

What Were Women Really Called? Pet Forms of Female Names in English Parish Registers, 1540-1800

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Abstract

This paper forms part of a wider study on women's names in their social context. Hypocoristic or pet forms of English personal names have existed as long as the names themselves. Very occasionally, such forms for female names are recorded in the 16th- and 17th-century parish registers. However, it is not until the mid-18th century that the phenomenon becomes widespread and pet forms appear regularly as baptismal names in the registers. This study shows which names were amenable to pet forms, what forms such hypocorisms took, and which pet forms became recognised as names in their own right. The collection of these names sheds some light on differences in their historical or regional pronunciation and also on the development of their usage. The authors begin to investigate whether it might be possible to distinguish any differences in practice by region, by religious practice or by social context. They attempt to explain why this development applied particularly to female names, and why such forms became accepted as names in their own right and therefore acceptable at baptism and other times of official record.

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This paper arises from a wider project investigating English women's names in their social context. In total, some hundred parish registers, covering all areas – though not yet every county – of England, have been studied. The formats of the sources used vary from original registers, early-20th-century transcripts, and some online resources including digitised originals, and other transcripts; supplemented, where necessary, by the potentially less reliable forms in the International Genealogical Index.

We became interested in surviving traces of vernacular, familiar and pet name forms in these, and other, records. We found that English parish registers, whilst obviously recording formal baptismal names, also contain some evidence of what adult women were actually called on a day to day basis, and how they were known in the family and community. At the same time, we became aware of a growing incidence of pet forms actually recorded at the time of baptism over the centuries. In particular, we were intrigued by the circumstances in which the phenomenon of forms with diminutive -y endings (as in *Betty*, *Fanny*, *Kitty* and so on) seems to become acceptable almost universally, allowing these forms to be seen as names in their own right. Redmonds (2004: 160-161) notes that this topic seems to have attracted little serious attention: we hoped to shed some light on the process, or at least to provide more examples for discussion.

We can assume that hypocoristic, or pet, forms of women's names in England have been around as long as the names themselves. McClure (1981 and 1998) has provided an

authoritative discussion showing how the various classes of such names should be analysed and interpreted. Here we merely note that evidence from the medieval, pre-parish register era is to be found in those documents that record women, and that further proof can be seen in those fossilised pet forms of female personal names which survive in metronymic surnames. Examples such as *Bibb(y)* (diminutive of Isabel), *Cass*, *Cassie* and *Casson* (Cassandra), *Till* and *Tillotson* (Matilda) and more can be retrieved from Reaney (1976) and Hanks and Hodges (1988).

By the time of the first parish registers, occasional pet forms for female names make an appearance. Interestingly, these are usually first found recorded, not at baptism, but later, during adulthood, when the woman married, gave birth, or died. Some pet names that we found in these circumstances appear in a variety of short forms: *Bess* (Elizabeth) married 1545 Sussex, *Eme* (Emma) buried 1553 Shropshire, *Myn* (uncertain) adult 1583 Norfolk, *Nell* (Ellen) married 1598 Sussex. Others show the diminutive suffix *-y*: *Barbery* (Barbara) married 1545, *Edie* (Edith) buried 1576 Gloucestershire, *Saly* (Sarah) married 1593 Derbyshire; the last form, *Saly*, is a true (double) diminutive form, whereas the first two forms also reflect the current vernacular pronunciation of the full name.

Our findings in the 16th century only uncovered the baptisms of *Luce* (Lucy) 1579 Buckinghamshire and *Eme* (Emma) 1595 Shropshire: apparently confirming the theory that pet forms in parish registers were first applied to adult women and less likely to be recorded as formal baptismal names. Such a linking of pet names with adult women also tallies well with the evidence from medieval metronymic surnames. Obviously, to determine the full social contexts in which such pet forms were acceptable, a much wider survey of other written records, both public and private, would be needed.

However, we did find, in the later 17th century, a few more short forms being registered at baptism. We cannot say for sure whether this new style reflects the name as spoken by the godparent, or by the parish priest, or as recorded afterwards by a parish clerk sympathetic to the family's wishes: *Kate* (Katherine) 1692 Cornwall, *Nann* (Ann(a), Hannah) 1672 Shropshire. Some earlier baptismal names, which appear to be short forms, such as *Angel* (Angela) 1618 Somerset and *Cordell* (Cordelia) 1646 Sussex, may already have been seen as names in their own right. Possibly the earlier example of *Eme*, recorded twice in Shropshire, above (and also found as *Eamme* married 1605 Sussex) was part of the same process.

