Naming Techniques in John Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga*

PETER VAN EGMOND

JOHN GALSWORTHY'S DELINEATION OF CHARACTERS in *The Forsyte Saga*[1] has been criticized as "clear but shallow"[2] by some writers, in spite of the wide popularity of the trilogy with students of literature since the first novel, *The Man of Property*, appeared in 1906. Such a criticism seems valid, perhaps, because Galsworthy provides only vague descriptions of most of his characters. Nonetheless, virtually all the characters in *The Forsyte Saga*, whether of major or minor significance, have been given names, if nothing else, toward characterization.

Galsworthy seems to have given careful thought to the selection of names of his characters and places, making this process a regular part of his fictive technique. There are at least three basic naming techniques in the *Saga*. The most obvious examples are of what is now frequently called "allegorical" naming, through which Galsworthy imitates the method of his predecessor Dickens. These "allegorical" names indicate that perhaps other names have significance. The result of investigation does, in fact, reveal a second category composed of major characters who have common English names with significant etymological sources relevant to characterization. These two categories include the majority of names in the *Saga*. But the handful of names still remaining also has apparent relevancies, thus strengthening the premise that Galsworthy has made naming a considerable part of the art of his *Forsyte Saga*.

[1] John Galsworthy, *The Forsyte Saga* (New York: Scribner's, 1933). Hereafter referred to as *Saga*.

[2] A. C. Baugh, et al., *A Literary History of England* (New York, 1948), p. 1557.

I

Galsworthy's contempt for Victorian middle-class values is clear enough in his descriptions, dialogue, and plot, and he embellishes the tone of irony in the naming of fictional artists, architects, ministers, clubs, and business establishments. For example, two typical artists of the day are Crum Stone and Bleeder. Soames Forsyte, "the man of property," is fond of the water colors of Mole, Morpin, and Caswell Baye. And Bodkin is a contriving art dealer.

Early in the trilogy, the action centers upon the building of a house for Soames Forsyte. Galsworthy uses the opportunity to describe the hideousness of Victorian architecture and design and mentions that one of the most prominent architects of the time is a man named, with ironic appropriateness, Littlemaster.

The Reverend Mr. Scoles, a popular minister, is also the author of a novel entitled *Passion and Paregoric.* The Reverend Mr. Boms, a shareholder in the New Colliery Company, once denounced the company's intention to aid the widow of a mine foreman who had committed suicide on the job, calling it a "dereliction of duty, both human and divine."[3] Another clergyman alluded to is a faith healer named Pondridge.

Tynemouth Eddy is an author of fashionable novels. Tynemouth, of course, is a city in northern England, and Galsworthy may be implying a real author whose work is as vapid as a Tyne River eddy.

Galsworthy's contempt for business and industry of the Victorian period is revealed in his selection of names for these establishments: Blasted Cement Company, American Golgothas, Woolen Mackintosh Company, Baple and Pullbred's (furniture dealers), and Bright's Rubies. Mealard's specializes in bright-colored furniture. Soames Forsyte drives a Rollhard automobile, patronizes Caramel and Baker's (a confectionery), and Grin and Grinning are his brokers.

The names of the Forsytes' clubs are indicative of their various temperaments. George Forsyte, the fat, lazy buffoon, belongs to the "Iseeum," where he sits for long hours in a chair by the large bay window watching people go by. "The Remove" is a club for conservatives, and its opposite, "The Disunion," is made up largely of liberals. Soames Forsyte belongs to the "Connoisseur's" but hardly ever goes there, and to "The Remove," where he goes often.

[3] *Saga*, p. 147.

Young Jolyon Forsyte, who has rejected Forsytean snobbery, belongs to the "Hotch-Potch." Swithin Forsyte is a member of the "Polyglot." Montague Dartie, the scoundrel in-law of the Forsytes, has no club, but he can usually be found at a burlesque show. His favorite is aptly named "Pandemonium Ballet."

Much of the action of *The Forsyte Saga* involves litigation, familiar territory for Galsworthy who was admitted to the bar before his writing career began. The peculiar names of lawyers and legal firms seem to indicate an attitude of contempt for that profession. The Forsyte law office includes a partner named Bustard, a long-legged bird of Europe and Africa. Other names: Freak and Able; Waterbuck, Q. C.; Ram; Dreamer, Q. C.; Bellby, a junior counsellor; Jobling and Boulter; Chankery; and Linkman and Laver. In one legal action, Waterbuck opposed Ram, but Galsworthy does not force the pun.

