Notes

Grammar through Onomastics

It is all too frequently claimed that proper names are somehow exceptional to or exempt from the rules of grammar of a language. I have argued at some length[1] that this is not true, that proper names in fact represent the historical development of forms and of rules in a notably exemplary fashion.

There are times, in fact, when proper names form almost the only testimony we have to the precise shape and distribution of grammatical forms. The genitive singular of thematic nominal stems in Celtic is a good case in point. D. Ellis Evans has recently stated: "An essential feature, it seems, in our understanding of Brittonic final *-i* affection reflected in forms deriving from old *-o* stem genitives."[2] He is speaking here of the length of the *-ī*. Actually, I would reverse the terms of his argument. It is rather that the final *-i* affection observed in British Celtic informs us that the vowel-final of the old genitive ending was in fact originally long.

We know that the Old Latin genitive singular *-ī* must have been long. We also see length in the Venetic doubling of *re•i•itii*. Unfortunately, Oscan *niumsi-eís* and *punti-eis* and Umbrian **kapres** 'caprt' show us nothing directly. Messapic *-a(i)hi* is too fraught with conjecture and inference to be a firm support.

Turning now to Celtic, we see immediately that Old Irish *maicc,* etc., shows us nothing of the length of the old lost vowel. Yet, sadly for us, there is no graphic indication of vowel length in any of the relevant graphic systems to assist or inform us on Ogam Irish MAQI or COIMAGNI, or Gaulish *ACCedomari,* or Todi ATEKNATI. TRUTIKNI, or Lepontic RANENI – to choose some of our finest and clearest examples.

But then when we turn finally to British Celtic we must realize that surface case forms have been lost prehistorically in the grammar of nouns. Thus an original *o*-stem of Welsh or Breton, like any other noun, shows no distinct genitive at any time in the history of these languages. There are simply no case inflections left.

We are therefore thrown exclusively upon such precious onomastic fossils as Welsh *Penn Tyrch* (: *twrch*) and Anglicized Cardiff (*-diff*: the river *Taff*), where the i-affection of the internal vowel can result only from a long **-ī*. That is to say, *y* alternating with *w* [u] in *twrch* [turx] and English *i* for a Welsh *ei* alternating with *a* in *Taff* can result from no lost final other than a long vowel.

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[1] "*Alauno-, ā*. Linguistic change and proper names," *Beiträge Z. Namenforschungen* 10, 1975, 173–8.

[2] "The contribution of (non-Celtiberian) Continental Celtic to the reconstruction of the Celtic 'Grundsprache'," *Indogermanisch und Keltisch* (ed. K. H. Schmidt), Wiesbaden 1975, p. 79.

The Linguistic Confrontation of *Macbeth* and *Macduff*

The "climactic" action of *Macbeth* is, of course, the single combat to the death of V.viii.3–34,

and Shakespeare did not fail to highlight this confrontation by exploiting both striking similarities and striking contrasts between the antagonists. Both are, to begin with the obvious, Scottish nobles, and both are killers of kings. But Macbeth stands for usurpation, while Macduff represents restoration: Macbeth seized power unjustly for himself, Macduff regains it justly for another. Macbeth is a killer of children – Macduff's children are killed.

What has not been pointed out is that these similarities and these contrasts are enhanced linguistically by the antagonists' names. Levin, after suggesting that, "The field of Shakespearean nomenclature is wide open,"[1] reminds us that, "The power of naming is intimately allied to the gift of characterization."[2] And Knight, likewise, on this subject, has warned against a too hasty and thence superficial acceptance of those names Shakespeare might seem merely to take from his sources: "If any name is effective, that effect is constituent to the art form, whether it is due to Shakespeare's invention or to his acceptance."[3]

That being agreed, we may again begin, as we always should, with the obvious. Both antagonists bear noble Scottish patronymics in *Mac-*: and both names are dissyllabic, with final stress. Further, in both instances those second syllables have initial voiced stops, followed immediately by a short simple vowel; and both are closed by voiceless fricatives. But, in the case of *Macbeth,* the second syllable begins with a *labial* and ends with a *dental* obstruent – while for *Macduff* it *begins* with a dental and *ends* in a labial (both labials and dentals contrasting with the preceding velar of *Mac-*). Finally, for *Macduff,* the vowel of that second syllable is back and round,[4] to contrast with the front non-round vowel of *Macbeth*. One is reminded of Blake's insistence that, "Poetry admits not a Letter that is Insignificant."[5] Or, to return to Levin, "We are likely to understand Shakespeare better if we assume that he knew what he was doing every minute."[6]

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[1]Harry Levin, "Shakespeare's Nomenclature," *Shakespeare and the Revolution of the Times*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 75.

[2]Levin, p. 77.

[3]George Wilson Knight, "What's in a Name," *The Sovereign Flower* (London: Methuen, 1958), p. 174, who in this chapter asserts both the semantic and phonetic importance of Shakespearean names. Levin, p. 55, refers to Knight's book as *The Sovereign Flame*.

[4]That is, like the vowel in *bush,* not as in *hush*. Although there had been discussion on this vowel, there is now more agreement among scholars of a wide range of approaches. Thus E. J. Dobson, *English Pronunciation 1500–1700* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1957), p. 585–9; Margaret Schlauch, *The English Language in Modern Times* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 85–6, esp. note 37; Hans Kurath, *A Phonology and Prosody of Modern English* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press), p. 93–7; and Noam Chomsky and Morris Halle, *The Sound Pattern of English* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 263 and 269–70, esp. note 14. All *contra* Helge Kokeritz, *Shakespeare's Pronunciation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), p. 240–4.

[5]William Blake, "A Vision of the Last Judgment," in David V. Erdman, *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1965), p. 82.

[6]Levin, p. 58.