

A LOAN WORD FROM THE DUTCH RE-LOCATED

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'The Swain's Complaint' (full title 'An Excellent Sonnet: or, The Swaine's complaint, whose cruell doome/It was to love hee knew not whom') is one of the Roxburghe ballads.¹ It is, as Chappell says, 'evidently the production of a poet, and not of an ordinary ballad-writer'² which is only to say that it exhibits the marks of one order of professional ability distinct from another, since the man who wrote 'The Swain's Complaint' was not notably a poet. The ballad belongs somewhere about 1620; according to Chappell the first stanza was set to music and published by 1624.

The Complaint is a courtly and conventional piece, a product, as is said, of a particular kind of professionalism, a thing seemingly of the city culture betraying nothing of the provinces except possibly in one respect. This occurs in the last stanza of Part II:

Oh!if she be amongst the beauteous traines
of all the Nimphs that haunt the several Kills,
Or if you know her, Ladies of the plaines,
or you that have your Bowers on the Hills,
Tell, if you can, who will my love become,
Or I shall die, and never know for whom.

Kills puzzled Chappell. His footnote is a conjecture, and a query: 'Kills - Arcadian mountains?', which he based on 'Cyllené, in Arcadia'.³ This is likely to strike any reader as implausible.

If *kills* 'hills' is meant, the lines are tautologous. The author has 'hills' quite sufficiently in l.4. If the meaning is *kills* 'mountains', the situation is actually no better. The author's address to the nymphs seems to be calculated to be a progression in an ascent from kills, whatever they are, up to plains, and on to hills. In the first stanza of Part I he addresses the nymphs who play about the 'Meddowes' but, in the full text, it is not hard to see that the meadows of that stanza are not the same as the plains of the last stanza of Part II. So, the chances are, the *kills* are not hills, nor are they meadows-plains. Because nymphs are involved, one is tempted to think there may be some suggestion of water-meadows. If the Concise Oxford Dictionary is a reliable guide here, the nymphs could resort to hills, but these are already ruled out. They could resort to woods or trees, but if the idea of ascent from kills to plains to hills can be held to, then the woods and trees are apparently ruled out as well. Which leaves *kills* to signify a waterway of some kind.

Unless, of course, *kills* is simply a misprint and should read either as *rills* or *gills*, for which there is justification in contemporary writing. That it may be a misprint is implied by Skeat and Mayhew (1914) who do not list *kill(s)* in their glossary of Tudor and Stuart words. Although the text published by Chappell has enough features to suggest

1. Chappell 1869: I, items 110,111 of the Roxburghe Collection.
2. Chappell 1878: I, Part II, 336.
3. Chappell 1878: I, Part II, 341.

that it was not wholly free from error, those features which Chappell noticed or queried are only a very few and one could well believe that *kills* is likelier to be correct than not.

If *kills* is not a misprint, and if Skeat and Mayhew are warranted in implicitly rejecting it as a standard Tudor or Stuart noun, the possibilities are that it is an anachronism or an archaism, a dialect word, or a foreign noun coinciding in form but not in meaning with a native word.

The case for *kill* as an archaism cannot readily be supported. There is a better case for seeing it as an odd outcropping of a dialect word occurring in the North. *The English Dialect Dictionary* gives *kill* cognate with *keld* or *kell*, 'A spring of water, a fountain; a marshy place', as a lexical feature of Yorkshire, Lancashire, Cumberland and Northumberland, and *The Scottish National Dictionary*, taking *keld* and *kill* to signify a well or spring, draws attention to Old Norse and to Norwegian sources. The *kills* of 'The Swain's Complaint' may thus be a dialect word, more likely, when Scottish lists are studied, to be from Northern England than from Scotland. Against this tentative case for the dialect term, it may be noted that nothing else in the Complaint suggests a dialect background but the ballad does strongly suggest the background of Southern speech and Southern literary convention. It may or may not be significant that the Complaint is to go to the tune of 'Bodkin's Galiard'⁴ rather than, say, 'To A Delicate Scottish Tune'⁵ or 'To a Curious New Northern Tune'⁶

Because of the absence otherwise of indications of dialect, the possibility of misprint of another kind can be ruled out. That is, that *kills* is a misprint for the West of England dialect *pill(s)*, another water-word.

These eliminations seem to leave in prospect *kill(s)* as something imported. The objection to this view is that as an importation it would be just as much of an anomaly in context as a dialect form. The Complaint is apparently orthodox. Yet we should not be blind to the fact that foreign words were being introduced into literary works at the time; but so, too, were dialect words. If the word was imported, then, we have to ask, did it come from a likely source, or is there any pointer such as words of the same linguistic field or register which apparently derive about the same time from the same source?

To that enquiry the answer seems to be that there is a case for considering *kill(s)* as being imported from the Dutch *kille* 'River-bed, channel', eventually to be defined by O.E.D. for the second substantive sense of *kill* 'A stream, "creek", or tributary river'. The O.E.D. regards this usage as a United States localising or place-naming feature especially pertaining to parts settled by the Dutch, such as parts of New York State, although the earliest illustration given is from the Pennsylvania Archives of 1669 in a quotation which strikes the reader as showing us a word that had become thoroughly assimilated. *A Dictionary of American English* also gives 1669 as the earliest attestation in quoting from the New York collection of historical documents.

It is perhaps coincidental that *kills* 'creeks' belongs to the difficult field in which one finds also *bluff*, *swamp* and *creek* as lexical items in some fashion connected with

4. Chappell 1878: I, Part II, 337.
 5. Chappell 1878: III, Part II, 576.
 6. Chappell 1878: III, Part I, 14.

Dutch in the early seventeenth or late sixteenth centuries. Nonetheless, it is worth noticing. There is a possibility that the *kills* of 'The Swain's Complaint' is simply a misprint, just as there is equally a possibility that it is a word from Northern dialects. Neither of these possibilities seems particularly strong, which leaves *kills* as a non-standard, relatively "new" word introduced from a speech area with which more than a few Southern English speakers and writers had a more than casual contact about the time that other words of the same field seem to have been entering English. The Complaint may, in fact, give us a first attestation of *kill(s)* at roughly fifty years before the time indicated by present authorities.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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