A firm of investigators hired by Soames Forsyte is operated by Lewis and Claud Polteed. Soames dealings are with Claud, whom he thinks of as a spider. The procedure is cloaked in code numbers and a sense of the mysterious pervades their dealings, enhanced by the selection of the Poe-like choice of Claud Polteed.

Other incidental characters defy classification and must be heaped together. Some of their names are clearly allegorical, others plainly ludicrous. Withal, Galsworthy attempts to portray the sham and affectation of Victorian society, what he calls "flummery." In one amusing incident, a Mr. Gathercole was encouraged to dance with a Miss Pink, a blushing wallflower, forming the image of a coal-gatherer with a flower. Augustus Flippard, a witty but indigent youth, is indeed flippant and occasionally becomes involved in complex matters without ever realizing it.

Crum is a no-account friend of Val Dartie. Tweetyman, Spender, and Warry all marry Forsyte daughters. The calling card of Mr. and Mrs. Polegate Thom "smelled severe." And a status-seeking couple frequently leave their card, which is engraved "Mr. and Mrs. Bareham Culcher." Soames, upon arriving home one evening, found a dishful of cards including those of Lady Bellis, Miss Hermione Bellis, Miss Winifred Bellis, and Miss Ella Bellis.

Others: Mademoiselle Vigor is an aged, decrepit woman; Jack Cardigan, a health enthusiast and athlete; and Septimus Small, "a man of poor constitution."

II

The names of major characters in the *Saga* are typical English names. But when traced etymologically, however, interesting and significant facts are revealed. A few of the names appear to be Galsworthy's inventions; others have been carefully selected for their symbolic or mythical meanings to aid in the development of a tone of irony and to strengthen characterization.

Forsyte

Forsyte is apparently the author's invention, modeled after *Forsythe*, a name well-known in English history. The derivation of *Forsythe* is Gaelic: from *fear*, meaning "a man," and *syth*, meaning "upright, honest, stiff."[4] This definition is clearly applicable in describing the Forsytes, for they are nothing if not "upright, honest and stiff."

It requires little ingenuity to see the possibilities of the name *Forsyte* without benefit of lexicon. The "foresight" of this family has enabled them to pile up great wealth. Their plans are carefully laid, usually in conference with each other as to the proper course to follow. Nor should "farsighted" escape consideration, for it is applicable in a kind of reverse irony. Although the Forsytes are blessed with "foresight" in matters of business, they are cursed with a sort of ocular farsightedness which will not allow them to perceive clearly those things nearest them, particularly in matters of religion or of the heart. Timothy Forsyte often says, "I don't know; can't tell!" James Forsyte's characteristic remark is, "Nobody ever tells me anything."

Indeed, no one in the family is certain of the origin of their name. Only Swithin Forsyte takes steps to discover if the family has aristocratic ancestors.

> It was Swithin who, following the impulse which sooner or later urges thereto some member of every great family, went to the Heralds' Office, where they assured him that he was undoubtedly of the same family as the well-known Forsites with an 'i,' whose arms were 'three dexter buckles on a sable ground gules,' hoping no doubt to get him to take them up.
>
> Swithin, however, did not do this, but having ascertained that the crest was a 'pheasant proper,' and the motto 'For Forsite,' he had the pheasant proper placed upon his carriage and the buttons of his coachman....[5]

[4] William Arthur, *An Etymological Dictionary of Family and Christian Names* (New York, 1857), p. 132.

[5] *Saga*, pp. 162–3.

Jolyon

Another apparent invention by Galsworthy is the name *Jolyon*. The Roman *Julius* can be ruled out in light of supporting evidence for *John*, which in the Hebrew means "gracious" or "God's grace."[6] The choice of *Jolyon* (pronounced jä/yən) is apparently a concealment of *John*, for it is known that old Jolyon Forsyte is modeled after John Galsworthy, Senior, and young Jolyon is John Galsworthy, author of the *Saga*. The two Forsyte ancestors named *Jolyon* are not revealed enough to draw further inferences regarding their names.

