Appropriate Naming in English Literature*

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C AREFUL READERS have learned to scrutinize the onomastica in the fictions they read, for literary artists habitually exploit the significative power of names. Personifying appellations in Bunyan and medieval drama quite literally speak for themselves, as do such onomatopes as Swift's *Houyhnhnms*, Dickens' *Chirrup*, and Barrie's *Tootles*. Somewhat subtler are the etymologizing habits of medieval writers and the use of names by later authors to evoke analogies with earlier literature.[1] The various types of *redende Namen*, which have already been surveyed often enough,[2] prove irresistible to many writers, and for good reason: frequently, as in dramatic literature, the names which an author fashions for his characters are his only means of communicating authorial judgments about those characters directly to the reader.

And yet, critics sometimes seek too earnestly for linguistic or literary significations behind every name,[3] and it may be useful to counterbalance such ingenuity with a reminder that simple decorum often lays as strong a claim upon authorial invention as does the ideal of investing every narrative detail with meaning. In the following pages I shall urge attention to "appropriate" (as opposed to "meaningful") naming in literature.

Authors have always shown concern for onomastic decorum, of course, a fact well illustrated by Mark Twain's remarks on the selection of names for his two best known characters: "You see, there was something about

1 Obvious illustrations would be James Joyce and J. R. R. Tolkien. A less obvious example has been suggested by Harry T. Moore in *The Life and Works of D. H. Lawrence* (London, 1951): the names *Loerke, Gudrun,* and *Gerald* in *Women in Love* can be taken as an evocation of the Eddic myths of Siegfried and the Doom of the Gods, just as Gertrude in *Sons and Lovers* might be an allusion to Hamlet's mother. I have discussed etymological naming in *Anglia*, 86 (1968), 14–58, and *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 69 (1968), 161–71.

2 Gerhard Eis, *Vom Zauber der Namen* (Berlin, 1970), offers suggestive views on some types of significant names in literature. Kemp Malone's "Meaningful Fictive Names in English Literature," *Names*, 5 (March, 1957), 1–13, is a good general introduction to the subject, while the special issue of *Names* devoted to literary onomastics, vol. 16, no. 4 (December, 1968), collects a number of essays on various aspects of literary naming.

3 See, for example, the discussions of *Crusoe* and *Selkirk* in Richard Gerber's "Zur Namengebung bei Defoe", *Festschrift für Walter Hübner*, ed. D. Riesner and H. Gneuss (Berlin, 1964), pp. 227–33.

the name 'Finn' that suited, and 'Huck Finn' was all that was needed to somehow describe another kind of boy than 'Tom Sawyer', a boy of lower extraction or degree."[4] For Twain, the surname *Finn* apparently evoked an Irish stereotype, a stereotype which was no doubt reinforced by the town drunk Jimmy Finn in his boyhood neighborhood in Hannibal, Missouri. The traditional English name *Sawyer*, on the other hand, suggests a more secure and conventional American plebeian stock. Like many others in Twain's works, these two names achieve so much in mere verisimilitude that efforts to establish further meanings behind the names seem inappropriate. The same may be said, of course, of literary names starting at least with the writings of the Romans.[5]

Popular British authors from Dickens and Thackeray to the present have shown a special gift for adjusting the names of fictional characters to their social status. Typical is C. S. Forester's response when he was asked to explain his selection of the names *Maria* and *Barbara* for two of his heroines: "Maria was by that time a lower-middle-class name, and at that time certainly Barbara was a name very much in the strict preserve of aristocracy. Barbara was an earl's daughter, and Maria was somebody of rather unknown origin, but certainly lower-middle-class."[6] Comparable social consciousness is everywhere evident in Somerset Maugham. If one reversed the names of the elegant snob *Mr. Warburton* and the brash colonial *Cooper* in "The Outstation," for example, the story would suffer a distinct loss in narrative versimilitude. Such awareness of name-status is shown today by the British journalists who insinuate middle-class tastes on the part of Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip simply by referring to them as "Brenda and Brian."[7]

An instructive instance of this social awareness in naming is to be found in a popular story by another British author, Aldous Huxley. "The Gioconda Smile" is characterized by a great deal of linguistic inventiveness which might overshadow the subtler device of socially appropriate naming, although, as we shall see, it is present. Actually, the linguistic playfulness and the appropriate naming work together to reinforce the

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[4] Quoted in James L. Colwell's "Huckleberries and Humans: On the Naming of Huckleberry Finn," *PMLA*, 86 (1971), 72. Colwell's discussion is generally quite persuasive, although I would lay more emphasis than does he on the fact that in mid-nineteenth-century America *huckleberry* was regarded as a crude mispronunciation of *whortleberry*. See G. P. Krapp, *The English Language in America* (New York, 1925), II, 212.

