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# An Introduction to Naming in the Literature of Fantasy

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# IN THE LITERATURE OF FANTASY

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If you were writing a fantasy novel, one of your first concerns would be to select names for the places and characters.  It is clear that ordinary names - Tom, Dick, and Jane - would not do, except in ironic counterpoint to extraordinary events and situations.  European names, such as Boris, Francois, and Ludmilla, might suggest more distance, but they usually carry a freight of unwanted connotations related to assumptions about national character and associations with historical figures.  It would be useful to have some theoretical basis as a guide to selecting the names for your fantasy, wouldn't it?  That is what this paper attempts to provide.

First we need some definitions.  If we were to create a continuum of fiction, from photographic realism to its ultimate opposite, fantasy would be at the furthest remove from realism.  The hallmark and primary criterion of fantasy is the creation of a world in which causality is based on principles that are, in comparison with the real, everyday world, non-rational (although there may be an internal

rationality to the causality of that "secondary" world which
is distinct from that of the "real" world).  For example,
in the secondary world of fantasy, sorcerous spells may be
effective and unicorns may exist.  This secondary world is
distinct from the imaginary world created in "main line"
fiction in that the latter is based on familiar, acceptably
rational principles of causality, even though the events,
characters, etc. are all invented and never really happened.
The point is that they could happen without any displacement
of our ordinarily accepted epistemologies.  Of course, we
can all think of fictions that seem to straddle the "real"
and "secondary" worlds, such as The House of the Seven Gables,
in which a dying man's curse seems to take actual effect and
paintings take on life, but these events could also be ex-
plained in "realistic" terms as hallucinations, etc.  This
is why I spoke of a continuum, not a clear-cut division of
classes.  Before going further, let me substitute the word
"primary" for "real" when speaking of the fictional world
that imitates rational causality.  This will obviate my
putting quotation marks around "real."

Now, this secondary world can be made to stand entirely
on its own, so that there is no primary world in the fiction
and the only reference points to the real world are those
the reader brings with him or forges for himself.  This is
generally the case with what is commonly called "high"
fantasy, such as J. R. R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings.

From beginning to end of the fiction we are in the secondary world. A common subset of high fantasy is "sword and sorcery" or, as Zahorski and Tymn call it, "sword and sinew."[1] In this subset, the action is similarly presented entirely within the secondary world, but the emphasis is on action and derring-do rather than on more subtle themes. Again, precise separations can not be made, for much high fantasy (e.g., The Lord of the Rings again) makes ample use of swordplay and physical prowess while presenting deeper themes.

Alternatively, the secondary world may abut or inter-act with the primary world, so that one or more persons from the primary world might at some point in the fiction enter into the secondary world - as is common in dream fiction and science fantasy - or the secondary world might manifest itself in the primary world - as is the case in most stories of supernatural horror. In all these cases, the fiction consciously relates two or more distinct and different worlds to each other, and this directly affects, among other things, the writer's choice of names. I am not sure to what extent one can clearly differentiate between fantasy and science fiction - most publishers seem to have given up trying - but I do not attempt the distinction here. I have tried to focus on works that are unquestionably fantasy, but the possibility of disagreement will not, I think, much disturb my presentation.

To complicate the definition of fantasy literature

further, there are some additional types, such as myth, fairy tale, and tall story. Myths, whether the traditional ones, extensions of traditional myth, or newly invented ones, generally fall into the category of high fantasy with two additional extrinsic features: (1) traditional myth may at one time have been believed to be literally true or at least true in a higher way than other fiction, and (1) traditional myth, like other materials that have considerable cultural importance, offers a source of literary allusion with which to enrich other fictions. Writers who extend traditional myths, much as a writer of historical fiction extends history, or who write in a consciously mythic style, are attempting to attach to their stories some of the solemnity of that higher truth, occasionally for the purposes of mock-heroic effects. Examples are Aubrey Beardsley's erotic fantasy Under the Hill, in which Siegfried and Venus play at highly sophisticated love games, and Richard Garnett's "The City of Philosophers", in which Plotinus, Porphyry, and others establish a short-lived city in Campania. Fairy tales likewise have a place in tradition, but considered as themselves, they tend to fall into one of the previously identified types. Tall stories are usually an exaggeration of the primary world for comic effect, with a gradual infusion of the non-rational so that at some point the reader says "This couldn't have happened." But since the central point of the humor is the reader's perception of the exaggeration,

