## Book Review

## Literary Onomastics. Edited By Dorothy Dodge Robbins. Lanham: Lexington Books. 2023. Pp. 124 (Hardback). $90.00. ISBN 13: 987-1-666-90593-9.

In compiling a collection of essays featuring literary onomastics, Dorothy Dodge Robbins has planted a new flag to guide scholars straddling their somewhat solitary ways along the borderlands of literatures, rhetoric, and linguistics. Although the trails may seem narrow, the range of disciplines represented among the authors included in this collection is broad. As Robbins notes in her introductory chapter, "Approaches to Literary Onomastics" (1-8), literary onomastics does not "simply meld literary studies with onomastic concerns [but] is often informed by theories and methods associated with other disciplines" (1). Chapter authors include academicians with expertise in various fields of literature as well as in such areas as communication science, psychology, history, gender studies, rhetoric, writing, and technical communication. Using a variety of lenses, these writers study names and the naming practices of people, places, and objects in a variety of narrative texts. Robbins briefly discusses theories of and methods used in literary onomastics but emphasizes that, rather than a particular theory or method, "what unites literary onomasticians is their belief that names are of central importance to literary works" (4). That's not to say that theories and methods are unimportant—and I will address both in the latter part of this review—just that the common element in all the essays is an interest in names as they are used in literature. If this all sounds a bit esoteric or even inconsequential, consider that some of the most subversive and transformative events in human history have been fomented not by the sterile recitations of facts but by the couching of facts within stories, stories that often challenged—and continue to challenge—the status quo. Each of the literary works studied in this volume, to greater or lesser degree, does just that, and the authors of the various chapters examine how names and naming function within those works to intensify the challenge.

How radical Elizabethan writers challenged literary and cultural norms—sometimes risking censure—is the topic of chapter 2, "Naming as Self-Reference in Poems by Sidney, Shakespeare, and Donne" (9–20), written by Ernest P. Rufleth. English poets of the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries seldom addressed lovers or themselves by name in their works, Rufleth notes, more often using a false name or the impersonal and unidentifiable *you/I*. "Such pseudonymic verse", Rufleth writes, "[provided a] veil of anonymity, dodging possible scandal or charges of inappropriate public affection" (9) and even "active state censorship" (10). Not only did Sir Philip Sidney, William Shakespeare, and John Donne buck tradition and censure by inserting their names and sometimes those of their lovers into their verses, they also "renegotiate[d] standard poetic practices by treating the idea of the narrator [. . .] in a completely different manner than other poems of the time" (9). Rufleth explores Sidney's uses of variations of his name, such as *Astrophil* and *Philisides*, and his playing with equine imagery, noting that *Philip* comes from the Greek for "fond of horses", in *Astrophil and Stella* (1591) and *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* (1590). In contrast to Sidney's machinations, Shakespeare's self-identification in various of the sonnets involved simpler, if sometimes risqué, plays on the homonyms of *Will-will* (15), and Rufleth's insights into Early Modern English slang suggest the puns may have raised more than a few eyebrows in their day. John Donne's uses of the homonyms *Donne-done* and *More-more—More* being his wife's maiden name—appear primarily in a more contemplative, though no less passionate, work titled "To Christ" in which, Rufleth notes in his nuanced "onomastic reading of [several] lines" (17), Donne wrestles with personal questions of judgment and forgiveness.

In chapter 3, "Proclaiming Names in Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies*" (21–40), Christine De Vinne provides an in-depth onomastic analysis of Alvarez's 1994 novel. Set in the Dominican Republic near the end of Rafael Trujillo's ruthless dictatorship (1930–1961), *In the Time of the Butterflies* tells of the three murdered Mirabal sisters—code-named *las Mariposas* 'the butterflies'—who challenged that dictatorship and of the fourth sister who, later, bore witness to their work. De Vinne establishes Alvarez as a meticulous historian and as a skilled novelist who "adds a cast of cannily named [fictional] secondary characters to advance the plot and underscore the theme" (21). While De Vinne explores the etymologies, connotations, and evocative poetics of the names of Alvarez's characters as well as the redactions of names—plus Alvarez's own onomastic concerns about identifying living survivors—she also examines Alvarez's "postmodern pathway" (23) in her choices of telling the sisters' stories through historical fiction, moving between past and present, and using "a distinctly Latin American narrative form that [by naming] re-empowers the silenced, the *testimonio*" (31). Six pages of endnotes and references attest to De Vinne's own diligent research into and insightful onomastic analysis of the author, the era, the narrative, and the characters.

