

2022

A Bad Time to Name Your Pet: Pet Names in the Age of Witches

Evan Velez

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/emergingwriters>



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), [History Commons](#), and the [Philosophy of Language Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Velez, Evan (2022) "A Bad Time to Name Your Pet: Pet Names in the Age of Witches," *Emerging Writers*: Vol. 5, Article 17.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/emergingwriters/vol5/iss1/17>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Emerging Writers by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu.

A Bad Time to Name Your Pet: Pet Names in the Age of Witches

by Evan Velez

Do you have a pet with a name? If so, you might have been a suspected witch. When people still believed that witches were real, they partially associated giving pets personal names with witches as well as ordinary people (Howe 239). Naming pets implied a type of relationship that was considered part of “perverted motherhood,” the corrupted motherly relationship that witches supposedly had with their demons (Howe 239). In this corrupt relationship, these “familiars” sucked blood from the witch at the “witch's teat,” like real babies suckling milk from their mothers (Howe 239; “Salem Witch Trials” 4:26-4:32). However, these demons were not babies, and they did not want milk. These demons were commonly referred to as “familiars” (Howe 239). These demon “familiars” appeared as animals and obeyed the witch’s will (Niehoff par 31). They could be just about any animal, such as pets or even wild animals (Gifford 8). This evil motherly relationship is only one of the many terrifying fantasies that people imagined of “witches.” This example demonstrates how the lore people created about witches was designed with women in mind (“Salem Witch Trials” 13:47-14:31). The most unusual thing was how names might have accompanied perverted motherhood. How do pet names relate to witch trials? In witch trials, the names of these animals, or familiars, could both intentionally and unintentionally manipulate people’s emotions and cause a sinister type of personification or anthropomorphization.

Overall, witch accusations were mainly a deadly social game, where the losers were often hanged. It has often been said that social standing influenced whether a person was accused of

being a witch (Howe 238; Norton par 18,20; Kamensky qtd in. "Salem Witch Trials" 14:42-14:54; Niehoff par 26). Even an author from the witch trials era, Reginald Scot, admits in his book *The Discourie of Witchcraft* that most witches were usually poor, helpless beggars (qtd in. Howe 20-21). In George Gifford's *Dialogue Concerning Witches and Witchcraft*, one of the characters, Daniel, talked about people he suspected were witches. He said, "there be two or three in our town I like not" (Gifford qtd in. Howe 24). When he said this, he had nothing that could have been considered solid proof back then. In fact, seeing some proof would not motivate him to find more proof. This is true because all possible "proof" was only significant if interpreted a certain way. According to Len Niehoff, finding proof was likely easy since "testimony that the accused had been in the presence of pretty much anyone or anything pointed toward guilt" because both people and animals could potentially be the devil or the devil's subjects (par 36). Thus, one only needs the motivation to find proof because finding it was so easy. It would, of course, make sense if this motivation was influenced by social standing. In the end, social standing indeed influenced who was accused of witchcraft. Names were one thing that could help create this fear of witches.

Names and anthropomorphization can profoundly affect people. When people anthropomorphize something, such as a familiar, they view it as human-like and assign it a personality (Brédart 33). The word anthropomorphic has both a verb and an adjective form. Anthropomorphizing is the action of humanizing an object, while cartoon characters can be described as anthropomorphic ("Anthropomorphize"). Advertisements are a common source of such personified objects. These anthropomorphized objects may talk, have arms, or have facial expressions. Anthropomorphization is a tactic that is supposed to increase sales (Yuan et al. 450-

451). Such use of anthropomorphism is a compelling example of anthropomorphization's profound effect on people.

How do names relate to anthropomorphization? Research suggests that names might also be a factor in anthropomorphization (Brédart 35). This association between names and anthropomorphization is especially pronounced when people use human personal names for inanimate objects. Some examples might include Mount Saint Helens, the city called "Lincoln," and the ship called *St. Lewis*. Anthropomorphization may sound unusual, but it is not uncommon for people to show tendencies towards anthropomorphizing objects (Brédart 33, 35). Since simply giving names to objects can cause anthropomorphization, it is easy to see how people can anthropomorphize objects without thinking about it.

