

THE FRENCH LOCUTION *A LA QUEUE LEU LEU*

A *La queue leu leu* is a locution of frequent occurrence in Old and in Modern French, now, however, restricted in its application to a peculiar form of student merrymaking known also as the "monôme"¹ in France, and in America as the "snake" or "serpentine." It refers to the long, winding procession of students who march in single file, hand on shoulder, in celebration of some athletic victory or other college festivity. The French have, too, a children's game called by this same name which will be discussed later.

¹ Cf. Albert-Lévy et G. Pinet, *L'Argot de l'X*, Paris, 1894, p. 201. "Le monôme est une transformation de la danse antique, appelée la *grue*, qui figure sur le bouclier d'Achille et dans laquelle, à l'imitation de ces oiseaux volant l'un derrière l'autre en longues files, les danseurs se tenaient par la main, et décrivaient, guidés par le conducteur du chœur, des circonvolutions gracieuses.

Quand les compositions écrites pour l'admission à l'École (*Polytechnique*) sont terminées, les *taupins*, candidats des lycées et des écoles préparatoires, se réunissent sur la Place du Panthéon. Ils s'organisent en longue file indienne, chacun venant appuyer ses mains sur les épaules du camarade qui le précède, et partent processionnellement sous la conduite du *premier taupin de France*, le premier de ceux qui ont échoué l'année précédente. Ce gigantesque mille pattes, va, vient, serpente, frappant le sol en cadence, lançant dans les airs des chansons du caractère le plus profane . . . Il se dirige vers la Cour du Collège de France où doivent commencer, quelques jours après, les examens oraux; il décrit toutes les circonvolutions de la courbe qui a fait le sujet de la composition de mathématiques; puis il descend le boulevard, au milieu de la foule ahurie, interceptant la circulation, suit les quais jusqu'au terre-plein du Pont-Neuf et après une ronde échevelée autour de la statue de Henri IV, se rend chez la 'mère Moreau,' le fameux débit de prunes et de chinois. . . . Quand on veut faire une manifestation quand il y a du bruit et du tapage, au commencement et à la fin de certains exercices, à des jours désignés et traditionnels, vite un *monôme* s'organise. Le *monôme des fumistes* conduit par un conscrit non encore habillé; le *monôme des tangentes*, le jour où l'on exerce pour la première fois les élèves à se servir de l'épée; le *monôme des manip*s où chacun a revêtu la longue blouse de toile pour la première manipulation de chimie; le *monôme de la gymn*, où l'on arbore pour la première fois le costume de gymnasiarque; le *monôme de l'acide benzoïque*, le jour où l'on prépare cette acide etc. etc.

Monôme, *binôme*, *trinôme*, ces mots qu'emploie l'algèbre pour désigner une expression d'un, de deux ou bien de trois termes, désignent respectivement, à l'École d'application, l'élève qui vit seul, les deux camarades, parfois les trois, qui partagent la même chambre pendant les deux années d'étude."

The dictionaries seem agreed in their interpretation of this locution. Littré, s. v. *leu*, gives the etymology, "Picard *leu*, loup: locution qui vient de ce que les loups cheminent les uns derrière les autres, *leu* usité seulement dans cette locution." Littré, s. v. *queue*, 23°, cites the only example that seems to have got itself into the standard dictionaries:

"En voyant cette émigration de grandes dames, toutes ces femmes de robe imaginèrent que ce devait être l'usage de la cour, et elles se mirent à défiler à la queue *lou-lou* révérencieusement et silencieusement devant la présidente Molé, qui ne savait que devenir. (*Souvenirs de la Marquise de Créquy* t. v, ch. 12.)"

The *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*, s. v. *queue*, calls attention to the "jeu d'enfants, ainsi appelé parce qu'à ce jeu on marche à la suite les uns des autres comme marchent les loups qu'on appelait autrefois *leux*." Darmesteter and Hatzfeld in the *Dictionnaire Général* state that "L'ancien français dit souvent *leu*, forme qui s'est conservée dans à la queue *leu leu* et dans la nomenclature géographique où Saint Leu correspond à Sanctus Lupus."² The same dictionary, s. v. *queue*, marks this locution as "familiar" and "formerly à la queue *le leu*." Furetière, *Dictionnaire Universel*, s. v. *queue*, has this to add:

"Les enfants ont un jeu qu'ils appellent à la queue *leu leu*, quand ils se tiennent l'un l'autre par la robe en marchant. *Leu* est un vieux mot qui signifioit autrefois *loup* comme s'ils imitoient les loups qui marchent ainsi à la suite l'un derrière l'autre."³

In the face of this dictionary evidence there arises the question: Is it true that wolves do travel "à la suite," "à la file," "les uns derrière les autres"; is this explanation of the dictionaries in accord with the facts of natural history? The present article answers this question in the negative; it attempts to show that the dictionary

² *Leu* in geographical names comes from Lupus, Bishop of Auxerre. G. Paris, *Romania* X (1881), p. 51.