Now, both old Jolyon and young Jolyon, unlike the other Forsytes, are blessed with a "graciousness" in all their dealings. Though old Jolyon is temperamentally more a Forsyte than his son, he is often tenderhearted, particularly toward the victimized Irene in his later years. Young Jolyon can be described in a word, *tenderness*, especially after the death of old Jolyon, and his marriage to Irene.

Young Jolyon's two sons are also named Jolyon, but are called Jolly and Jon, tending to corroborate the concealment of *John* in *Jolyon*.

James

Derived from the Hebrew, *Jacob*, *James* means "he that supplants,"[7] from the biblical story of Jacob and Esau. Jacob supplanted Esau by buying his birthright, thus depriving him of his father's blessing. Ironically, James Forsyte supplants Montague Dartie as supporter and counsellor of Dartie's wife Winifred and their children. Furthermore, James is a landlord and has the power of supplanting quite literally any family behindhand in payment of rent, and he frequently does.

Nicholas

Nicholas, from the Greek, is formed from a compound of "victory" plus "people."[8] Nicholas Forsyte is indeed victorious in his business projects. Once he brought an entire tribe from upper India

[6] Arthur, p. 169.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 168.

[8] E. G. Withycombe (ed.), *Oxford Dictionary of Christian Names* (New York, 1947), p. 105.

to Ceylon to work in his gold mines. It was carried off in "the teeth of great difficulty." Nicholas says, "For want of a few hundred of these fellows we haven't paid a dividend for years, and look at the price of the shares. I can't get ten shillings for them."[9]

Roger

From the Teutonic, *Roger* means "famous with the spear."[10] Now Roger Forsyte's money is in house property, and often as he strolled along "he measured the street frontage of the houses by the way, and now and then he would level his umbrella and take a 'lunar,' as he expressed it, of the varying heights."[11] His spear is his umbrella, symbolic of his authority.

Swithin

From the Old English, *switheahn* means "very high."[12] Another possible derivation may be the Old English *swiò*, meaning "strong, violent."[13] Swithin Forsyte, called "Four-in-Hand Forsyte" by his fellows, has a high opinion of himself, and he is certainly "strong and violent," frequently headstrong and taking a quarrelsome part in conversation. Swithin is a likeable fellow, nonetheless; and his name may have more onomatopoeic implications than etymological ones.

Timothy

From the Greek, *Timothy* means "honoring God."[14] Timothy Forsyte's god, however, is Mammon. His money is invested in safe securities, and he lives off his three per cent dividends. It is also striking to remember that the *New Testament* Timothy dealt in money as a tax-collector before becoming a disciple. Galsworthy's Timothy is unique among the elder Forsyte brothers.

> The baby of the family, a publisher by profession, he had some years before, when business was at full tide, scented out the stagnation which,

[9] *Saga*, p. 40.

[10] Withycombe, p. 119.

[11] *Saga*, p. 19.

[12] Arthur, p. 288.

[13] L'Estrange Ewen, *A History of Surnames of the British Isles* (London, 1931), p. 371.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 289.

> indeed, had not yet come, but which ultimately, as all agreed, was bound to set in, and, selling his share in a firm engaged mainly in the production of religious books, had invested the quite conspicuous proceeds in three per cent. consols. By this act he had at once assumed an isolated position, no other Forsyte being content with less than four per cent. for his money; and this isolation had slowly and surely undermined a spirit perhaps better than commonly endowed with caution. He had become almost a myth — a kind of incarnation of security haunting the background of the Forsyte universe.[15]

It should be pointed out that the Christian names of all the Forsyte brothers are names of saints, and all are biblical excepting *Swithin*.

Soames

Soames is possibly derived from the English surname *Soames*, apparently derived from *Saham* (Cambs. Suffolk). A more likely derivation is *Soanes*, meaning "son," or, perhaps, "the younger."[16] Certainly Soames Forsyte is the younger incarnation of all the Forsytes, as "the man of property." Furthermore, Soames is a particularly apt choice because of its obvious onomatopoeic overtones.

Irene Heron

Irene from the Greek means "peace."[17] Withycombe points out that the word came into British usage around 1880,[18] just about the time Irene Heron married Soames Forsyte!