Christopher L. Robinson coins a new term, *onomaphor*, in chapter 4, "Onomastic Metaphor: The Rhetoric of Right Names in *A Wizard of Earthsea*" (41–56), claiming that Ursula K. Le Guin's 1968 fantasy novel is more than just a quest narrative containing symbolic charactonyms (41). Rather, as the entire "novel's enchanted world, characters, action, and discourse are built on onomastic metaphor" (42), the narrative is, itself, an onomaphor. Robinson considers the main characters' names, both their "everyday names" and their "true names" (43), in terms of their symbolic meanings as well as the ways in which they embody their physical characteristics, character traits, the challenges they face, and elements of the natural world in which the tale is set. Prosodic elements and their affective weight on interpretations of names also are discussed as are various religious and allegorical allusions, and, throughout, Robinson situates his detailed analysis within applicable theories of literature, rhetoric, and interpretation.

In chapter 5, "'First and Last Names on a Collision Course': Immigrant Naming Strategies, Ethnic Identity, and Cultural Assimilation in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*" (57–80), Dorothy Dodge Robbins employs an etymological approach to the charactonyms, and to the challenges parents, particularly parents who have emigrated to another country, face in naming their children, and to the challenges those children face as they grow up. While the novel, published in 2000, opens in 1975 London, Smith's characters' roots are planted in several countries and cultures around the world, circumstances which result in given names and surnames at a disjunction. Robbins traces the onomastic ancestries of the three main characters back through the centuries as well as forward to the end of the twentieth century, viewing their names as "case studies for [. . .] socio-onomastic inquiries" (75) into what happens when parental expectations, internal acceptance/rejection, and external perceptions of one's name collide.

Kara Kennedy and Derek R. Whaley explore, in chapter 7, "Names and World-Building in George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* and *Game of Thrones*" (81–98), the ways in which charactonyms, toponyms, and other named features contribute to readers' encountering a "believable world within which readers are personally invested in [. . .] the game" (82). Because Martin's works rely on "the reader's general awareness of medieval and feudal tropes and stereotypes" (83), as well as on the history and geography of the medieval Western Europe palimpsest over which the fantastic world is laid, Kennedy and Whaley begin by considering etymological information about names drawn from historical records. From there, they discuss how Martin truncates, alters, and/or combines actual names to suggest traits of individual characters, and of entire kingdoms, and of each of the seven ruling houses.

Finally, in chapter 7, titled "Angry Young Women and *Rebel Writers*: The Naming of a Feminist Literary Movement" (99–114), Susan J. Behrens reviews Celia Brayfield's 2019 book *Rebel Writers: The Accidental Feminists* in which Brayfield recognizes seven post-WWII female British writers as "a cohort, an artistic movement" and bestows on them "a collective name [. . .] the *Rebel Writers*" (99). Unlike a group of male British writers from the same era whose works were actively promoted after journalists of the time labeled them collectively as the "Angry Young Men" (100), the lack of a collective name for the women writers "kept them writing in isolation and subject to the whims of the media", which manifested itself as "misogynist, patronizing, and devaluing receptions by the largely male journalists and critics" (101). Behrens suggests the lack of collective support and dismissive media attention rendered their mid-twentieth century works as somewhat obscure.[1] In the second part of her essay, Behrens examines the works of the seven women— Shelagh Delaney (*A Taste of Honey*, 1956), Edna O'Brien (*The Country Girls,* [1960] 2002), Lynne Reid Banks (*The L-Shaped Room*, 1961), Charlotte Bingham (*Coronet Among the Weeds*, 1963), Nell Dunn (*Up the Junction*, 1963; *Poor Cow*, 1967), Virginia Ironside (*Chelsea Bird,* [1964] 2019), and Margaret Forster (*Georgy Girl*, 1965)—and demonstrates how each "rebel[led] against sexism via naming practices" (102) in her works.

*Literary Onomastics* is the first volume in a series, *Names and Naming in the Social Sciences and Humanities*, edited by I. M. Nick, who also is the editor of this journal. While the title of the series includes the humanities in its scope, the series description begins by stating, "Names and naming are a core to human thought, activity, and interest. Given that fact, experts across almost every *scientific discipline* regularly find themselves contending with the issue of names and naming" (ii, emphasis added). There is no further mention of the humanities in the description of the series. It would appear, then, that both the social sciences and the humanities are subsumed into the classification of scientific disciplines. Where does that leave literary onomasticians, how does that apply to this volume, and what steps can we take—within the context of onomastic studies of literary texts—to strengthen connections between the various sciences and the humanities?

