

The etymology of Old English **docga*

ABSTRACT. This article explores the origin of English *dog* (OE. **docga*), generally regarded as a word of unknown origin. It is argued, on the basis of its morphology, that the word is a hypocoristic derivative of *dox*, an Old English colour adjective. The article suggests that the relation between OE. *frox* and *frocga* 'frog' is not an isolated irregularity but an example of a derivational process represented also by *dox*: **docga* and possibly by other such pairs in Old English (e.g. *fox*: **fogga*).

Introduction

Authors of etymological dictionaries of English, from Skeat (1879–1892) onwards, deal with the origin of *dog* brusquely in such terms as “root unknown” (Skeat) or “of obscure origin”. In fact, historians of English seem to have lost interest in the word, at best commenting on its form, which, as will be shown, suggests some kind of diminutive formation (Hogg 1982: 196, 1992: 43). Since no etymological source suggests itself, *dog* has apparently been shelved together with other words of dubious derivation. In the following sections I shall challenge this agnostic attitude.

There is certainly a good deal of truth in Yakov Malkiel's rather pessimistic assessment of the status of etymology in modern linguistics (Malkiel 1993: 168):

“The very term ‘etymology’ has virtually disappeared from announcements of journal notes and articles, or from series of academy memoirs. For a young scholar, it is at present inadvisable, at least for career purposes in the teaching field, that he or she be known as aiming to qualify mainly as an etymologist, the way his next-door neighbours may safely declare their eagerness to pass off as phoneticians, phonologists, semanticists, pragmaticists, syntacticians, and the like.

Now it is, indisputably, desirable that one should not cultivate etymology in strict isolation. Its study can be very fruitfully combined with inquiries into models of regular sound change, phonosymbolism,

