

Names Magic

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Who hath not owned with rapture-smitten frame
The power of grace, the magic of a name?

—Thomas Campbell.

A SCIENTIST ONCE EXPRESSED HIS IRRITATION that whenever he showed or described a new substance to a layman, he was immediately asked, "What is it called?" as if the name imparted some mystical value to its properties. Shakespeare too, seems to have been of the same opinion when he asked, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet."¹ Yet names have psychological properties, no doubt survivals of ancient ideas. The Greeks regarded the name or *logos* of a thing as intimately connected with its very nature. Plato held the view that it was not merely a label, symbol, or representation, but a true reality with independent existence, the material thing being but its shadow.

A person's name was regarded as the substance of his breath, even the word *psyche*, "soul," is derived from $\psi\acute{\upsilon}\chi\omega$, "to blow." The ancient Semitic name for the gods is the same as that for "breath" or "spirit"; and in most languages name, breath, and soul are so closely allied that they undoubtedly meant "anima" or "nomen" originally.² This is, of course an extension of the belief that language itself, and especially poetry and rhetoric have magical properties, a notion underlying the astonishing popularity and growth of Orphism. Even among Christian theologians, language was once considered to be innate in man, and to doubt this was to doubt the existence of the soul. St. Basil was accused by Eunomius with atheism for holding the view that babies learned to talk.³

These notions gave birth to several interesting conclusions. Conferring a name was, in essence, a creative act as when Adam named the animals⁴; indeed, Adam was regarded by some as having been their creator.⁵ To pronounce a name not only creates but evokes a

thing already in being; the belief is widely held among primitive people⁶ and it is no doubt behind the religious formula of "In the name of . . ." and the belief of the efficacy of using the names of gods as curses. It is therefore dangerous to mention anything that is harmful, and the use of certain names became taboo. A theory recently put forward to account for the subordinate position of the god in early Eastern religions is that to pronounce his name would invoke him with dire results.⁷

The taboo of names developed the idea of a secret name known only to the god or person, or to a selected hierarchy. To guard against the misfortune of others gaining its possession and therefore power over the god, he was called by various pseudonyms. In Phoenicia the deities were known as *Baal* or *Baalat*; "Lord," "Lady"; in Babylon *Bel* and *Belit*. Sometimes *Melik* "King," or *Adon* "Master" (Greek: *Adonis*), *Melkarth* or *Melqart*, "Our Appellant" or "Listener," and *Reseph*, the "Luminous," translated to Apollo by the classical Greeks, were used.⁸ With the constant use of such pseudonyms, the secret name was very often lost, if indeed, it ever existed and the substitute became recognized as the proper name for the god. As Freemasons will know, the loss of such a name is used as the basis of an important ritual.

For a person to utter his own name was tantamount to parting with his soul, or part of it. The Ojibwa Indians warned their children never to utter it themselves.⁹ This is true throughout most folk-tales, myths and beliefs.¹⁰ In Abyssinia it is believed that no sorcerer can harm or benefit one if he be ignorant of one's name.¹¹ It is thus a universal rule in primitive society that the real name of a person, that is, the name bestowed upon him at the proper naming ceremony is not divulged. Thus, on the Gold Coast a man's name is always concealed from all but his nearest relatives; to others he is always known by a pseudonym.¹²

The name taboo not only relates to personal names, but also extends to things. The natives of Madagascar are reluctant to speak of lightning,¹³ the Kaziba never mention earthquakes,¹⁴ and rain is not mentioned as such in Samoa.¹⁵ Fire is not mentioned in China, where there is a risk of it,¹⁶ neither was it in Scandinavia, where also the ordinary word for water was avoided when making beer for fear of spoiling the brew.¹⁷ In Siberia, the Baltic, among the Kiowa Indians, and in Quebec the bear was called "Little Old

Man," "Grandfather," "Beautiful Honey Paws," and the like. In Sumatra the tiger is "He with the striped coat," in Java the crocodile "The Old Man" or "Grandfather." The Bechuanas call a lion "The Boy with the Beard," and in some parts of Africa a snake is "the strap, string or rope." Bavarian farmers do not name the fox lest he come after the chickens, and in Germany mice are not so called at Christmas or Twelfth Night lest they multiply greatly. In many parts of Europe and in England it is unlucky to mention the hare, who is often called "The Long Eared Fellow," because witches are supposed to assume its shape.¹⁸

The use of private, pet, and nicknames has a similar significance. As a rule it displays the search for a unique name that will apply to one person or thing only, and in particular to give more emphasis or conjure up some virtue of the thing named or, perhaps a significant historical event or experience connected with it. The curious pet names commonly used between husband and wife or near relatives seem to indicate a search for such a name, the possession of which gives a mystical power of one over the other. Among such names recently published are Bonehead, Button Nose, Cookie, Dozy Kipper, Big Nog, Paraffin Oil Face, Parsley Pants, Podge, Porkey Pie, Sausage, Snitch, Tosher, Vissey Vee, Whiskers, and Zamba Zomba. In some cases, the pet name evidently commemorates a feature or idiosyncrasy of the partner, or some common experience. Its secret nature is evident, for if anyone but the partner ventures to use it he will be in no doubt of having committed an unpardonable *gaffe*.