[5] See William M. Seaman, "On the Names of Old and Young Men in Plautus," *Illinois University Studies in Language and Literature*, 58 (1969), 114–22, where the author studies Plautine names in the light of contemporary lists of the names of Romans living in Plautus' time.

[6] "C. S. Forester on Names of His Characters," *Names*, 1 (December, 1953), 247.

[7] Kindly reported to me by Mrs. Ann Thayer Holmquist of the Stanford Linguistics Program.

social distinctions in the story, and so it will be well to begin by looking at the former. The first instance occurs in an early exchange between the hero of the story, Mr. Hutton, and a tiresome spinster, Miss Spence. He speaks first.

> "In married life three is often better company than two."
> "Oh, you're cynical."
> Mr. Hutton always had a desire to say "Bow-wow-wow" whenever that last word was spoken. It irritated him more than any other word in the language. But instead of barking he made haste to protest . . . .

In this conversation Mr. Hutton, a charming, restless dilettante of the leisured class, indulges in one of his characteristic diversions – etymology. His impulse to bark, although unexplained in the story, is clearly based on the fact that the word *cynical* derives from the Greek κύων, κυνός "dog." Once we recognize this, we are prepared for even more elaborate etymologizing when he ruminates over the name of his current mistress:

> Doris, Doris, Doris. The scientific appellation of the sea mouse, he was thinking as he kissed the throat she offered him, white and extended like the throat of a victim awaiting the sacrificial knife. The sea mouse was a sausage with iridescent fur: very peculiar. Or was Doris the sea cucumber . . . ?

Mr. Hutton's inexact cogitations over zoological meanings of *doris* are but counterpoint to his subtler etymologizing of the name *Doris*, which is Greek for "sacrificial knife." More than an instance of his dilettantism, Mr. Hutton's frivolous etymologies reveal the essential man – a charming, self-centered hedonist who frankly uses others for his intellectual amusement and his animal pleasures. It would be a mistake, however, to seek further "meaningfulness" in the girl's name – e.g., by finding significance in the fact that Juvenal had a mistress named Doris, or that the concubine of Agrippa the Prefect (in the apocryphal *Acts of Peter*) was so named, or that there was a sea-nymph named Doris in Greek mythology. And yet there is more to be found in the name, not in meaningfulness, but in appropriateness.

Mr. Hutton's mistress is a naive girl of humble origins. He muses over the fact that her "fresh and childish voice" has "the faintest hint of Cockney impurity about the vowel sounds," and her ardent letters to him are penned in a "peculiarly vulgar handwriting." It is this poignant side of her character that is emphasized in the "appropriate" aspect of her name, for according to observers at the time Huxley wrote this story, *Doris* was "a frequent feminine name, rather avoided by the aristocracy."[8]

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[8] Eric Partridge, *Name This Child: A Dictionary of Modern British and American Given or Christian Names* (London, 1936; 3rd rev. ed., 1951), p. 93.

First documented as the name of an American girl in 1819, the name "leaped into sudden popularity towards the end of the nineteenth century"[9] but only among the lower classes. It is just as important for the reader to sense this exquisite aptness in the name as it is for him to follow the etymological and scientific meanings of *Doris* which are so amusing to her carelessly cruel lover.

Recently Gerhard Eis has made a systematic investigation of the social overtones of names in modern German literature,[10] and it is a pity that there is no comparable study devoted to names in English and American fiction. Such an investigation could yield results which would be of interest equally to sociolinguists and to students of literary naming in English. In his study Professor Eis listed the names of certain fictional characters alongside a scrambled list of their various occupations and then asked informants who had not read the fictional works to match up the names with the occupations that seemed to them most suitable. With remarkable consistency the informants' intuitive choices matched those of the authors. One suspects that social appropriateness may be a more potent factor in literary naming than either readers or writers have consciously realized.

A different kind of onomastic appropriateness lies in the form which fictional names can take. The grammatical oddities of the Puritans, such as *Tribulation-Wholesome, Zeal-of-the-Land,* and *Praise-God Barebones* have been satirized from Ben Jonson to John Barth. A modern name-form which has attracted attention is that of the dangling initial, which T. S. Eliot exploits in "The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock." A less widely recognized peculiarity is the middle initial, as in *James K. Polk* and *Hubert H. Humphrey.* Many American readers are unaware that this is an onomastic Americanism,[11] but the British have so recognized it at least since the days of Robert Browning, who satirizes the convention in his poem "Mr. Sludge, 'The Medium'," by designating a foolish American as *Hiram H. Horsefall.*[12] The oddness of the middle initial is reaffirmed by the British novelist Robert Hichens, who has one of his characters say, "... and that Mr. George R. Sims – what would he be without the initial? – is a minor poet."[13] In instances such as these the name itself may or may not be significative; the appropriateness lies in the form.