A few more new short forms are recorded at baptism, later, during the 18th century. One, *Frews* 1764 Surrey, is particularly interesting in that it is an abbreviation of the name *Frusanna(h)*, which in turn seems to be an 18th-century invention, a combination of *Frances* and *Susanna(h)*. Here we have a hint of the imaginative naming of girls (as opposed to boys) which can be traced throughout the period, and indeed has much earlier roots.

Turning to those adult pet names recorded before the 18th century and which take a longer form, we found one type to be that of the name itself plus a diminutive ending in *-y*: *Anny* (Ann(a), Hannah) married 1595 Surrey, *Joanie* (Joan) adult 1649 Staffs. In passing, we note that this form *Joanie* may reflect that the simple name *Joan* was, according to Camden (1614), already unpopular (and giving way to the name *Jane*). Particular examples which attracted our attention were the diminutives by extension *Faythye* buried 1628 Devon, *Gracie* adult 1665 Derbyshire and *Truthy* married 1688 Norfolk: the names *Faith*, *Grace* and *Truth*

(amongst others) forming part of a previous study on virtue names (Nair and Scherr 2012). Other names use a short form of some sort and then add the -y suffix, producing a double diminution in the same style as *Saly* noted above: *Dolly* (Dorothy) adult 1685 Devon, *Silly* (Priscilla) buried 1654 Devon.

Concentrating now on baptismal names, the -y ending is found from the 16th century onwards. *Thamsy* (Thomasin(a), Tamsin) 1552 Devon also uses a shortened form and then extends this. However, *Margery* (Margaret) baptised 1540 Surrey is identified by Hanks and Hodges (1990) as the usual medieval vernacular form of the name, which seems to have become a name in its own right by this time. Generally, this early appearance of -y endings, whilst also infantilising a name, may therefore just (or additionally) reflect the current popular pronunciation: *Averie* (Aphra) baptised 1572 Kent, *Presselay* (Priscilla) baptised 1607 Devon, *Deberie* baptised 1630 Staffordshire, *Marthy* baptised 1649 Surrey, *Phillippy* (Phillipa) baptised 1683 Cornwall, *Sarye* (Sarah) baptised 1613 Yorkshire, *Urseley* (Ursula) baptised 1573 Norfolk.

Meanwhile, further forms such as *Adrie* (Audrey) buried 1637 Sussex, *Yedye* (Edith) baptised 1580 Warwickshire, made us realise that our collection could also be used to study pronunciation, local, regional or over time. This would be a topic for another paper. Here we merely note a few examples of the various different pronunciations recorded in parish registers. Some seem to be regional dialect variations: for example, adding *Y* or *H* to the start of a word, as in *Yeedith* (Edith) baptised 1645 Gloucestershire, and also *Hiddy* (Edith) baptised 1810 Sussex, *Hellenor* (Eleanor) baptised 1664 Berkshire. Some reflect the particular pronunciation of the age: *Custance* (Constance) baptised 1562 Bedfordshire, *Darity* 1563 Bedfordshire (Dorothy). The form *Betteridge* (Beatrice) baptised 1566 Worcestershire, along with many variants, including *Betteritch* adult 1599 Staffs, *Bitterice* baptised 1612 Surrey, perhaps attempts to preserve the original Italian pronunciation.

Returning to pet forms of names, of course none would have appeared in the registers if they were not acceptable to the minister in question. This view of propriety and acceptability no doubt varied from person to person and parish to parish, as well as, we would suggest, over time and perhaps reflecting the gradual influence of nonconformist practice. Occasionally the priest (or the parish clerk) feels the need to give both pet and formal names, for the record. The earliest example we have noted is *Alexan* alias *Alex* (presumably Alexandra) married 1600 Leicestershire. An appearance of the older style of diminutive ending -*et* is recorded in *Jenet* alies *Johan* baptised 1630 Yorkshire. Later we have *Betty* aliter *Elizabeth* baptised 1767 Lancashire, *Aggy* ‘or if you please’ *Agnes* baptised 1783 Lancashire, *Mary* (or *Polly*) married 1811 Nottinghamshire and *Charry* or *Charity* baptised 1815 Sussex.

