A Fancy for the Fantastic:
Reflections on Names in Fantasy Literature

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One of the remarkable facts about name study is the extent to which it serves as a link between otherwise diverse disciplines and activities. Geography, history, genealogy, sociology, anthropology, etymology, linguistics, literary criticism, folklore, lexicography, encyclopedia writing, criminology, scientific terminology, manufacturing, trade-naming, marketing, legal studies, dialectology, psychology, philosophy, astronomy, and pop culture are some of the motley crew that join hands in onomastics. Correspondingly, onomastic studies are of diverse kinds. The best survey of the subject with which I am familiar is Frank Nuessel's book, *The Study of Names*, which gives a concise overview of the amazing diversity in the field.

Very few persons are onomasticians by their primary calling in life, but a great many persons are fellow travelers on the name trail or amateur enthusiasts. As one of the fellow travelers, I have been mainly interested in the linguistic and especially theoretical aspects of name study, but I have also been an amused observer of the social scene, especially with respect to given names and contemporary place names, and also an aficionado of literary names in off-beat works ranging from the Bhagavad Gita to Oz.

The recent release of two films on popular works of fantasy (*Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings*, each the first of a series) prompts thoughts about onomastics in fantasy literature. Fantasy names are topical because of those movies and because of the popularity of the novels on which the films are based. But fantasy names have an intrinsic and not just a fashionable timely interest. Real names in literature are limited by the reality they represent. Fictional names in fantasy

literature, by definition, represent no reality, so can correspond to whatever playfulness, symbolism, or mystery their writers wish or (writers not always knowing what they have wrought) their readers discover.

Serendipitously, as I was contemplating this essay on names in fantasy literature (though I had in fact not yet fully settled on that topic), I took a stroll through our local mall and inevitably stopped off at one of its chain bookshops, on whose bargain sale table I found a copy of *The Dictionary of Imaginary Places*, "the newly updated and expanded classic" by Alberto Manguel and Gianni Guadalupi, for an irresistible 80 percent off the list price. The gods, I decided, had sent me an omen. The roughly 775 pages of the volume fairly teem with utopias (at least in the etymological sense of that word, 'not-place'). So, once again proving the correctness of the cultivated observation of Oscar Wilde, who said, "I can resist anything but temptation," I bought the bargain.

The Dictionary of Imaginary Places contains (according to its blurb) more than 1200 entries ranging from *Abaton* (said to be from Greek *a-* 'not' and *baino* 'I go', a Scottish town that unpredictably changes its location, described by Thomas Bulfinch in his 1892 *My Heart's in the Highlands*) to *Zyundal* (one of the Isles of Wisdom in the north Pacific, described by Alexander Moszkowski in his 1922 *Die Inseln der Weisheit*). The dictionary is also fairly up to date, including two entries (*Forbidden Forest* and *Hogwarts*) from the first two Harry Potter books by J. K. Rowling.

Forbidden Forest, being a descriptive name, is not particularly interesting onomastically. But *Hogwarts* is. It is the name of a school to train young witches and wizards, located apparently somewhere in the north of England and accessed by the Hogwarts Express train, which leaves from platform 9¾ (an unreal track) at London's King's Cross Station (a real structure). Hogwarts is modeled on English upper-class public (anglice, private boarding) schools, which mark many a student for life. So the clang associations of its name are appropriate. *Hog-* is an ironic commentary on the English classes who attend the exclusive schools, and *-warts* suggests the way the schools rub off on their students. But the humor of the name is both gentle and very English.

Hogwarts has four houses into which the students are sorted, named for the four founding masters of the school: Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin. Now a little quiz. Match the four names to these descriptions:

> By A———, the bravest were
> Prized far beyond the rest;
> For B———, the cleverest
> Would always be the best;
> For C———, hard workers were
> Most worthy of admission;
> And power-hungry D———
> Loved those of great ambition.

The correct matches: Gryffindor (*griffin*, part eagle and part lion—royal animals, used in heraldry) is A; Hufflepuff (*huff* and *puff*, sounds of effort expended) is C; Ravenclaw (Noah's raven is "a symbol of the lower mind, which goes forth to the things of the world, and returns not again" according to Gaskell's *Dictionary*) is B; Slytherin (*sly*, *slither* 'slip or slide like a snake' + *in*) is D. The names of the masters and the houses they founded are clearly iconic.