Heron, Welsh for "hero," appears twice in DeBrett's *Peerage*[19] and can be found in other lists of nobility of Great Britain. But Irene Heron is the daughter of a professor, a factor in her alienation from the rest of the Forsytes.

The most intriguing possibility for the significance of *Heron* lies in the word as descriptive of Irene herself. She is described as very graceful and slim, and the consistent simile comparing her stately beauty to that of a bird seems relevant to her name. The most

---

[15] *Saga*, p. 10.

[16] P. H. Reaney, *A Dictionary of British Surnames* (London, 1958), p. 301.

[17] Though in the novel she is the living symbol of "Beauty."

[18] Withycombe, p. 77.

[19] John DeBrett, *The Peerage of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland* (10th ed. rev.; London, 1816), II, 1276.

striking example occurs in the scenes following Bosinney's death. Her spirit broken, Irene returns to Soames. Galsworthy writes:

> Huddled in her grey fur against the sofa cushions, she had a strange resemblance to a captive owl, bunched in its soft feathers against the wires of a cage. The supple erectness of her figure was gone, as though she had been broken by cruel exercise; as though there were no longer any reason for being beautiful, and supple, and erect.[20]

To Soames she appears to be "like a bird that is shot and dying, whose poor breast you see panting as the air is taken from it, whose poor eyes look at you who have shot it, with a slow, soft, unseeing look, taking farewell of all that is good – of the sun, and the air, and its mate."[21] And the same figure occurs to Soames again in the scene.[22]

Later on, Jolyon Forsyte, meditating upon marriage to Irene, declares to himself that he wishes to be "her perching-place; never – never her cage."[23]

Phillip Bosinney

For once, a character's first name appears to have no particular relevance in the *Saga*. *Phillip*, from the Greek, means "a lover of horses," and has no bearing upon the architect Bosinney. The name *Bosinney*, however, causes some confusion within the novel; no one seems quite certain of how to pronounce it. One servant mistakenly pronounced the name as a dactyl; another said "Boswainey." Apparently, the accent falls on the second syllable, emphasizing "sin" which ironically is the nature of his alliance with Irene.

III

The remaining names in *The Forsyte Saga* defy strict classification. These are very minor characters, for the most part servants and other working people. The names are typical of English life: Pippin, superintendent of a New Colliery mine; Smither, a servant; Adolf, Swithin's driver; Warmson, a butler; and Cook, a servant.

---

[20] *Saga*, p. 306.
[21] *Ibid.*, p. 307.
[22] *Ibid.*, p. 308.
[23] *Ibid.*, p. 592.

The name Thomas Gradman, an aged clerk in Soames's office of Cuthcott, Kingston, and Forsyte, is apparently allegorical. Like Dickens' Gradgrind of *Hard Times*, the life of Thomas Gradman has become stunted. The only life he knows is a life of legal jargon and figures in the accounts of the firm. Galsworthy writes that he "feared God, and served the Forsytes, and kept a vegetable diet at night. And, buying a copy of *John Bull* – not that he approved of it, an extravagant affair – he entered the Tube elevator with his mere brown-paper parcel, and was borne down into the bowels of the earth."[24]

One last method of naming in the *Saga* is no less interesting than the foregoing. As he describes changes in the Victorian period, Galsworthy very subtly indicates a shift in attitutes from the typically Victorian to the modern by the names given the young generation of Forsytes and Darties being born during the course of the novels. At the outset of the novel, the youngest Forsytes are described and their names given. Like the characters discussed above, their names are traditional and perhaps even obsolete. Certainly this sample of names – Eustace, St. John, Florence, Euphemia, and Archibald – indicates a Victorian flavor. The changing times are indicated by the names given the younger characters further on in the trilogy – Holly, Jolly, Jon (a new spelling), and Cherry. The shift in naming conventions, therefore, seems apparent.

In his greatest work, *The Forsyte Saga*, John Galsworthy is a conscious artist and is onomastically very much in the tradition of Charles Dickens. His names of characters and places suggest a great deal, and evidently are a conscious part of his literary craftsmanship.

University of Maryland
College Park

---

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 802.

[25] Val is named Publius Valerius by George Forsyte, who looked it up in the "*Encyc'pedia Brit.*" The Darties called him Publius because it was "chic," but styles changed around 1890 and they changed the nickname to "Val." *Saga*, pp. 378–9.