By studying the full registers in their original or transcribed format we can occasionally identify the same woman, at different stages of her life, using different forms of her name. Here again, such evidence as we have seems to point to the adult use of pet forms. For example, *Han* adult 1732 Shropshire was earlier married as *Hannah*, *Tim* buried 1741 Staffs was married as *Thomasin*, *Patty* married 1758 Devon was baptised *Patience*, *Milly* adult 1759 Staffordshire was elsewhere *Amelia*, *Mille* married 1763 Gloucestershire was baptised *Milberrow*, *Vye* adult Staffordshire 1786 was baptised *Viletta*, and *Creechy* adult 1793 Staffordshire was elsewhere *Lucretia*.

This recorded fluidity of usage throughout a woman's lifetime leads us to suppose that official and pet forms were therefore interchangeable in everyday life. We find the short form *Frank* (Frances) – used for an adult female, a wet-nurse, in Wimbledon, Surrey in 1722, 1723 and 1725 – mutating to *Fanny* when she was buried in 1751. We note evidence for the transition from *Jane* to *Jenny*: the adult *Jenny* in 1764 in Staffordshire is recorded elsewhere as *Jane*, and *Jenny* baptised in 1767 in Surrey was the daughter of a *Jenny*, who was elsewhere called *Jane*. *Jenney* daughter of *Jeney* baptised 1740 Surrey may even reflect this transition in pronunciation by its spelling. We also observe the possibility of levels of informality: the adult known as *Nanny* (Ann) 1787 Staffordshire was baptised *Nancey*.

As noted before, this study would need to be extended to include other types of documentary evidence in order to define more exactly when a pet form was officially acceptable and when not. Perhaps it is when it can be agreed by relevant parties to be a name 'in its own right', though this is a very subjective judgement to make. One thing that becomes very clear when we reach the 18th century is the number of baby girls given a diminutive of their mother's name. This is perhaps indicative of the growing influence of, and choice made by, the mother by this stage, although of course it can also be seen as part of the general tendency to memorialise popular family names across the generations. We have *Peggy* daughter of Margaret 1738 Cornwall, *Babby* daughter of Barbara 1755 Sussex, *Bett* daughter of Elizabeth 1756 Sussex, *Hetty* daughter of Hester 1760 Gloucestershire, *Nan* daughter of Ann 1772 Surrey, *Milly* daughter of Millicent 1778 Surrey.

In passing, we draw attention to our three examples of *Mille*, *Milly* which show that one pet form can arise from several different names – Amelia, Milborough, Millicent: something to be aware of generally when suggesting possible origins without any corroborating evidence.

Finally, we begin to see an explosion in growth of the pet form ending in -y at baptism as the 18th century unfolds: for example *Alley* 1772 Staffordshire, *Annie* 1705 Staffordshire, *Bessy* 1770 Staffordshire, *Betsy* 1778 Surrey, *Betty* 1710 Somerset, *Biddy* 1770 Surrey, *Commey* 1758 Worcestershire, *Dessy* 1762 Worcestershire, *Docey* 1731 Lancashire, *Dolly* 1749 Staffordshire, *Epsey* 1801 Bedfordshire, *Fanny* 1789 Surrey, *Ginney* 1785 Staffordshire, *Happy* 1815 Norfolk, *Hippie* 1755 Somerset, *Jinny* 1765 Lancashire, *Katy* 1735 Sussex, *Kitty* 1749 Staffordshire, *Lany* 1784 Staffordshire, *Lyddy* 1712 Worcestershire, *Marsy* 1753 Staffordshire, *Matty* 1766 Lancashire, *Molly* 1744 Staffordshire, *Pally* 1783 Yorkshire, *Peggy* 1732 Staffordshire, *Philly* 1775 Surrey, *Polly* 1781 Staffordshire, *Silvey* 1770 Staffordshire, *Sophy* 1775 Staffordshire, *Sukey* 1746 Worcestershire, *Tabby* 1774 Lancashire, *Totty* 1769 Staffordshire, *Winney* 1802 Staffordshire, *Zanney* 1836 Staffordshire.

This distillation from our records tends to confirm the findings of Redmonds (2004), Dunkling (1977) and others about the general emergence of baptismal names ending in -y at this time. Redmonds (2004: 161) notes that Yorkshire evidence differs from parish to parish, but finds the first instances – usually of *Betty* and *Fanny* – from the 1720s. Our study suggests that, although we may find sporadic earlier examples (*Nancy* baptised 1568 Cambridgeshire, *July* baptised 1602 Sussex, *Fransy* baptised 1658 Cornwall), generally this use of name form is a practice which became increasingly evident and widespread from the 1730s.