³ In addition to the dictionaries mentioned, I have consulted Bescherelle; Sainte Palaye, *Dictionnaire Historique*; Nisard, *Dictionnaire des Curiosités*; Chéruel, *Dictionnaire des Mœurs et Coutumes*; Billaudeau, *Recueil de Locutions*; *International Encyclopedia*; G. Paris, *Romania* X (1881); L. Sainéan, *Rom. Forsch.*, 23, p. 254; Marcel Schwob, *Etude sur l'Argot Français*; Lévy et Pinet, *L'Argot de l'X*, Paris, 1894; A. Barrère, *Argot and Slang*; L. Sainéan, *L'Argot Ancien*, Paris, 1907; R. de la Grasserie, *Etude Scientifique sur l'Argot*, Paris, 1907.

interpretation is contrary to the facts of natural history, and that the accepted explanation of the locution is therefore false zoologically as it is likewise, grammatically. It further endeavors to provide a new explanation of the locution both adequate and accurate.

As to the question of the habit of wolves, let us get the evidence of the natural historians both of ancient and modern times, also of famous animal hunters both dead and living, and let us consult the fable literature, the bestiaries and animal legends. The natural histories of as ancient a time as Aristotle and Ælian give no data that bear upon the subject in hand.⁴ Buffon⁵ is responsible for the statement that

“the wolf is the enemy of all society; he does not even keep much company with those of his kind. When they are seen in packs together, it is not to be considered as a peaceful society but as a combination for war . . . the instant their military expedition is completed, their society is at an end; they then part and each returns in silence to his solitary retreat.”

Abbott, *Cyclopedia of Natural History*, p. 64, says, “whether in the Old World or the New, the habits of this animal (wolf) are the same; . . . they hunt in packs and are extremely fierce and dangerous when pressed by hunger.” In the *International Encyclopedia* we read: “In the forests of Russia and Poland wolves appear in formidable packs. . . . Packs of wolves associate for this purpose (hunting).” Champlin’s *Young Folks’ Cyclopedia* adds the following evidence: “The wolf is very swift and hunts deer

⁴ In addition to the works cited, I have consulted the following books relating to animal lore:—Ælian, *De Animalibus*; Du Cange, *Glossarium*; Kenneth McKenzie, *Italian Bestiaries* in *M. L. N.*, 20 (1905); Grandville, *Scènes de la Vie Privée et Publique des Animaux*, Hetzel, Paris, 1842; Hippeau, *Bestiaire Divin de Guillaume le Clerc*, Caen, 1852; Philippe de Thaun, *Bestiaire*; Hetzel’s *Bestiary*; Allen’s *Bestiary*; Abbott, *Encyclopedia of Natural History*; s. v. *physiologus* in *Grande Encyclopédie* and *Encyc. Britannica*; Champlin, *Young Folks’ Encyclopedia*; Cahier et Martin, *Mélanges Archéologiques*, Chap. on *physiologus*; Brunetto Latini, *Livre dou Tresor*, éd. Chabaille; Berger de Xivrey, *Traditions Tératologiques*; de Montaignon, *Les Dictz des Bestes et aussi des Oyseaux* in *Recueil de Poésies Françaises*; Etienne Pasquier, *Les Recherches de la France*, Paris, 1863; de Montaignon, *Recueil des Fabliaux*; Gautier de Metz, *Image du Monde*; Chabaille, *Roman de Renart* et al.

⁵ *Natural History of the globe, etc., from the writings of Buffon, Cuvier and other eminent naturalists*, ed. by John Wright, Boston, 1831, v. I, p. 334.

and other animals in packs. In hard winters packs of hungry wolves come down from the forests of the Alps and other mountains in Europe. . . . Even in France wolves are still plentiful. From 1882 to 1889 more than 6,000 were killed, or above 800 a year." Watson, *Reasoning Power of Animals*, p. 423-4, contributes the statement: "a number of wolves will combine together to encompass a herd of deer on large plains bounded by steep cliffs. While the deer are grazing, the wolves will form a crescent around them and creep stealthily forward, etc." Paul du Chaillu, in *The Land of the Long Night*, New York, 1899, chapters XVI and XVII, tells tales of wolf-hunts in Lapland and stories of the animal's sagacity. "The Lapps among whom I lived were in great fear of wolves, for three packs of them had made their appearance in the forests about 150 miles away. . . . The tracks of three packs had been seen. . . . They attacked the reindeer from various sides, the pack dividing so as to encompass them. Driven off, the Lapps said, 'they will visit us again in small packs, so we must watch constantly.'"