In one study on names, Serge Brédart investigates the more precise details in the relationship between name-giving and anthropomorphism. His paper investigated the relative "when" between anthropomorphization and name-giving. In other words, he wanted to know whether a person anthropomorphizes an object first and then names it or if it happens the other way around. He does show instances in which he thinks "personification follows name-giving" (Brédart 34). His examples included instances where people named self-driving cars, voice assistants, and business mascots (Brédart 34). His experiment examines another more naturally occurring instance. Specifically, his experiment investigated name-giving by ordinary people in their day-to-day lives. The results of Brédart's survey said that 59.6% of the people naming objects anthropomorphized them, while the other 40% did not. After seeing the experiment's results, he concluded that "personification was not a prerequisite to name-giving" because the people who gave personal names did not all personify the objects that they named (Brédart 34). These results do show that anthropomorphizing does not *always* happen before name-giving, but

it does not entirely rule out the possibility of anthropomorphism before name-giving. In fact, anyone can see that the results do prove the existence of a relationship between names and personification, but Brédart mainly seeks to quantify the strength of this relationship. His research is also silent on whether one person anthropomorphizing objects affects other people. The closest he comes to mentioning others' influence is when he says, "[Some of the reasons for first naming objects were from] friends (or relatives) [doing] it with similar objects" (Brédart 35). This mention is somewhat unclear whether the people citing these reasons had anthropomorphized objects or not, but it still shows the possibility of peer pressure in communities such as small Puritan settlements. This peer pressure would potentially cause names for pets and animals to be rapidly adopted.

Why the pet was really named or *why* the pet really behaved strangely would not matter to the colonists. One often hears the saying, "perception is reality." Assuming this is true, it is reasonable to conclude that the "objects" that make up an internal reality must be just as important as the internal reality itself. The "objects" of this internal reality could, of course, be affected by anthropomorphism. In the *Penguin Book of Witches*, Katherine Howe describes witches and witchcraft as "a legitimate, but dangerous category for explaining reality" (xii). Randolph Charlton agrees. In his paper "Fictions of the Internal Object," he talks about people using "internal objects" to understand life (81). "Internal objects" are related to unconscious memories as a child which may manifest themselves in a person's personality (Sheposh Par 1, 7). Although both Richard Sheposh and Charlton are talking more specifically about abstract constructs that cannot exist physically and cannot be held, such as friendships and old memories (Charlton 81), internal fantasies, like familiars, are just as important and relevant to Charlton's discussion because all such things affect how people react to the external world (Charlton 81,

85). As a result, the belief in witches makes them real to the colonists. If everyone thought that a strange lady named a pet like a child because that witch personified it as a child, then that is what happened. It would all have the same effect on the population. Therefore, the effects of the name would take place whether or not the “witch” actually personified the object or used the name.

In the end, though, how does anthropomorphism have any notable effect on pets? The names of “pets” are what matters, after all. Well, to answer the question, think about what a pet is. According to Jen Wrye, pets and the idea of “petness” are “a social construction” (1035). According to this argument, pets must be especially vulnerable to social attacks on their characters. They expound by defining pets. They say, “... petness, ... can generally be defined as the state, quality, or conditions under which a pet is constituted, [this petness] arises from social relations and the treatment of objects [and animals]” (Wrye 1035). Wrye defines any kind of interaction where pets “act back” as interactions that create this “petness” (1050). She believes that one such interaction may be dominance, where the pet can be neutral or resist (1039-1040). Affection can be a form of dominance too because humans express their affection in dominant ways: by taking care of them (Wrye 1039-1040). Whatever interactions people have with their pet increases “petness.” Picking up pets, scolding them for getting on the counter, and taking them on walks all build “petness.” Humans would, of course, feel rather odd if pets did these things to them instead. This “treatment of objects” and their “social relations” (Wrye 1035) are incredibly significant. These things are so significant that Wrye says they are the defining factors of petness, and, therefore, they are what make pets different from toys and games.

Familiars became a strange kind of pet that could hurt the accused witches. As a result of the familiars' high mobility, they became pieces in this social game. Gifford's dialogue mentions familiars that were random animals (Gifford 8). This must mean that there were interactions

between familiars and humans every day. According to Wrye, pet interactions are what categorize anything as a pet (1049-1050). Thus, according to Wrye, they could influence people to perceive even wild animals they do not control to be pet-like. Even though no one keeps wild animals, they may still be community fixtures. Indeed, almost any unpopular animal could be accused of being a familiar. Based on Gifford's dialogue and John Godfrey's trial, people did not even have to see the familiar around the witch (Gifford 8; "Deposition of John Remington" qtd in. Howe 76-77). This happens because the rumors circulating about the witch's evil demon "pet" must influence the animal's reputation and the interactions the town has with that animal. Negative interactions with familiars could be described as shows of dominance and, according to Wrye, shows of dominance are some such interactions that may increase the "petness" of an animal or object (1038-1039). If these interactions are what construct the pet in the human mind, their minds will eventually distort the pet based on interactions with it. That means that these shows of dominance can increase how much of a pet it would seem. Despite the animal being more pet-like than other domesticated or wild animals, it would be in a negative way. It would be a pet they hate, and the interactions would corrupt the perceived personality of the pet. Whether they were wild animals the accused "witch" did not own or "real" pets they fed regularly, the pets' perceived eeriness would end up reflecting negatively on witches. Their mobility adds to the familiar's chances to make an impression without the witch even doing anything.

