Onomastics and the Academy: Past, Present, and Future

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Twenty-five years ago Margaret M. Bryant commemorated the silver anniversary of the founding of the American Name Society with an article in *Names* titled "After 25 Years of Onomastic Study" (1976). She concluded that essay by noting that

> If one considers the significant volumes of place-name study, the gazetteers, the learned and not-so-learned articles that have appeared [in *Names*], the ever-increasing number of Names Institutes and now the regional sessions in conjunction with the regional Modern Language Association meetings and other educational and scholarly groups plus the National Place-Name Survey now underway, one can see that during the last 25 years much onomastic interest has been created and much work has been done in the field of onomastics, a good foundation for the next quarter of a century. (54-55)

These remarks mirror the general tone of the entire article: Bryant is upbeat, celebratory, and even says that ANS had, as early as 1972, "come of age" (30).

Some 18 years after Bryant published her essay, I wrote an article that was neither upbeat nor celebratory (1994). There I pointed out that, at least in the Academy, onomastics and the people who study it often suffer fierce intellectual prejudice at the hands of their uninformed (or narrow-minded) colleagues, a prejudice that typically takes several different forms: the lack of reward in bids for tenure, promotion, grants, and annual pay raises; the lack of release time and/or editorial assistance for some of those who have edited onomastics journals; and the common perception that the study of names is the nonrigorous pursuit of amateurish dilettantes with too much time on their hands.

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At the risk of raining on the golden anniversary of ANS, I wish to say here that things seem not to have changed much in the last seven years: in many academic corners the intellectual snobbery against onomastics and onomasts continues, and actually may have worsened. The two questions that I will address in this essay, then, are (1) What has happened in the years since Bryant published her essay to cause such an extreme turnabout in how onomastics and those who study it are perceived? and perhaps more important, (2) What can we do about it?

Let me acknowledge first that perception is a tricky thing. The "extreme turnabout" I refer to in my first question assumes that Bryant was not merely trying to paint a rosy picture on a canvas that others would have judged more pessimistically, and not reporting only a portion of what she observed to be true. I never had the pleasure of meeting Ms. Bryant, but I must believe that her assessment was complete and level-headed, and generally one with which the majority of ANS members would have agreed.

Let me also acknowledge that I tend to see the proverbial cup as half empty rather than half full. No doubt some who read my article in 1994 believed I was unduly negative in judging the position that onomastics holds in the Academy, and they may be right. It is interesting, however, that within a few weeks of the essay's publication I received nearly two dozen letters from all across the United States, written by colleagues who agreed with my assessment and wanted to share their own woeful tales. It seems true, in other words, that the intellectual prejudice I wrote about is not *just* the product of my curmudgeonly cynicism.

The first question I posed above has no obvious answer when we focus on the discipline of onomastics. Yes, names do receive their share of light-hearted attention from the media, but this has always been true. Yes, the study of names is by definition interdisciplinary (which makes it automatically suspect in the eyes of some), but it was just as interdisciplinary 25 years ago. Yes, very few courses are taught in onomastics, and no degrees are offered, but this represents no change from the past. Yes, onomasts typically do a poor job of demonstrating how the study of names informs other disciplines, but "applied onomastics" has never been a serious focus of attention. And yes, we might well expect onomastics to experience the growing pains that typify new fields of study, but we might also expect such pains to be more intense in the first quarter-century than the second.

But let's change the focus of the question from "onomastics" to "the academic setting in which onomastics occurs." In other words, if onomastics hasn't changed much since Bryant published her article, has the Academy?

The answer, of course, is yes. In fact, the Academy has changed greatly over the last 25 years, largely because of the exponential increase in the number of talented and hungry Ph.D.s available for employment. Predictably, this surfeit has created the ultimate buyer's market, not to mention an almost Darwinian environment in which only the fittest can hope to survive: the competition for jobs is fierce, and the standards for scholarly publication, for tenure and promotion, and for grants and other academic prizes is higher than ever. Those who don't clear the bar of achievement perish and are quickly replaced by those who can prove that they are leaner and meaner examples of academic fitness. And make no mistake: the bar continues to rise higher every year, at a dizzying pace.

As nearly as I can judge, this rising bar has generally had the predictable effect on the caliber of scholarship published in the journals that represent their various disciplines. Certainly it is true that research methods have improved over the past 25 years in the social and natural sciences, as has the quality of empiricism and theoretical analysis there and in the humanities. All in all, it's probably true that most of the articles printed in the mid-1970s would not be accepted for publication today.

I'm less confident that all of this is true of onomastics. Some cosmetic changes have occurred in this journal, as when in 1996 the title *Names* was changed to the more scholarly-sounding *Names: A Journal of Onomastics*. And some of the less academic features of the journal have long since been discontinued (such as the section titled "Your Name," which, beginning in the fall of 1954, listed "the derivation of the names of members of the [ANS]" [Bryant 1972, 35]). And fewer and fewer of those "not-so-learned articles" that Bryant mentioned have appeared, especially since the inception of the policy stipulating that submissions go to the editorial board anonymously. But on the whole the quality of the journal, as measured primarily by the scholarship in it, may not have risen either fast enough or high enough to keep in step with the rest of the Academy. Is it just me, or do too few of the articles

(including my own) seem truly exceptional, with the majority reflecting essentially the same methods, brand of empiricism, theoretical orientation, and even concerns that were popular 25 years ago? And is it just me, or do the reviews too frequently provide only a book report-like plot summary rather than a compelling analysis of strengths and weaknesses?