the principles for naming are those of "realistic" comic
fiction. (To borrow a cue from Leonard Ashley, I might
point to the need for a study of the principles of comic
naming.)

The type of fantasy that you are writing will largely
determine the principles of nomenclature that you use.
If, for instance, you are writing high fantasy, the central
principle of the nomenclature will be remoteness from the
real or usual patterns, those most familiar to the reader.
For the fantasy to induce the necessary suspension of dis-
belief, the secondary world must be remote in space, time,
and/or dimension from the primary or real world. The nomen-
clature is one important way in which this remoteness is
achieved and sustained. If you are writing the kind of
fantasy that juxtaposes the primary and secondary worlds -
either by traveling in some way from primary to secondary
or by introducing the secondary into the primary - you will
wish to use at least two categories of names, the familiar
and the remote. And for the greatest shock effect, the one
set of names should be very familiar and ordinary, whereas
the other set should be very unusual or alien. Of course,
special effects of various sorts can be attained by varying
from these basic principles. You might want to show, for
example, that a character from the primary world really
belongs in the secondary world and so choose a name that
could be satisfactory in both realms, as Stephen R.

Donaldson does with Thomas Covenant in his trilogy The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant the Unbeliever. Or you might want to achieve a comic displacement from the basic pattern, as Lewis Carroll does when his Alice, in the midst of characters with names like the White Rabbit, the Mad Hatter, the March Hare, and the Cheshire Cat, encounters a lizard named Bill.

Remoteness alone, however, is not the only desideratum. Names in fantasy literature must do the same kind of work that they do in the real world, that is, indicate sex and frequently age and social rank, distinguish among nations or the equivalent (such as different language stocks), and, in the case of place-names, give some idea of the size and/or identity of the place. For example, in The Lord of the Rings it is easy to detect that Mirkwood is a rather nasty wooded place and that the Brandywine is a smallish, gently comforting stream. Tolkien is particularly good at this. His names for elves and dwarves, for instance, are quite clearly each of a pattern, and the two patterns are distinct from each other. His dwarves have names, drawn from Finnish folklore, that suggest sturdiness and grimness, such as Gimli, Thorin, and Bofur (see the first group of names in the appendix). The elves, on the other hand, have musical, liquid names, such as Elbereth and Legolas (see appendix, #2). His place-names, too, suggest differences in character. We have the calm sense of domesticity that lies in The Shire and Hobbiton (built on common British naming principles),

the melodious harmony of the elves' domain in Rivendell and
Lothlórien, and the ominous tone of Mordor and Barad-Dûr,
home of the evil Sauron and his powers of darkness.  Jane
Gaskell, in her Atlan trilogy, also devises fitting names
for many of her characters.  Her heroine, Cija (pronounced
Key-a), has a name that clearly denotes femininity, but
the harsh shrillness of the name also suggests some predatory
bird, which is in keeping with Cija's complexity of womanly
independence and even fierce shrewishness at times.  Another
main character, Zerd, has a name that quite clearly arises
out of a different language stock (he is from another nation)
and, because of its clench-jawed terseness of sound, sug-
gests power and authority.  In fact, Zerd is a military
conqueror who takes Atlantis by storm.  Writers of fantasy
have a special kind of freedom in their name-choices, but
concomitant with that freedom is the special responsibility
to fit the sound to the sense and achieve internal con-
sistency.