Nevertheless, this argument about familiars' names has some weakness. Some scientists say that name giving does not affect anthropomorphism. If this is true, then the names of familiars would not affect their perceived personality, but scientists disagree on this. There is much conflict in the scientific community over how names affect anthropomorphism. If so, research about names and anthropomorphism may be much more biased. If research is biased,

then it cannot be trusted. This disagreement about names has, more specifically, arisen from a debate about correct technique (Benson 107). Some scientists, such as Jane Goodall, have stirred up controversy about objectivity with their experiments, primarily because of the way she viewed and used names with the animals she studied (Benson 122). Scientists who care about the objectivity of data are against using personal names in studies. They also believe that names affect anthropomorphism, and thus they would support the idea of familiar's names affecting their perceived behavior or personality. They worry that the connection between names and anthropomorphization runs the risk of researchers assigning study animals subjective personalities (Benson 107-108). Those concerned for animal rights defend the value of humane animal treatment and think that naming research animals would be helpful. They believe that names might not affect anthropomorphism, and thus they would skeptically view the idea of familiar's names affecting perceived behavior. They maintain that naming research animals helps the researchers be conscious of the sentience of the creatures they study (Benson 108). However, both sides agree that anthropomorphization is not totally linked to name-giving (Benson 107, 109-110). Even then, scientists still cannot agree on what this means for naming research animals or the effect of using names in general (Benson, 108-109).

Therefore, this controversy is a flag of caution for those using any research on names' relationships to anthropomorphism. Thankfully, the article by Brédart is an excellent example of an unbiased article. Brédart admits fully in the abstract that anthropomorphism is more prominent in people that had given a name to an object. However, in the same breath, he says that anthropomorphization was not a "prerequisite" (Brédart 33). He acknowledges both sides. He understands that anthropomorphization highly encourages name-giving, but he still sees evidence that it is not a totally connected relationship. He says that about 40% of the participants

who gave names did not anthropomorphize objects (33). Therefore, he shows an exquisitely balanced and unbiased view of this matter and is an authoritative voice on this subject.

Even if names altered the Puritans' perceptions of pets, they would have had their limits in witch trials. Some scientists might maintain that the effect of names would be so insignificant in witch trials as to be practically useless to prosecutors. To an extent, their concerns are valid. People argue over whether personal names for animals in scientific studies would affect the observer, but they are still just studying animals when all is said and done. In fact, Etienne Benson subtitles his conclusion “The Limits of naming” (Benson 122). He goes further to say, “There thus remains a profound asymmetry [in relationships between study animals and *all* scientists] that puts any simple equivalence between the attribution of a personal name and the attribution of liberal subjecthood or rights into doubt,” because he believes that the use of names never causes empathy and kindness in and of itself (123). How he argued this issue implies that he believes the way animals are treated still lies mainly within the researcher themselves. Thus, he might also argue that the way familiars were treated was mainly up to other more significant factors. This claim to significance is valid. It is wrong to claim that the names were the most significant factor determining treatment towards witches and familiars.

Nevertheless, the beliefs about the character of familiars and their naming still played a significant role in witch trials. The image of an evil mother was hard to avoid with such names. The name would have compounded the horror of demons because having to use such a childish name for something perceived as so evil must have seemed unnatural and wrong. This meant a lot to settlers because Puritans created the names ‘Joy’ and “Patience” because they were characteristics of Holiness (Edwards 3.1 par 4). The use of childish or good names on demons would be an unholy and corrupted use of this practice. Good or childish names did not belong

with demons. Such things would be considered as horrific lies. Thus, its name would likely have added a dark overtone to the conversation, manipulating their perception in small ways to build on other factors.

In the specific case of the Salem Witch Trials, it is also easy to see that the names of familiar may not have played a part in the accusation and yet still result in a punishment. During the witch trials, a group of girls accused random people of attacking them with magic (“Salem Witch Trials” 33:20- 33:26, 24:24-24:37). The girls’ whim was very significant (“Salem Witch Trials” 24:34-24:37) and probably a lot more condemning than familiar names. Nonetheless, one can still see other trials bringing up the names of familiars and their “false” likeness to an animal. In one witch trial before Salem’s famous trials, a woman named Ursula Kemp was being tried for witchcraft (*A true and Just Recorde, of the information, examination and confessions of all the witches taken at S. Oses in the countie of Essex* qtd in. Howe 10). Eventually, she “confessed” that she had four familiars (*A true and Just Recorde* qtd in. Howe 10). Their names were Tyffin, Titty, Pigeon, and Jack (*A true and Just Recorde* qtd in. Howe 10). Howe herself noted that Titty referred to Kemp’s corrupt relationship with her familiars (239). In fact, all these names could be said to refer to this relationship to some extent. The nature of these names and their mention shows that familiar names could potentially be a tool used by accusers.