Now, do not misunderstand. The quality of the journal *has* increased, particularly in recent years, and continues to do so; it just may not have increased enough to keep in stride with the rapidly-rising standards of the Academy. Add to this the general perception that, as the official organ of the American Name Society, the journal must be the very best of its kind, and the inescapable conclusion is that "the very best" scholarship in onomastics is a notch or two below the best scholarship in other disciplines. And when we factor into the equation the light-hearted media attention that names receive, the interdisciplinary nature of onomastics, and so forth—never mind the remarkable ignorance so common among non-onomasts regarding what exactly we do, and how, and why, when we study names, that conclusion is compounded many times over.

But there is reason for hope. Onomasts and onomastics may not currently enjoy the best of relationships with the rest of the Academy, but the future is not set in stone. I suggest that, instead of merely responding defensively to any additional bias, we adopt a proactive approach:

1. We must reach out more, particularly to those academics who question the intellectual rigor attached to onomastics, and set the record straight, and we must do so matter-of-factly and undefensively. One way of doing this, as Bryant's remarks quoted earlier make clear, is by forging and maintaining strong ties with "the regional sessions . . . [of] the . . . Modern Language Association . . . and other educational and scholarly groups." Such ties are priceless connections to the rest of the Academy, and yet our performance in this area over the past several years has not been strong (ANS currently has *no* connection to the Midwest Modern Language Association, for example).

2. We must publish more names-oriented articles in journals not devoted to onomastics, thereby making the point that ours is a complex

discipline reaching far beyond the study of place names and personal names to provide insights into such diverse facets of the human condition as language, folklore, history, sociology, psychology, and literature. In other words, we should more often seize the interdisciplinary nature of onomastics and turn it to our advantage by demonstrating how critical the study of names is to understanding those disciplines more completely. The essays Stanley Lieberson and his colleagues have published in *American Sociological Review* (1995) and the *American Journal of Sociology* (2000) over the past several years constitute one good example of this; Grant Smith's work in *American Speech* (1997) is another.

3. Similarly, we must capitalize on every opportunity to dissuade the media, and hence the public, from believing that the study of names amounts to little more than poring over maps and telephone books, noting all the oddities to be found there. Some of us give numerous interviews every year to various newspapers, radio stations, and the like, and we should answer the questions asked of us as though onomastics is serious work with a serious past and a serious future. I'm not suggesting that we adopt a stodgy academic persona, or spew out bibliographic references, or make lengthy speeches in which we stump for the seriousness of onomastics, but that we simply allow the relevance of onomastics to speak for itself. When my work on the perception of married women's surnames (1997a) and on the perception of women who title themselves with *Ms.* (1997b) served as the focus of an hour-long talkshow on Wisconsin Public Radio in 1998, the host of the show and I and the many listeners who called in with questions had fun, yet the host also told me afterward that he'd had no idea how important the study of names could be, or how much it could tell us about ourselves.

4. We must get more of our students involved in onomastics. We need to teach more courses (at both the graduate and undergraduate levels), direct more independent studies, encourage more theses and dissertations, and co-opt more research assistants. Perhaps the best model of devotion in this area has been the Department of English at the University of South Dakota, where between 1938 and 1962, Edward

Ehrensperger directed 16 M.A. theses on the names of one or another South Dakota county, and in the 1980s Tom Gasque taught a course in which the students made substantive contributions to a revision of Ehrensperger's 1941 WPA study of South Dakota place names. Elsewhere, courses have been taught, or at least papers assigned, on various aspects of name study at Clemson University, the University of Oregon, the University of South Carolina, and other schools. But such theses and courses and assignments are rare, and need to become much more frequent.

5. We must take greater pride in the work we do. Of course onomastics is worthy of inclusion in the Academy, and not just because academic freedom guarantees us the right to study what we wish. But academic freedom does *not* guarantee that our work will be accepted or, much less, respected. Those are privileges that we must earn—not once, but continuously—by giving the strictest attention to our methods, our theoretical orientations, and in general by religiously following accepted standards for primary and secondary research. In short, we must never forget that our work is on constant display before those who are predisposed to see it in a poor light.

6. Deep breath for this one: We should change the name of our journal yet again, perhaps to *American Journal of Onomastics*. I suspect the original name was chosen because, in a single word, it indicated the interest of the membership of ANS and reflected the Society's resolution that the journal be "of interest not only to the scholar but to the general intelligent reader, . . . a bridge between the learned and everyday worlds" (Bryant 1976, 36). And yes, I realize that tradition dies hard, especially for some. But the academic climate in which the journal exists now is very different from what it was two generations ago, and the journal can no longer be viewed as a "bridge" between two worlds. Let us therefore select a name that would command more respect from the academic community, and perhaps also more submissions from scholars outside ANS, and adopt it with all due speed. (For those who may be wondering, no, I definitely do *not* believe the adage that "clothes make the man." But I'm not above playing to the narrow-mindedness of those who do, and as I noted above, perception is a tricky thing.)

I could make additional suggestions (e.g., that we finally standardize a term for one another: Bryant used *onomatologist* throughout her essay; elsewhere I have resorted to *onomastician*, though here I have used the shorter *onomast*), but I have used up my allotted space. I hope, in the end, not to have repeated the dour attitude of the article I published in 1994. I believe the future of the American Name Society is bright, but that it can and will be only as bright as we allow it to be.

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