In contrast with its mere two entries for Harry Potter, *The Dictionary of Imaginary Places* has a great many entries for the Middle-earth books of J. R. R. Tolkien. The index devotes nearly two columns of small print to Tolkien and includes more than 200 entries (counting some entries as many times as books in which the places appear). The entries were drawn from *The Hobbit*, all three volumes of *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion*. But even that large number of entries (which appears to be greater than for any other author represented in the dictionary) is modest compared with the totality of names in Tolkien's epic fantasy.

Two Tolkien name glossaries, Robert Foster's *Complete Guide to Middle-earth* and J. E. A. Tyler's *Tolkien Companion*, have respectively 435 and 531 pages of entries for names of Middle-earth places, people, things, and events. Tolkien's linguistic and onomastic inventiveness was indeed epic in proportions. He was a philologist with knowledge of a

score of tongues, which he drew on in creating fourteen different languages for various populations of Middle-earth (Noel 1980). Quenya, the ancient High Elven tongue, is based on Finnish; Sindarin, one of the later Elvish languages, has a pronunciation influenced by Welsh; the language of the Rohirrim, the Horselords, is represented in Tolkien's books by Old English, and their culture is likewise based on that of the Anglo-Saxons.

Many of Tolkien's names are derived from the literature of northern Europe. For example, Eärendil is a legendary mariner in Middle-earth identified with the morning star. Tolkien took the name and modeled the figure on a character from Germanic mythology variously called Earendel, Orentil, and Erentel, a kind of Ulysses figure who appears in several accounts, including the *Prose Edda*. Tolkien's originality consists less in creating from scratch than in weaving together themes, characters, and motifs from a variety of traditional sources, much as the old gleemen did.

Some of the names used by Rowling and Tolkien have shared features. For example, Rowling's arch villain is Lord Voldemort, generally called not by name but by the superstitiously euphemistic epithet "You-Know-Who." *Voldemort*, a Nazi-sounding moniker, echoes German *wollen* 'to wish' and Romance *mort* 'death'; he is a personified death-wish. Tolkien's arch evil is *Morgoth*, again echoing *mort* 'death' plus the name of one of the Germanic tribes with a particularly bad rep, the *Goths*. Morgoth is associated with a land called *Mordor*, once again echoing the *mort* theme or, more specifically *mordant* or *murder*. It is also referred to as the "Black Land" or the "Nameless Land." So villainous persons and places in both Rowling and Tolkien have similar names associated with death or are unnamed. Borrowing need not be invoked as an explanation; the independent use of common symbolism will account for the resemblances.

But Rowling's and Tolkien's works are not the only sorts of fantasy. Some fantastic fiction, unlike Harry Potter or Middle-earth, is cloaked in realism. Examples are two golfing novels that treat the game as a metaphor for a spiritual quest: *Golf in the Kingdom*, by Michael Murphy, and *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, by Steven Pressfield. Both

novels have golf links that are allusively named. In the first novel, the *Links of Burning-Bush* evoke the encounter of Moses with Yahweh in the wilderness; and in the second, the links at *Krewe Island* is a less obvious allusion to *Kuru Field*, the site of the battle of the Mahabharata, where the Bhagavad Gita is set. Indeed, *The Legend* is an elaborate parallel to the Gita: for example, its protagonist is *R. Junah*, paralleling *Arjuna*, the hero of the Gita, and his black caddy is *Bagger Vance*, paralleling *Bhagavan* "the Lord," an epithet of Krishna, whose Sanskrit name means "the black one" and who served as Arjuna's charioteer. In both novels, playing the game of golf becomes a metaphor of searching for spiritual discovery and leading an integrated life. Works of this kind transmute ordinary reality into extraordinary fantasy.

The question, however, is why onomasticians should pay attention to names in fantasy literature. What is the intrinsic interest it holds for students of the subject? As suggested above, the writers of fantasy works have a greater freedom than do most authors. They are creators of a world whose boundaries are only what the authors choose. And that freedom applies also to all names in the story: those of characters, places, objects, events, and so on. Fantasy writers are name-givers with no restrictions other than those they choose to observe to make the whole work coherent. The lack of restrictions gives them the opportunity to make their names not arbitrary and conventional but appropriate and "natural."

Fantasy is therefore potentially the richest of all genres of literature for onomastic analysis focusing on a connection between the name and the named. That connection is a central concern of philosophical onomastics, as exhibited for example from the Platonic dialog of the *Cratylus* onward. In addition, there is a playfulness in fantasy onomastics that is very human. Our species has been called *Homo faber*, *Homo loquens*, and *Homo ludens*, "man the maker," "talking man," and "playing man." In fantasy onomastics we are all three at once. And that is a reason, both productive and pleasurable, for pursuing the study.

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