Nicknames have also a similar significance. An English political writer recently mentioned that certain Members of Parliament are usually known by their nicknames, and, though the use of a nickname is often a sign of popularity, its absence does not indicate the reverse. Mr. Eden for example, who is popular on both sides of the House, is never known by his Christian name and he has no nickname.

A study of the phobias of young children discloses that many, by association of ideas and perhaps with a frightening episode experienced near them, endow inanimate objects with a face or a personality. Primitive man would bestow a name on these personalities or spirits, as the Greeks bestowed the name Hermes to the spirit of a heap of stones. The child with a small vocabulary often

fails to do so, but the fear or significance of the object remains. Among the phobias of children between the ages of three and five years recorded recently are revolving chimney cowl, red pillar boxes, railway engines, father's pipe, bowler hats, traffic signs, a dummy in a hairdresser's window, newel posts, certain designs of wallpaper, and red telephone kiosks.

Deliberate search for a special or unique name becomes very important when a new commodity, book, or play is being put on the market, and great efforts are made to preserve it for individual use by framing copyright and patent laws. In a recent interview Mr. Walt Disney described the care with which he chose the name Mickey for his animated mouse, and no doubt similar care is taken to choose an agreeable name for stage and screen stars. The late Nosmo King, however, related that he chose his stage name in a hurry from the back stage notice "No Smoking." In such circumstances the choice of a euphemous name, particularly if it has an association with a current vogue, can be a very valuable asset. That this was well known in ancient Greece is shown by early records of patents and special names for commodities which have been preserved. Among the name of footwear, for example, can be mentioned Sicyonians, Little Ambracians, Nossians, Chians and so forth, names which obviously refer to their place of origin or design.¹⁹

When names were given at special ceremonies, it was believed that the person so named became identified with and assimilated the character and virtues of the god, person, or thing from which the name was derived. A study of ancient cuneiform and other texts dating to the fourth millennium B.C. shows that many personal names were theophoric; that is, contained the name of a deity. Indeed so common was this practice in ancient Assyria, Akkadia, and Sumeria that a study of personal names gives much information on their ancient religions.²⁰

In Greece theophoric names were not popular until the Hellenistic period and the spread of foreign cults and ideas. By 150 B.C., about one third of personal names were theophoric, the most popular being Isis, Dionysos, Apollo, Men (and Manes) of Phrygia, and the Near Eastern Aphrodite. The *ἄθεα* names etymologically connected with magisterial or professional titles, with virtues moral or physical, and from birth places were popular from early times.

A curious light on Greek reluctance to use theophoric names until after the classical period is the fact that they had no generic word for the colour blue as they had for red, green, or yellow, which even writers as early as 9th century A.D. were unable to explain.²¹ As the supreme being of Greek theocracy was Zeus, the Sky God, any direct reference to the colour of the sky by a generic word would naturally invoke the god himself with his storms and lightning. Zeus was undoubtedly a pseudonym, for like other primitive people, the early Greeks thought of the sky as not only his dwelling place but actually the god himself.

Though Roman names conformed in later days to a standard that was almost monotonous, and became mere labelling, the insistence on gens and family names points to an early belief of naming children after their ancestors.

A comparatively modern instance of expecting children to assimilate the virtues of their namesakes is the invention in the naming of his son Maximilian by Frederick III of Germany in the fifteenth century. The name is a mixture of Quintus Maximus, hero of the Samnite wars of 325 B.C., and Scipio Aemiliarius (185-129 B.C.), who fought with distinction in Spain. Frederick hoped that his son would have the virtues of both heroes.

The creative act of naming also conferred a new character to a person on changing his name. It is for this reason, no doubt, that pagans are given new names when baptised. This has precedent in Revelations 2:17 and 3:12. By receiving a new name the Christian enters a new and higher state of existence. Verse 3:12 draws attention to the untimely fate of the town of Philadelphia, destroyed by an earthquake in 17 A.D., shortly after changing its name to Neokaisareia in honour of the new Emperor Tiberius Caesar. Among certain North American Indians and in Tibet illness was said to be caused by names that "did not fit"; a certain cure being to "wash them away" and be named afresh; others had winter and summer names the better to contend with the seasons.²²

But changing the character by changing the name is not confined to persons; things, especially drugs and remedies, are altered too. In describing an onion cure for coughs and colds, a correspondent to the daily press wrote "the onion is full of healing properties, whereas the less said the better about modern five syllabled remedies."²³ "Parents," wrote a doctor, "show disappointment if we can-

not attribute their childrens' complaints to one or other well known disease. They ought to be delighted, but they are not, 'It must be *something*' they say."²⁴ At a medical conference it was pointed out that fibrositis is not a disease of itself, and pains in the shoulder and neck are often caused by spinal strain or disease. If instead of fibrositis it be called osteo-arthritis the patient may get alarmed, his employer a notion of unemployability, and with a public figure cause widespread and undesirable publicity.²⁵ The same phenomenon is observed when what Sir Alan Herbert calls "witch words" are used. How sinister "The Liquor Traffic" sounds compared with "The Wine Trade."

