. by S. J. Crawford (London: Oxford University Press, 1922), XV.13, p. 411. The OE text has been lightly amended as reproduced in *Dictionary of Old English*, ed. by Angus Cameron, Ashley Crandell Amos, and Antonette diPaolo Healey (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2003-).

<sup>21</sup> *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*, fasc. A-B, p. 186, s.v.v. *basto, bastum*.

<sup>22</sup> Friedrich Kluge, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*, rev. ed. by Max Bürgisser, Bernd Gregor *et al.* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1989), p. 63, s.v. *bast*.

<sup>23</sup> *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, vol. 1, p. 111; *Dictionnaire de la langue gauloise*, ed. by Xavier Delamarre, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Paris: Editions Errance, 2003), p. 68, s.v. *bascauda*; *Lexique étymologique de l'irlandais ancien*, ed. by Joseph Vendryes *et al.* (Dublin, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies; Paris: Société nationale de la recherche scientifique, 1959-), B-21-22.

<sup>24</sup> *Französisches etymologisches Wörterbuch, Germanische Elemente*, Vol. 15, A-F, pp. 74-79, s.v. *bastjan*. It is then rather surprising to find an earlier volume of this same work deriving French *bât* (Old Fr. *bast*) not from the same root as the verb *bastjan* but rather from a late Latin *bastum* identified as 'pack-saddle'. This is, admittedly, recognized as a loan from Germanic, but the detour via Latin seems unnecessary to explain the OFr. form; *Französisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, vol. 1, pp. 279-281, s.v. *bastum*.

<sup>25</sup> *Dictionnaire de la langue gauloise*, p. 68, s.v. *bascauda*.

<sup>26</sup> *Französisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, vol. 1, pp. 267-68, s.v. *bascauda*.

<sup>27</sup> Although considering rather different evidence, e.g. *cofinos* equated with *banstas* in the *Reichenauer Glossen* and Picard *banste* 'corbeille', Wolf comes to precisely the opposite conclusion of the present study and categorically states 'Von der Bedeutung "Korb" ausgehend, lässt sich jedoch die Herkunft von afr. *bastart* auch nicht erklären' (p. 315). See the *FEW* entry for Frankish *banst* 'large basket', 15.66-67.

<sup>28</sup> *OED*, s.v. *basket*, sense A. 11. I am grateful to an early reader of this note for this observation and other helpful comment.