There is no need of multiplying examples. The authorities agree that the wolf lives the solitary life of a recluse in time of peace and that in time of hunt and war he *herds, packs* with his kind. Neither of these conditions conduces to the custom of travelling in procession, Indian file. Everywhere in the wolf literature we read such expressions as "ils vivent par troupes," "leurs troupes affamés," "par bandes considérables," but never and nowhere do we encounter any mention of a custom so characteristic as "in single file," "à la suite, l'un derrière l'autre."

If, then, the natural histories seem aligned in opposition to the theory that wolves travel *à la file*, what of the nimrods? What evidence do the hunters offer, the living and the dead? The books are filled with stories of attacks by wolves, of sleighs pursued by packs of howling wolves, coming forward on all sides, each striving to outdo the other. Wolf-tracks are seen, always a myriad maze of mingled prints. That experienced woodsman, Mr. Stewart Edward White, writing under recent date from Los Angeles, Cal., in reply to a request for information, contributes to this investigation the statement:

"As a usual thing I think wolves are apt to travel in single file through deep snow. So are men and any other persons of any sense at all. Otherwise they travel in a pack just as dogs do everywhere."

Mr. Ernest Thompson Seton, authority on the habits of animals, in response to a request for his experiences on this subject, writes:

"I have seen wolves walk as you say, in single file, but do not consider it characteristic. It was done where there was an obvious pathway, such as a buffalo trail. They straggled along and were not in close array."

Mr. Wm. J. Long, the erudite scholar and naturalist, answering an appeal for a contribution to this subject from his vast fund of knowledge of animals, writes from Stamford, Conn.:

"In the habits of wolves, there is some reason to justify the expression to which you refer. It is not the usual way of wolves to travel nose to tail in single file, but occasionally they do it. A pack never travels that way. At least I have followed many wolf-trails in the snow and saw no evidence of it. When a small band is approaching a danger point, they sometimes swing into file evidently to escape detection. When two or three wolves are stalking game *in the open*, they sneak along one behind the other, to make themselves less conspicuous. I have never known them to do this when hunting domestic animals, or when hunting in the woods. It is only when they are creeping on deer or a flock of wild geese on the open barrens that they make use of this trick. Again in the mating season, a dog wolf will sometimes follow a bitch for miles, nose to tail.⁶ But when there are more than two, the rest keep behind or at one side, and run in a bunch. . . . the expression does not at all go with wolf habits. A big pack never travels this way, in single file, and smaller packs never go this way in play or in roaming the woods or in search of food or in ordinary hunting. In a word it is exceptional. . . . When a student on the other side, I got into the mountains occasionally in my vacations

⁶ Apropos of Mr. Long's letter, cf. Etienne Pasquier, *Les Recherches de la France*, Paris, 1863, p. 708, who finds in this mating season habit of the male wolf to follow the female, nose to tail, the source of the application of this locution to the children's game called by the same name. Suffice it to say that this animal habit of the mating season is not confined to wolves, but might have been observed in animals more generally domesticated, and that M. Pasquier's article is otherwise quite as fanciful and unscientific as his interpretations of locutions usually are.

and learned a little of wolves there. But I never knew of their travelling single file nor have I ever read of it. There is a pretty large wolf literature and the beast has figured prominently in folklore and fable. It would seem that, if the habit were common enough to result in a popular expression "*à la queue du loup*," the habit would be mentioned in literature, but it never is mentioned . . . the habit is so unusual that very few observers have ever noticed it. Our own wolf literature, like that of Europe, always emphasizes the fact that wolves travel in an entirely different manner."

And the huntsman chief, the well-informed and ever-ready former President, Mr. Theodore Roosevelt, lends the stamp of his authority to this discussion, graciously writing from the White House shortly before the expiration of his term of office:

"I have usually seen wolves in straggling parties, but I have once or twice seen them traveling in single file."