Finally, there remains to be mentioned a type of appropriateness in naming which is more basic than either social or formal appropriateness. Linguists have long noticed a tendency in natural languages for certain

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[9] E. G. Withycombe, *The Oxford Dictionary of English Christian Names* (Oxford, 1945), p. 39. Note that Galsworthy condescends to the name in *Swan Song,* chapter xiii.

[10] *Vom Zauber der Namen,* pp. 14—28.　　　　[11] See Krapp, I, 212—15.

[12] See John V. Fleming, "Browning's Yankee Medium," *American Speech,* 39 (1964), 26—32.　　　　[13] *The Green Carnation* (Dover Publications: New York, n.d.), p. 45.

phonetic features to become associated with certain areas of reference. Thus the high front vowels heard in *hit* and *heat* occur with remarkable frequency in words denoting smallness: *itsy-bitsy, teeny-weeny, skinny, thin, little, imp, pigmy, midget, mini, wee, chip, chit*, etc. as well as in the diminutive endings such as Spanish *-ito, -cito, -illo*, Italian *-ino*, and English *-ie, -y* (as in *birdie, kitty, doggie, Bobby*).[14] Conversely, low front, central, and back vowels, along with voiced stops and continuant consonants, seem to suggest grossness: *jumbo, lump, plump, abundant, ton, monstrous, grown, brawn, swollen, volume, large, massive, gorge, gigantic, Gargantuan, hulking, bulk*, and, in Spanish, the augmentative endings *-ón* and *-azo*. Although such formulas as these admit of many exceptions, linguists find that the positive examples are sufficiently numerous to confirm the reality of "sound symbolism" as an active principle in natural languages.[15] And yet, surprisingly little has been done in the way of correlating such principles with the motives underlying literary naming.[16]

A suitable text in which to explore the question is *Gulliver's Travels*, Parts I and II, where the imaginary languages may be expected to show signs of some effort on Swift's part to assign diminutive-sounding names to the Lilliputians and massive-sounding names to the Brobdingnagians. And indeed, it is striking how often the former have *i* in the main syllable while the latter have *a*, *o*, and *u*. The names *Lilliput* and *Brobdingnag* themselves are illustrative, and others follow the pattern. The chief city of Lilliput is *Mildendo*, that of Brobdingnag *Lorbrulgrud*.[17] In Lilliput Gulliver encounters people and things called *Flimnap, Limtoc, Snilpal*, and *Glimigrim*; in Brobdingnag he encounters *Grultrud, Glumdalclitch, Glonglung*, and *Slardal*. The only Brobdingnagian name with prominent *i*-sounds is the word which the Brobdingnagians assign to the diminutive

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[14] Dickens seems to imply that the "ee" sound is more intensely diminutivizing than the "i" sound when, in *Oliver Twist*, he has a character prescribe "just a *leetle* drop [of gin] with a *little* cold water and a lump of sugar."

[15] Otto Jespersen's chapter on "Sound Symbolism" in *Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin* (London, 1922) and Edward Sapir's "A Study of Phonetic Symbolism," *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 12 (1929), 225–39, provide tentative explorations of the subject, while recent studies in *The Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior*, 6 (1967), 508–11; 7 (1968), 574–76; and 8 (1969), 310–12, attempt to give experimental confirmation to certain aspects of sound symbolism. The fullest recent discussion is Hans Marchand's "Phonetic Symbolism in English Word-Formation," *Indogermanische Forschungen*, 64 (1959), 146–68; 256–77.

[16] Charlotte Sennewald, "Die Namengebung bei Dickens, eine Studie über Lautsymbolik," *Palaestra*, 203 (Leipzig, 1936), pp. 98–113, provides a compilation of Dickensian names which follow similar phonetic patterns but she does not discuss them within the context of the general theory of sound symbolism.

[17] The use of *i* in Lilliputian words is not, however, consistent: *Clustril, Lalcon, Nardac*. and the name assigned to Gulliver, *Quinbus Flestrin*, all involve low front, central, and back vowels, as do some others.

Gulliver himself – *Grildrig*. Even here, however, the *i*-vowels are offset somewhat by the heavy voiced consonants, which suggest the grossness of Brobdingnagian even as the vowels suggest the smallness of Gulliver. Either consciously or unconsciously Swift was clearly using sound symbolism in fashioning his imaginary languages, and this fact has been passed over too lightly, I believe, by those who have sought to find explicit meanings in the names used by the Lilliputians and Brobdingnagians. Some have tried to explain these artificial tongues as anagrams or other coded forms of familiar English words.[18] Others have invested the strange words with meaning by construing them as distorted forms of French, Italian, Greek, Latin, and even Arabic words.[19] Still others would see Swift's languages as anagrams of Gaelic words.[20] I believe these efforts to be misguided; and yet I would not agree that the imaginary languages are "mere nonsense, for which Swift always had a marked fondness."[21] While the names he uses are indeed meaningless, I suspect, there is still cunning art in their sound-symbolical appropriateness, and it is in these terms that we should study and appreciate them.

Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* offers another instance where sound symbolism may play an onomastic role. Although the names of other characters in the novel are very apt, the rationale for the hero's name – *Henchard* – is not immediately apparent. The element *hench-* occurs elsewhere only as rather remote dialect words. As a variant form of dialectal *haunch* it can refer to a wrestling hold or to a way of throwing stones.[22] As a Somerset dialect word it refers to a part of a gate.[23] It is not easy to develop an appropriate signification for the name out of these words.[24] In the absence of a persuasive explanation of the word's "meaning" I would suggest that the name may have been selected on the basis of sound symbolism. The root syllable *Hench-* is similar in sound to the

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[18] P. O. Clarke, "A Gulliver Dictionary," *SP*, 50 (1953), 592–624. The weaknesses of Clark's approach are well described by Martin Price, *PQ*, 33 (1954), 301–302.

[19] H. D. Kelling, "Some Significant Names in *Gulliver's Travels*," *SP*, 48 (1951), 761–78, and Émile Pons, "Rabelais et Swift à propos du lilliputien," *Mélanges offerts a M. Abel Lefranc* (Paris, 1936), pp. 219–28. *Cf.* Pons' "Swift créateur linguistique: À propos du lilliputien," *Cahiers du Sud*, no. 344 (1958), 31–39.

[20] Roland M. Smith, "Swift's Little Language and Nonsense Names," *JEGP*, 54 (1954), 111–47.

[21] Arthur E. Case, ed, *Gulliver's Travels* (New York, 1938), p. 531.

[22] See *OED* s.v. *Haunch*, vb. and *EDD* s.v. *hainch*.

[23] See W. W. Gill's note in *NQ*, 170 (1936), 133. He offers the interesting conjecture that *hench* may be related to *-henge* in the name *Stonehenge*.

[24] B. Bohling, "Why Michael Henchard?" *English Journal*, 55 (1966), 203–207, thinks that the dialect word meaning "to throw with an underhand movement" is the basis for Hardy's coinage *Henchard* since she feels that this word implies the character's "rash impulsiveness." I do not find this association compelling. Miss Bohling's explication of *Farfrae*, however, seems to me very persuasive indeed.

words *clench*, *intrench*, and *wrench*, all of which are expressive of determined, vigorous action.[25] The very pronunciation of the syllable *ench* forces a momentary clenching of the teeth. Perhaps this sound-symbolical aspect of the word may explain the aptness which we instinctively sense in the name *Henchard* when it is assigned to the choleric, determined, fatally impulsive hero of Hardy's novel.

As I stated at the outset of this essay, more than enough attention has been devoted already to the varieties of "meaningfulness" in literary names, the artful complexity of Joyce, Nabokov and others in their tradition having accustomed critics to look first and often exclusively for the literary allusion, the polylingual pun, the etymological sense, or the allegorical hint in fictive names. In the rush for these clues to an author's meaning, readers have too often overlooked this humbler aspect of artful naming – the mere fitting of a name to the circumstances or qualities of the person who bears it.

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[25] That words of similar sound can seem to enrich one another connotatively has long been observed by writers and is in fact the basis of sound-symbolism. Stephane Mallarmé, in an unusual meditation upon this phenomenon, cites the natural association one senses between *spur* and *spurn*, *house* and *husband*, etc. and then adds: "Certains vocables ne montrent pas cette conformité d'impression; mais alors comme une dissonance: Le revirement dans la signification peut devenir absolu au point, cependant, d'intéresser à l'égal d'une analogie véritable: c'est ainsi que *heavy* semble se débarrasser tout-à-coup du sense de *lourdeur* qu'il marque, pour fournir *heaven*, le *ciel*, haut et subtil, considéré en tant que séjour spirituel." *Œuvres complètes*. Texte établi et annoté par Henri Mondor et G. Jean-Aubry (Paris, 1945), p. 919. Mallarmé's assumption of an etymological relationship between *heaven* and *heavy* is based upon a mistaken derivation originating apparently with Richard Verstegan and widely disseminated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by Johnson, Tooke, Webster, and others.

ELEVENTH INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS
OF ONOMASTIC SCIENCES

The convention this year will be held in Sofia, Bulgaria, from June 28–July 4. Main themes are to be 1) onomastic research and historical geography, and 2) the problem of transcribing personal names. A tentative list of sections appeared on the back cover of the March, 1972 issue of *Names*, q.v. for other details.