Another obvious flaw resides in what happens when the familiar names do not comply with the naming stereotype, and it does happen. There are instances in which the familiar’s name does not comply with the stereotype or is never even mentioned, but the trial still results in a guilty verdict. Some examples included the trial of John Godfrey in 1658-9, or Sarah Good, Sarah Osburn, and Tituba’s trial, among many more (Howe 71-83, 132-149). As these trials show, the lack of familiar names is not essential. It is just one “proof” out of an infinitely large

pool of “proof” that may be chosen from by confirmation bias. The way the witch’s teat was used as proof is an excellent example of this. If a teat was not found, a person could still be a witch because the witch could have used magical or nonmagical means to suppress it (Niehoff par 36). It may have been the same way with names. The childish names did not need to be found for a witch to be guilty. The existence of such names simply made the use of other proofs less necessary and would add some weight to the easily found pile of “evidence.”

The witches' familiars' story shows that the effect of anthropomorphization on pets can indeed be harmful when taken in the wrong direction. In the age of witches, the town could either glorify them in their personifications or condemn them. Such negative anthropomorphization was partially possible through the beliefs surrounding how demon familiars may be named. Pets have always been a part of our lives that we treasure in our hearts, and they would have been affected by such attacks on their character. Crazy attacks on pets were possible too because of an internal reality highly divergent from the actual reality. The internal reality of the Puritans allowed for the existence of demons disguised as pets, making it a bad time to name your pet cat Tom.

Works Cited

- Benson, Etienne S. "Naming the Ethological Subject." *Science in Context*, vol. 29, no. 1, Mar. 2016, pp. 107–128. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1017/S026988971500040X.
- Brédart, Serge. "The Influence of Anthropomorphism on Giving Personal Names to Objects." *Advances in Cognitive Psychology*, vol. 17, no. 1, Mar. 2021, pp. 33–37. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.5709/acp-0314-1.
- Charlton, Randolph S. "Fictions of the Internal Object." *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, vol. 42, no. 1, Jan. 1997, pp. 81–97. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=pbh&AN=12244034&site=eds-live&scope=site.
- Edwards, John. *Language and Identity. Key Topics in Sociolinguistics*. Cambridge UP, 2009.
- Gifford, George.. *A Dialogue Concerning Witches and Witchcraftes in which is Laide Open how Craftely the Diuell Deceiueth Not Onely the Witches but Many Other and so Leadeth them Awrie into Many Great Errours. by George Giffard Minister of Gods Word in Maldon*. London, Printed by Iohn Windet for Tobie Cooke and Mihil Hart, and are to be sold by Tobie Cooke] in Pauls Church-yard, at the Tygers head, 1593. *ProQuest*, www.proquest.com/books/dialogue-concerning-witches-witchcraftes-which-is/docview/2240872262/se-2?accountid=11824.
- Howe, Katherine. *The Penguin Book of Witches*. Penguin Group, 2014.
- "Anthropomorphize." *Merriam Webster*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/anthropomorphize>, Accessed 6 December 2021.
- Niehoff, Len. "Proof at the Salem Witch Trials." *Litigation*, vol. 47, no. 1, Fall 2020, pp. 21–25. *EBSCOhost*,

search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=a9h&AN=146592643&site=eds-live&scope=site.

Norton, Mary Beth. "Finding the Devil in the Details of the Salem Witchcraft Trials." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, vol. 46, no. 20, Jan. 2000, p. 4. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=edsgea&AN=edsgcl.58960471&site=eds-live&scope=site.

"Salem Witch Trials." *In Search of History*, History Channel, 1998. *Films on Demand*, fod.infobase.com/PortalPlaylists.aspx?wID=96643&xtid=42734. Accessed 14 Oct. 2021.

Sheposh, Richard. "Object Relations Theory." *Salem Press Encyclopedia*, 2020. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=ers&AN=129815381&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 22 December 2021.

Wrye, Jen. "Beyond Pets: Exploring Relational Perspectives of Petness." *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, vol. 34, no. 4, Fall 2009, pp. 1033–1063. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.29173/cjs4110.

Yuan, Lingyao (Ivy), and Alan R. Dennis. "Acting Like Humans? Anthropomorphism and Consumer's Willingness to Pay in Electronic Commerce." *Journal of Management Information Systems*, vol. 37, no. 2, Apr. 2020, pp. 450–477. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1080/07421222.2019.1598691.