Of course, there are variations. At Dymock (Gloucestershire) the fashion is very marked between the 1730s and 1750s: of 50 female baptisms, 28 are either *Nancy* or *Betty*! We find our earliest *Betty* in 1710 in Wedmore (Somerset), with a few every decade thereafter. On the other hand, the fashion seems not to have reached Wimbledon (Surrey) until somewhat later, in the 1760s and 1770s. Interestingly, here, from 44 female baptisms, 14 take the form of the diminutive -y, but with a much greater variety: *Barbary*, *Betsy*, *Betty*, *Dolly*, *Fanny*, *Jenny*, *Milly*, *Molly*, *Nanny*, *Polly*, *Sally*.

So far, we too can only offer tentative explanations for this phenomenon. Ultimately the responsibility for allowing the record of a baptismal name in the vernacular must have rested with the relevant incumbent, and we have not yet discovered documentary evidence to explain this growing acceptance of informality. We may suspect it was encouraged by the general rise of non-conformity. There seems to be no particular regional influence at play (although we note a preponderance in Staffordshire and Worcestershire). Overall, the trend towards a longer delay before baptism, allowing mothers to be present, noted by Coster (2002) and by Cressy (1997) as beginning in the later 17th century, may have had some influence in allowing ‘baby names’ to be established. A greater incidence of private baptism, and the decline in naming after godparents, an important factor in the choice of baptismal name in the earlier period, may also have contributed, as suggested by Redmonds (2004) and Smith-Bannister (1997).

There is now widespread agreement that the case for a ‘revolution in sentiments’ in the second half of the 18th century has been somewhat overstated. Nevertheless, there is evidence of a growing informality in familial relations and a greater readiness to express, for instance, affection for children, together with an increased recognition of childhood as a separate stage of development. It is plausible to link greater informality in naming practices at baptism with this.

However, this does not explain why – as seems to be the case – this practice should be applied to girls much more than to boys. George Redmonds (2004) found no male diminutives recorded before the 1750s. We have noted a very small number (*Harrie* (Henry) baptised 1542 Sussex, *Harry* baptised 1580 Shropshire; *Sandy* (Alexander) baptised 1698 Somerset). We note (Healey 1995) that a typical family in 1780s Shropshire baptised their children *Fanny*, *Kitty* – and *William*. As for day to day usage, it is known that John and Charles Wesley, the 18th century founders of Methodism, had seven sisters, baptised Emilia, Susanna, Mehetabel, Mary, Anne, Martha and Kezia. Throughout their lives they were known as *Emily* or *Em*, *Sukey*, *Hetty*, *Molly*, *Nancy*, *Patty* and *Kezzy* (Best 2011). As far as we know, the brothers John and Charles were not referred to as *Johnny* or *Charlie*...

We have elsewhere (Nair and Scherr 2012) drawn attention to some changes in the type of abstract qualities used as girls’ names in the same period, tentatively linking this to shifts in gender relations, and it is tempting to view the growing acceptance of pet forms as female baptismal names as part of the same process.

We have not yet analysed this corpus in enough detail to detect regional variations in popularity; nor by religious practice; nor by social standing of the family. We might suspect class considerations (of families and/or of clergy) may be behind the fact that St George’s Chapel, Windsor has only two pet forms recorded – *Em* 1674 and *Annie* in 1842. Likewise,

Temple Church, London, only records two *Bettys*, and one *Sally Fanney* [sic] in the whole of the 18th century.

Overall, the use of pet forms in parish registers may record an informal, familiar way of referring to a particular age or type or class of person. The reasons why this should apply mostly to female names, and for the overwhelming acceptance as proper names, by the end of the 18th century, of female names ending in the diminutive *-y*, deserves further study.

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Sources

Names were selected from volumes published by the following county series: Bedfordshire Parish Register series; Birmingham and Midland Society for Genealogy and Heraldry; Cornish Parish Registers: Marriages; Lancashire Parish Register Society; Shropshire Parish Register Society; Staffordshire Parish Register Society; Surrey Parish Register Society; Sussex Record Society; Warwickshire Parish Register series; Worcestershire Parish Register Society; Thoresby Society (Yorkshire). All other forms were found online in digital facsimiles of registers or by using the database provided by the International Genealogical Index via <FamilySearch.org>.

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