To achieve the effect of remoteness, an author may
choose actual historical names or invented names.  If he
chooses historical names, he will most probably select the
name from:

    1.  Myths or traditional fictions,

    2.  Places that are geographically remote, or

    3.  Times that are historically remote.

If he selects invented names, they are likely to be:

    1.  Imitations of historical names based on the above

criteria,

2. Unusual letter/sound combinations,

3. Class names (e.g., the Snow Queen, the Maid, the Wizard of Oz, the Cheshire Cat), or

4. Paronomasic names (e.g., Crayola Catfish, Habundia, Saltheart Foamfollower).

Since fantasy literature tends to contain many characters who possess supernormal powers, one source of such characters and their accompanying names is mythology, the various pantheons of Greece, Rome, Egypt, Wales, the Norse and Finns, peoples from Africa, Asia, the Americas - whatever body of lore is available to the writer. Thus we have such stories as "The Miniature" by Eden Phillpotts (itself a delightful, and real, name), which casts Zeus, Hera, and the other Greek gods as observers of mankind. Or we have Evangeline Walton's The Island of the Mighty, set in the world of Welsh mythology, or André Norton's Fur Magic, with names and events drawn from American Indian myths. Alternatively, a writer could take as his fantasy domain one already imagined and peopled, as Mark Twain and T. H. White do with the Arthurian material in, respectively, A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court and The Once and Future King, deriving their names primarily from Malory's Morte D'Arthur and Tennyson's Idylls of the King. Similarly, Michael Moorcock presents Werther and Sisyphus in Stories from the End of Time, and John Gardner retells the story of Grendel

and Beowulf in <u>Grendel</u>.  Occasionally, historical personages
are mingled with fictitious characters and settings, as in
Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Celestial Railroad," in which
Plato's works, among others, are used to fill up the Slough
of Despond, and Appolyon drives the train.  Other examples
include E. M. Forster's "The Celestial Omnibus," which
employs Sir Thomas Browne, and Ray Bradbury's "The Exiles,"
in which Dickens, Poe, Ambrose Bierce and others join forces
with the witches from <u>Macbeth</u> to defend Mars against the
invasion of rationalistic science.

Names of characters and places from mythology, traditional
literature, or history may add a sense of heightened signifi-
cance, tragedy, or comedy to the fantasy.  However, such
names impose limitations on the writer.  The resulting story
may be just a curiosity, as is Phillpotts' "The Miniature,"
or a titillation for the cognoscenti.  It may also approach
translation of actual myths or a fictionalization of legend
similar to the historical novel.  Characters and places are
limited by what readers already know of them, and deviations
from traditional character are punished by scorn or are
deliberately comic.

Another way to achieve the effect of remoteness is to
draw names from existing languages that are geographically
distant from the world of the reader.  Thus, for instance,
Ernest Bramah (pen-name of E. B. Smith) set <u>The Wallet of</u>
<u>Kai Lung</u>, a collection of fabulous stories, in China, with

names like Yat Huang, Kiang-si, Li-Kao, Chang Tao, and others. Thomas Burnett Swann set "The Night of the Unicorn" on Cozumel, "the capital...of a small island off the Yucatán peninsula,"[2] Jane Gaskell's Atlan trilogy is set partly in the ancient Mayan territory, and William Beckford's Vathek, set primarily in the Middle East, uses as its hero an actual historical caliph of the Abbasid dynasty named Harun al-Wathik.[3] This technique is found more often in older fantasy literature, however, since modern speeds of travel and communication leave very few corners of the world seeming remote and alien.