Before answering, consider where we are. Nationwide, a 2022 survey conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts showed only 48.5% of adults in the United States read any book other than for work or school at least once during the previous twelve months, and the percentage who read novels or short stories was 37.6% with only 9.2% reading poetry (11). Even when audiobooks were added to the equation, only 43.2% read or listened to novels or short stories and only 11.5% read or listened to poetry (12). Fewer people reading literature—especially fiction literature—means fewer people reading essays about names and naming in literature. Most of us in academia have watched as humanities departments have shrunk. It is reasonable, therefore, to assume that more and more of our cross-campus colleagues produce research articles that describe scientific investigations based on methodically collected and objectively analyzed empirical data than produce interpretive essays based on (seemingly) subjectively derived inferential data. We speak two different languages, and it would seem it is up to us to try to bridge the gap through more careful use of terms, more detailed methodology, and more overt connections between life presented in fictional pages and life lived outside of those pages.[2]

*Terminology*. Words that mean one thing in one culture can mean something quite different in another culture. Speakers of American English, for example, understand *fries* as deep-fried potato sticks and *chips* as deep-fried potato slices, where speakers of British English refer to the same items as *chips* and *crisps*. Similarly, different academic terms may evoke different connotations from scholars in different disciplines.[3] In this volume, Robbins describes the collection as "demonstrating a range of literary onomastic inquiry, including qualitative studies that examine a few select names and quantitative studies that examine entire systems of names" (1). But those of us in the communication sciences and education use the words *qualitative* and *quantitative* to refer to a type of study rather than to the number of subjects being studied.[4] To most scholars, quantitative studies operate under the assumptions of an objective reality that can be explained through the analysis of numerical data—quantifying the data, as it were—whereas qualitative studies generally assume a socially constructed reality that the interpreter discovers through non-numerical study of

one or more subjects (Gall, et al. 2007, 650). Mixed-method studies use both quantitative and qualitative techniques in a single study, as van Dalen-Oskam notes in her discussion of corpus-based studies of literary texts (2016, 344–354). More specifically, van Dalen-Oskam describes quantitative studies using computer programs to tally and categorize the names appearing in the body of an author's works—information often presented in tables of percentages or in pie charts—but which still require the qualitative study of close reading and interpretation to contextualize the data.[5 and 6]

In other cases, language might just need tweaking to ensure common understanding. Robinson, for example, offers a section headed "A Couple of Caveats" (51) to his discussion of *The Wizard of Earthsea* series as an onomaphor. One of those caveats has to do with the limits of any metaphor and the danger of forcing a metaphor too far, the other has to do with the need for "in critical analysis [. . .] rigor [to be] applied" (52) by supporting the metaphor with appropriate research. *Limits* and *rigor* are familiar terms used in presenting studies in the sciences, with the limits of a study often discussed in a labeled section near the end. Were Robinson's section heading worded "A Couple of Caveats Regarding Limits and Rigor" (51), our more scientifically oriented colleagues, glancing through the book, might recognize familiar terms, read the section, and then be enticed to read the full chapter. Framing our onomastic work in terms used by scholars in both the sciences and the humanities also might help forestall, as Robinson notes, those who "dismiss literary onomastics as sophist trickery" (52) or who simply pass it by as irrelevant.

*Methodology*. Along those same lines, rigor can be more clearly established as we more carefully explicate our methods, even when those methods seem self-evident to us. Writers of many of the essays in this volume weave in bits of clues to their processes, but offering a paragraph or two at the beginning of the essay with a concise synopsis and explanations of what in a text triggered a connection to a particular theory or method, what questions arose from studying the text, how the material was approached and data were collected, and how supporting material was found to bolster arguments, helps assure—upfront—colleagues unfamiliar with literary essays that what they are about to read is grounded in disciplined study. Enticed to read further, readers could continue to be reassured of the robust nature of the onomastic and literary analysis throughout. De Vinne, for example, deftly shares her process when she asks, at the bottom of one page, "how much onomastic freedom, specifically, does Alvarez enjoy as a biographical novelist" (27). Serendipitously, the page turn allows the reader time to ponder the question before De Vinne explains, briefly, her own method for finding an answer: "It helps to approach the question slant" (28), which, she goes on to explain, means looking at other authors who faced similar barriers and at how they resolved them and then applying their solutions to Alverez's work (28). If it seems awkward to insert ourselves in the essay, perhaps we can take courage from the examples of Rufleth's poets—using greater discretion, of course.

Another option is to intentionally apply some of the research methods used in the social sciences to onomastic readings of literary works. Robbins hints at this when, as I noted before, she suggests viewing questions that Smith's narrative posits about characters' names and their acceptance or rejection of them as "case studies for [. . .] socio-onomastics inquiries" (75). However, with no further explanation given relative to such studies, the reader is left wondering what that means. Is it possible to go further by actually applying case study and other methodologies—adapting, with explanation, as necessary—to fictional worlds? How might such studies contribute not just to literary understanding but to the fields of psychology, sociology, and anthropology? Which leads us to questions of connecting fictional worlds with what many people perceive as the real world or, to use an over-used term, to questions of relevance.