If naming is a creative act, omission to do so is the negation of existence. Unbaptised children, for example, are believed by many to have no soul, and there are recent instances even of the Church refusing a burial to them. Charles Lamb seems to have held this view when he wrote, "We are only what we might have been, and must wait upon the tedious shores of Lethe millions of ages before we have existence and a name."²⁶ In modern Greece unbaptised children are called dragons or snakes because they are supposed to turn into snakes and vanish if they remain unbaptised.²⁷ A similar belief was held in the Isle of Man, where a poker or the tongs were laid across the cradle if a stranger called, in case they were witches. In Scotland it was believed that should an unbaptised child die, its soul was neither saved nor lost but became a "*sgreachan raidhlic*," a shrieker of a burying place.²⁸ In Cornwall it was believed that unbaptised children became fairies or piskies when they die.²⁹

A curious result in the belief of names indicating the character of a place was recently based on false etymology. A writer considered that as England was a peace loving country place, names such as Warminster, Wargrave and so on should be abolished in favour of something else.³⁰

The reluctance to part with one's name is no doubt reflected in the many indecipherable signatures found to-day, especially among the more esoteric professions. The special significance of the written name probably originated in the magical regard for writing by primitive and even advanced civilizations. The King of Dahomey refused to put his signature on an official paper to the French President lest he should be bewitched.³⁰ Until recently it

was a very solemn affair for many country people in England to write down their names *in full*: it was of course the given names that mattered for these are usually represented by initials. The magic spell surrounding names is very strong and difficult to break. In America, for instance, where given names are more commonly used than elsewhere, the spell remains: it shows itself in the practice of representing at least one given name, often not the first, by initials. Indeed sometimes these initials have no more significance than to create mystery.

Modern journalism too is responsible for creating names, particularly the practice of using trades and professions as a sort of title such as, Actress Rose Cavendish, Clerk Bill Sweetman and so on; but this is a dangerous habit—to call Mr. Charles Robinson, Twister Charlie, even though twister is an honourable calling with an official industrial disease called “twister’s wrist,” might be somewhat misleading.

NOTES

- ¹ W. Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* II ii 43.
- ² J. Rhys, *Celtic Folklore, Welsh and Manx* 1901, p. 625.
- ³ Gregory of Nyassa, “Contra Eunomius” in *Migne, Petrologia*, Vol. XLV, cols. 258 and 999.
- ⁴ Genesis II 19:21.
- ⁵ Clementine Homilies III 2:21.
- ⁶ P. Giraud, *Magie et religion—Annamites*, 1912, p. 51.
- ⁷ R. Weill, *Phoenicia and Western Asia*, 1940, p. 68.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 64.
- ⁹ P. Jones, *History of Objiwa Indians*, 1861, p. 62.
- ¹⁰ Maria Leach, *Dict. of Folklore, Mythology and Legend*, 1950.
- ¹¹ M. Parkyns, *Life in Abyssinia*, 1853, Vol. II, p. 145.
- ¹² A. B. Ellis, *The Tshi-speaking People of the Gold Coast*, 1887, p. 107.
- ¹³ H. F. Standing, “Malagasy Fady” in *Antananarivo Annual and Madagascar Magazine*, No. VII, p. 70.
- ¹⁴ H. Rehse, *Kiziba, Land und Leut*, 1910, p. 146.
- ¹⁵ G. Brown, *Melanesians and Polynesians &c*, 1910, p. 250.
- ¹⁶ H. Friend, “Euphism and Taboo in China” in *Folklore Record*, Vol. IV, p. 81 ff.
- ¹⁷ B. Thorpe, *Northern Mythology*, 1851–1852, Vol. II, p. 84.
- ¹⁸ W. Henderson, *Notes on Folklore of Northern Counties of England*.
- ¹⁹ H. Michele, *The Economics of Ancient Greece*, 1940.
- ²⁰ F. J. Allbright, *Archeology and the Religion of Israel*, ch. II.
- ²¹ Job of Edessa, *Book of Treasures*, tr. A. Manganin, 1935, Dis. V, ch. 25.
- ²² Leach, *op. cit.*, and H. Harrer *Seven Years in Tibet*, 1953, pp. 61–62.
- ²³ *News Chronicle*, 29.6.53.
- ²⁴ *The Evening News*, 2.7.53.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.7.53.
- ²⁶ Charles Lamb, *Dream Children*.
- ²⁷ J. E. Henderson, *Prologoinia to the Study of Greek Religion*, 1922, p. 331.
- ²⁸ C. Bede, “Notes and Queries,” Ser. 4, Vol. 8, p. 500.
- ²⁹ *Sunday Express*, 19.7.53.