

LETTER

Classical Origin of the Name *Daption* Stephens

Sibson's (1978, 1987) rather emotional and digressive essays on the gender of the generic name of the Cape Pigeon or Pintado do little service to the facts and ignore pertinent literature. There is no question that the letters in the word "pintado" can be recombined as "daption", but that *Daption* Stephens (1826) actually has its origins in a deliberately constructed anagram, as has frequently been assumed (Oliver 1968, Watson 1974, Sibson 1978, 1987), seems unlikely.

If it were simply an anagram, it would be a nonsense word that could not be inferred to conform to any rules of classical grammar and the pronunciation of which would be completely arbitrary, Sibson's (1987) remarks notwithstanding. In such instances in zoological nomenclature, the gender is determined by the original author's usage, which in the case of Stephens (1826), is consistently neuter, as correctly shown by Watson (1974).

Coues (1882: 126), under the name *Daptium capense*, attempted a classical derivation of *Daption*, as follows:

Gr. [*daption*] or [*dyption*], a diminutive of [*dyptes*] or [*dyles*], a diver. This set of words vary in the vowels in different dictionaries, and may not all be found; compounds of them are seen in ornithology in *edyptes*, *edytes*, &c. They are all from one root. The above is almost universally written *daption*, but in transliteration from Greek to Latin becomes properly *daptium*.

Coues, ever the purist, was probably stretching a point in attempting to derive *Daption* from *dyptes*, even if such a vowel transformation is actually to be allowed. Nevertheless, it is significant that he regarded the name to be neuter in gender.

Choate (1973) comes much closer to the mark, though is still wide of it, in his derivation of *Daption*:

Gr. *dapte*, 'devour'; L. *-ion*, suffix meaning 'having to do with.' The name may be explained by this quote from Murphy's *Oceanic Birds of South America*, 'Cape Pigeons are eager devourers of garbage and it would not be unnatural if bands of the birds sometimes pursued vessels a considerable distance.'

The stem should in fact be the Greek noun *daptes*, "an eater, consumer" (Liddell & Scott 1846:309). It can hardly be assumed that Stephens set out to create a *vox hybrida* by tacking a Latin suffix to a Greek root, and so the ending is surely the Greek diminutive suffix *-ion*, which is neuter. Thus *Daption* is a perfectly fine classical word meaning a "little devourer."

There are two pieces of internal evidence, one circumstantial, the other more substantive, indicating that this meaning is what Stephens (1826) intended. Firstly, Stephens, as already mentioned, clearly regarded *Daption* as neuter; yet if the word were only an anagram, there would be no reason to choose this gender over the more frequently used masculine or feminine. Secondly, the following passage from Stephens (1826:242) concerning the "Cape Pintado" provides ample reason for his choice of the Greek root "daptēs": "They feed on fish and the dead carcasses of whales, and are very voracious." Much more appropriate quotes from Murphy (1936:608) than that given by Choate above amplify Stephens' observation:

. . . they are notoriously voracious birds . . . The food of the Cape Pigeon is as varied as its voracity is incredible. It may be called a glutton, in the human meaning of the word, not only because of its appetite but equally because each Cape Pigeon seems to dislike to see another eating as much as it enjoys the process itself!

In all likelihood, Stephens had precisely this attribute of the Cape Pigeon in mind when he coined the name *Daption*, which name would therefore be of purely classical origin and would not have been purposely, or at least not primarily, intended as an anagram. In either case, however, its gender is unequivocally neuter, so that the specific name of the Cape Pigeon must be rendered *Daption capense*. Sibson's (1978, 1987) assertions that this treatment is "insulting" and that it deprives the bird itself of sex are silly and have no place in serious discourse. "Gender is a grammatical term . . . To use *gender* as if it were synonymous with *sex* is an error, and a particularly unpardonable one in scientific writing" (Bernstein 1973:199).

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