*Relevance*. Here, I suggest two approaches. The first is a more subtle shift—already incorporated in the research papers of most other disciplines—that is, to accommodate readers in today's highly visual world by providing information that can be absorbed at a glance. Especially when multitudes of characters populate the pages of the source text or when multiple works are being discussed, providing the information in chart, diagrammatic form, or even as bulleted lists can help readers orient themselves to the *dramatis personae* and then to better follow the arguments being made. Some source texts and essays lend themselves better than others to visualizing information. For example, I tried, but found it difficult, to mentally sketch genealogical trees of the three families whose names Robbins traces through multiple generations in her essay on Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*. How helpful it would have been—and what visual interest they might have added to the pages—for such figures, easily created in most word processing programs, to have been included as part of the text. Charts of Kennedy and Whaley's *Games of Thrones* houses, characters, sigils, and realms and of Behren's writers, years, works, and characters would help readers stay connected across pages and sections. Additionally, when such text is presented in chart form, it makes space for more concise and more in-depth analysis. Which leads me to the second approach, that is, to broaden our own approach.

As Kennedy and Whaley point out in this volume, even works of fantasy have some basis in the real world. As we write our essays, instead of writing only for other onomasticians, we might intentionally consider how our colleagues in other disciplines might find and draw on our work in their teaching or research. How might Kennedy and Whaley frame their work to encourage professors and students understand Western European intrigue and conflicts? Behrens' work, also, could lend itself not just to gender

studies but to post-WWII British history and to film studies courses. What additional arguments might be added to attract colleagues outside of literature and onomastics? And what key terms can we add so search engines can find our works?

*Literary Onomastics*, then, offers thoughtful onomastic readings of a variety of texts from a number of different backgrounds. Beyond illuminating particular texts, it also points to paths that could take literary onomasticians beyond the less-traveled borders between disciplines into the more populated areas of common ground based on methodologies. Such ventures may require adapting to slightly different terminology, becoming more self-aware and transparent with our own approaches to research, and even learning in more detail less-than-familiar research practices and protocols. But if doing so draws new scholars to the field, then Robbins and the authors of these essays will have accomplished more than they thought when they responded to the call that brought their work into these pages.

# Notes

[1] Behrens relies solely on Brayfield's account and does not offer any corroborating evidence of how these early experiences affected the writers' careers. At least one, Lynne Reid Banks, published twelve novels for adults (including two sequels to *The L-Shaped Room*, despite her displeasure with the film), two works of historical fiction, and numerous books for youth readers (Watts 2024). That is not to say the women were not subjected to misogynist treatment, but that other sources would have bolstered Behrens' review of Brayfield's work and of her own analysis of the Rebel Writers' works.

[2] As a border straddler myself, my degrees are in creative writing, journalism (communication sciences), and literacy studies/youth literature (education) with a graduate certificate in qualitative methods and numerous post-graduate courses in statistics.

[3] When I taught literature to pre-service teachers in the College of Education, we divided literature into genres more by content: historical fiction, contemporary realistic fiction, fantasy, folk tales, science fiction, non-fiction informative, biography, etc. When I took literature classes in the English department in the College of Arts and Sciences, we discussed genre more by form: short story, novel, play/drama, poem. The two colleges used the same word to refer to categories, but they defined the categories differently, which sometimes led to confusion and misunderstanding.

[4] Robbins may have intended the terms *qualitative* and *quantitative* in terms of perception, as Neethling (2016) does in his analysis of Billy Joel's list of names in his song "We Didn't Start the Fire", which essentially is a list of names. Neethling notes that, individually, each name carries different connotations to different listeners while, *en masse*, the effect of name after name of people, places, and often tragic events may affect listeners in other ways. Neethling writes, "These perceptions or connotations may differ in many ways: in their quantitative as well as qualitative nature" (325). It is clear, however, that Neethling is not referring to studies of the names or of the listeners but is making the point that the names can be perceived individually or collectively.

[5] Ironically, perhaps, the index listings for *qualitative methods* and for *quantitative methods* in *The Oxford Handbook of Names and Naming* (2016, 764) indicates that the first references of both terms occur in the five-chapter section on "Literary Onomastics" (295-367), mostly in discussion of corpus-based studies of various authors' works. Other references to both terms appear in the next section on "Socio-Onomastics" (371-464), the last reference in the section being to a study of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (Taavitsainen, et al. 2016, 434), suggesting that literature can, indeed, be studied in terms of socio-onomastics.

[6] Nor do quantitative components need to be dense or involve statistical analysis. My use of descriptive statistics—a simple counting of names presented in chart form—mentioned in a picture book demonstrated more effectively than words alone how the protagonist's name marked her as different from the rest of her classmates (Anderson 2022, 7).

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