From all this evidence we are justified in concluding that although wolves have been seen to travel in single file, *à la suite*, it was always under the stress of peculiar and especial circumstances, due either to some obvious exigency of the *terrain* or of the season, and that the custom has been rarely observed and is entirely exceptional. Now it is not unfair to demand of a locution that attains popularity and currency that it find its origin in a custom at once generally known, well authenticated and characteristic.⁷

If, then, the explanation of this locution given by the dictionaries is not compatible with the facts of natural history, where are we to seek the correct interpretation? The answer to this question is suggested by M. Gaston Paris in *Romania* X (1881), pp. 50-51, where he says:

"*à la queue leu leu* contient une fois, si je ne me trompe et pas deux la vieille forme *leu* en même temps qu'un reste de l'ancienne syntaxe; c'est proprement *à la queue le leu*, 'à la queue du loup,' et

⁷ It should be mentioned that diligent search of the Bestiaries and of the Fabliaux literature in the hope of finding the source of this locution in some myth or legend was totally without result. The early Bestiaries all seem to follow Philippe de Thaun, giving no mention of the wolf. When he finally does get into literature his identity seems to be much confused, as, for example, in Cahier's *Mélanges Archéologiques*, chapter on *Physiologus*, where the wolf is confounded with the pig.

dans le jeu enfantin auquel elle est empruntée, tous les joueurs à la file forment la queue du meneur qui, il est vrai, n'est pas le loup, mais qui le devient s'il laisse gagner celui qui en remplit le rôle."

Here we are referred to the proper *terrain* for the source of this locution, viz., "le jeu enfantin auquel elle est empruntée." But M. Paris, by his translation of *à la queue le leu* as "à la queue du loup," shows that he considers *le leu* as a limiting genitive, while on the contrary there is no element in the game nor any syntactical evidence to justify such a conception.

Rabelais,⁸ among the games of physical exercise in *Les Jeux de Gargantua*, lists this game as *à la queue au⁹ loup*. The note of the editors adds:

"Ce jeu est trop connu pour le décrire. Nous nous contenterons de faire remarquer qu'on appelait ainsi et qu'on l'appelle encore *à la queue leu-leu*; qu'en Languedoc on dit *à loubet-loubet* (au petit loup), ou *fa à los anquetos* (jouer aux oisons), et qu'on dit encore *Saint Leu* pour *Saint Loup*."

Other editors¹⁰ of Rabelais have exhibited less confusion but as little instruction in the matter of this game, nor do the books on games¹¹ include a description of it in their pages. As a matter of fact the game is so well-known that any French child can recite its rules. The following is the oral description of a Frenchman¹² who has played the game hundreds of times as a boy:

"A crowd of children form in line each holding the skirt of the one ahead of him, thus forming a queue. When the game is pro-

⁸ *Œuvres de Rabelais, Edition Variorum* par Esmangart et Eloi Johanneau, Paris, 1823, Liv. I, c. XXII, p. 430.

⁹ Whether *au* is a misprint for *du*, or a scribal error, or whether *au* was actually in use in the title of the game, it is impossible to say. Suffice it to add that nowhere else has the phrase been seen other than *à la queue du loup*.

¹⁰ M. Paulin Paris, *Manuscrits Français*, I, 1, p. 290 (*Triumphes des Vertus*), discovers the list from which Rabelais took the list of games incorporated in *Gargantua*, but makes no explanation of the game.

¹¹ Cf. *Grande Encyclopédie*, s. v. *jeux*; Becq de Fouquières, *Jeux des Anciens*, Paris, 1869; Bayle-Mouillard, *Manuel Complet des jeux de société*, Paris, 1836; Cotton and Seymour, *Complete Gamester*; Bohn's *Handbook of Games*; de Montaignon, *Comment les Pastoureaux et Pastourelles ensemble se jouent en divers jeux*; Philidor, *Académie Universelle des Jeux*, Amsterdam, 1752.

¹² Dr. Albert I. Calais, De Witt Clinton High School, New York City. The correctness of the description here given is further vouched for by Mr. Henri Muller, a Frenchman, Professor at Columbia University.

posed and as the line is forming, all say 'à la queue, à la queue.' Then one of the players, *le loup*, takes his place opposite the leader of the line of players. The latter must keep in line and the leader must face the wolf. Then the line by twining and twisting (somewhat resembling 'Crack the Whip') tries, still keeping the line-formation, to keep out of the wolf's clutches. The players keep up a constant cry '*leu, leu, leu, leu!*' [which, in the narration the speaker unconsciously but very perceptibly pronounced '*le leu! le leu!*'] and when one of the line is caught he becomes *le loup* and the previous wolf takes the place at the end of the line, *à la queue*, all the players moving up."