Some of the previous names also illustrate another way to achieve a sense of distance, that is, reference to names from ancient history, especially if the places and persons are little-known and long-forgotten. In his Jurgen, for instance, James Branch Cabell refers to "the lands between Quesiton and Nacumera," names that sound invented but are actually from The Voyages and Travels of Sir John de Mandeville.[4] Robert E. Howard, the creator of Conan the Barbarian, "picked over Classical mythology for grim, stark names redolent of dark evil," as Lin Carter says, such as the kingdom of Acheron (in "The God in the Bowl"), the lands of Stygia and Dagonia (in "The Devil in Iron"), and the kingdom of Corinthia.[5] In fact, Carter takes him to task for his unimaginative use of names like Akbatana (slightly altered from Ecbatana, the capitol of ancient Media), Asgalun (from the old Biblical

city of Ascalon), and Khorshemish (from the old Syrian city
Carchemish).[6]  As Carter sums up, "It does not pay to make
it too easy for the reader to guess the source from which
your names are derived.... Once you spot the source of the
name - poof! - all the romance and mystery the author strove
to weave about it go out the window."[7]

To avoid this risk and achieve an even greater sense
of distance, therefore, most writers of fantasy literature
make up the names they use.  They may do so, in the first
place, by imitating names from ancient myths and remote
places and times.  Thus, for instance, we find the Hebraic
quality of H. P. Lovecraft's Yog-Sothoth and Kadath, the
Egyptian quality of the same author's Nyarlathotep, and
the antique French flavor of Cabell's Poictesme.  In Poul
Anderson's continuation of the Robert E. Howard tradition,
Conan the Rebel, we find the actual Egyptian god Set (though
here a serpent rather than a wolf-headed man) and a group
of names that come from or evoke at least eight different
language stocks: Egyptian, Arabian, Greek, Hebrew, Zambian,
Philippine, Russian, and Gaelic (see appendix, #9).  An
interesting variation of this practice is used by Michael
Moorcock in his "Chronicles of Castle Brass" series.  There
we find place-names that are obvious derivations from con-
temporary names, slightly changed to give a medieval flavor,
such as Gran Bretagne and Muscovia.  The names of characters
are similarly medieval but represent a mixture of influences
(see appendix, #10).  Like the names, the weapons used by

these characters in this variation of chivalric romance are
of mixed types, ranging from swords and armor to ornithopters
equipped with laser-like beams. In such stories one looks
in vain for a consistent naming pattern because the books
are meant for fast-paced entertainment, not onomastic
scholarship.

Particularly common, given the reliance on magic in so
many fantasy stories, is the use of names drawn from the age
of Beowulf and the sagas. In The Broken Sword, Poul Anderson
refers to Odin and Imric, and uses such names as Orm the
Strong, Ketil Asmundsson, Asgerd, Ragnar Hairybreeks,
AElfrida, and others (see appendix, #11). Tolkien gives
a similar flavor to names like Gandalf, Gimli, Frodo, and
Aragorn. The effect is to create a sense of a primitive
culture wherein magic and the belief in the preternatural
are not out of place.

Still further removed from reality are the exotic
names of pure invention, devised by combining letters and
apostrophes in ways totally alien to any known language
(see appendix, #12). What is most noticeable about such
names is their utter alienness, evoked not only by their
lexical opacity and their unfamiliarity, but even more
by the difficulty, and in some cases impossibility, of
pronouncing them, as if they were not made for modern,
or even human, mouths to utter. In this category fit
such names as Mmatmuor, R'lin K'ren A'a, Qar, and Xiurhn.

Also noticeable among the best choices of invented names
is an attempt to fit the effect of the phonemes - deep and
harsh or high and gentle - to the characters and places
named. One knows instantly that a young man named Thongor
(Lin Carter's "The City in the Jewel") will be strongly
thewed and firm of will, just as one knows that a person
named Thish is not to be trusted (he is a robber in Gary
Myers' "Xiurhn"). As Lin Carter says, quoting a letter
from C. S. Lewis, invented names "ought to be beautiful
and suggestive as well as strange; not merely odd."[8]  He
laments that too many writers opt for the merely odd -
uncouth combinations of X's, Z's and Q's - or seem to
get fixated on words beginning with the same letter, ending
with the same sound, or identical in numbers of syllables
and placement of stress.[9]  Even fantasy worlds must _seem_
actual while the reader is in them, and such sameness
does not create a sense of actuality.