Here, surely, there is no trace of the single file manner of travel which wolves do not, as a matter of fact, affect, nor of the nose to tail habits of the mating season. *A la queue* indeed means "in single file," but it is a file of sheep, not of wolves; in fact, there is but one wolf, who takes his place *à la queue* when his play is over. *Leu leu*, as M. Paris correctly observes "est proprement *le leu*" and refers to the cry of the children at the approach of the wolf. Where could so natural a corruption as that of *le leu* to *leu leu* take place more readily than in children's games, where rhyming sounds are most sought?¹³ As for the use of *leu* for *loup*, it is the regular Picard form of the word and readily gets itself preserved in this locution because of its rhyme with *queue*.

According to Borel, *Dictionnaire des Termes du vieux français*, s. v. *leu*, in Languedoc the children do not play at all at *à la queue* but at *à loubet-loubet* (which the editors of Rabelais render 'au petit loup,' not as a limiting genitive): This is not at all the game of "tail" but the game of "wolf"; and the manner of playing it ("ils feignent que le loup les vient prendre") bears out the choice of title. In further support of this interpretation comes the description¹⁴ of a Spanish game, *El Lobo y la Pastora*, wherein the children who play the part of sheep (*las ovejas*) stand in single file in one long line, each with his arms about the waist of the one ahead of him. One, who plays the shepherdess (*la pastora*), stands before the others to prevent another player, the wolf (*el lobo*), from catching them. At a given signal the wolf cries: "*Yo soy el lobo, obo, obo, que las (ovejas) comerá,*" to which

¹³ Note that the *Dict. Gén.* marks this locution as "anc. à la queue *le leu*."

¹⁴ *Juegos de Tertulia y de Prendas*, Paris, 1836.

the shepherdess replies, "*Yo soy la pastora, ora, ora, que lo impedirá.*"¹⁵ The wolf, pretending to move against the head of the line, draws the shepherdess toward that side, when he suddenly swoops down upon the foot and seizes the last sheep. That child must pay a forfeit. If the sheep escapes and seeks shelter behind the shepherdess, where the wolf may not touch it, the wolf pays a forfeit, loses his position and takes his place at the foot of the line, the other child becoming the wolf.

If this locution had aught in common with the custom of any animal to travel in single file would it not seem more natural that it should connect itself with an animal whose characteristic habits could be more easily and generally observed than, for obvious reasons, can those of the savage wolf? For example, in Switzerland and in Southern France any day the cows may be seen returning from their highland pastures in single file, nose to tail, if you will; and French does present the locution *à la queue de vache*,¹⁶ which Ste. Palaye explains, "c'est-à-dire l'un derrière l'autre." Here there is an unmistakable descriptive genitive, as in the well-known expression *à la queue de morue*, etc.; but as far as *à la queue leu leu* is concerned, neither the habits of the wolf, nor the method of playing the game of that name, nor the form of the article, justifies the interpretation of a descriptive genitive.

To resume, then, in a word: the dictionary explanation of this locution should be changed, because it is contrary to the facts of natural history and to the syntax. *A la queue leu leu* stands, not for *à la queue du loup*, but for *à la queue, le loup!* and refers, not to any wolflike habit of travelling in single file, but to a children's game¹⁷ in which the players begin by calling *à la queue!* ("form in

¹⁵ Note the repetition of the rhyming sounds, as in *queue leu leu*. Closely related to this is the cry of the Béarnais peasants *gous-gous* (*gous* = chien) used to excite dogs against one another, and the cry of the Poitevin shepherds *goua-goua*, used to incite dogs in pursuit of sheep. (Lazare Sainéan, *Rom. Forsch.*, 23, p. 254.)

¹⁶ Sainte Palaye, *Dictionnaire Historique*, s. v. *queue*, "Messire Jean Chaperon et le dit Seigneur d'Auton meirent cinq cens hommes de guerre en leurs vaisseaulx, c'est assavoir quatre cens dedans la nau dudit Chaperon et cent dedans la barque du seigneur d'Auton et se meirent sur mer *à queue de vache*." (Jean d'Auton, p. 112.)

¹⁷ Of course the growth and spread of a game of this sort, and so named, is directly due to the great prevalence of wolves in the Middle Ages and even

line!" and then cry out, *le leu!* (Picard form for *le loup*) in fear of the attacking player-wolf. It is the Picard form of the word that is here preserved, because of its rhyming with the preceding word *queue* and because of the corruption by the peasantry. The article *le* is corrupted to *leu* by alliterative attraction to its neighboring sounds, and because the following word is no longer understood to be a noun.

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far into Modern times, the great fear they inspired, and the precautions taken by shepherds to protect flocks from wolf depredations. The Pastourelles abound in such references.