It should be noted that in the above lists I have
made no attempt to separate place-names from person-names.
Nor have I included another class of names, the generic
words that authors invent for alien flora, fauna, and
minerals, such as Edgar Rice Burroughs' Martian (or
Barsoomian) pimalia plants, thoats, banths, and ersite
rock. That is matter for another day and/or another
person.

In the span of this paper I also can not go into

detail on the kinds of names that denote a general class
(such as The King of the Golden West, the Wizard of Oz,
the Cheshire Cat, the Maid, the Faceless Ones, The Grey
Mouser, etc.). <u>Alice in Wonderland</u> and the Oz books are
full of them, as are William Morris' fantasy novels among
others. These names achieve the effect of alienation,
since people just do not have names like those, and also
create a sense of mystery because the name seems to say
both more and less than it does - more because it hints
at a whole class of persons like the one named, less
because it does not really individualize the person being
named.

Similarly I will barely mention those paronomasic and/or
lexically transparent names occasionally found in fantasy,
such as Crayola Catfish from R. A. Lafferty's "Boomer Flats,"
Habundia from William Morris' <u>The Water of the Wondrous</u>
<u>Isles</u>, and Saltheart Foamfollower from Stephen R. Donaldson's
<u>The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant the Unbeliever</u>. Since
the world of fantasy is essentially play, no matter how
serious and even deadly it might get, names such as these
are not only more acceptable than they would be in realistic
fiction (no matter how playful some parents actually get
with their children's names) but also help to keep the
spirit of make-believe alive. In addition, of course,
they add levels of meaning to the work similar to those
we are familiar with in all of our onomastic analyses.

Fantasy literature, therefore, offers a vast and
fruitful field for the use of names.  The determining
characteristics are essentially aptness and remoteness,
in keeping with that magical world which H. P. Lovecraft
dalled the world of wonder.

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# APPENDIX: SAMPLE NAMES IN FANTASY LITERATURE

1. The Lord of the Rings: Dwarves

    Gimli
    Glóin
    Thorin
    Dáin
    Bofur
    Balin

2. The Lord of the Rings: Elves

    Elbereth
    Elladan
    Elrohir
    Elrond
    Lúthien
    Legolas

3. The Lord of the Rings: Places

    The Shire
    Hobbiton
    Rivendell
    Lothlórien
    Mordor
    Barad-Dûr

4. Gaskell's Atlan Trilogy

    Cija
    Zerd

5. The Wallet of Kai Lung

    Yat Huang
    Kiang-si
    Li-Kao
    Chang Tao

6. Howard's Conan Series

    Acheron
    Stygia
    Dagonia
    Corinthia
    Akbatana
    Asgalun
    Khorshemish

7. H. P. Lovecraft Names

    Yog-Sothoth
    Kadath
    Nyarlathotep
    Cthulhu
    Y'ha-nthlei

8. J. B. Cabell Names

    Jurgen
    Poictêsme

9. Poul Anderson, Conan

    Set
    Luxur
    Tothapis
    Akhbet
    Sukhmet
    Taia
    Pteion
    Jehanan
    Hoiakim
    Bangulu (cf. Bangweulu Lake in Zambia)
    Zamboula (cf. the province of Zambales in the Philippines)
    Kush (cf. Russian Kushka)

10. Moorcock's Castle Brass series

Places: Gran Bretagne
Londra (capital of G. Bretagne)
Köln
Muscovia
Amarehk
Asiacommunista

People: Josef Vedla
Huillam D'Averc
Bowgentle
Dorian Hawkmoon
Yisselda
Count Brass

11. Poul Anderson, Broken Sword

Orm the Strong
Ketil Asmundsson
Asgerd
Ragnar Hairybreeks
Guthorm
Athelstane
AElfrida
Valgard
Skafloc

12. Exotic Invented Names
(Lord Dunsany)
Akanax
Goolunza
Thangobrind
Lorendiac
Zaccarath
Thanga of Esk

(Michael Moorcock)
Imrryr
R'lin K'ren A'a

12. cont'd...
(Clark Ashton Smith)
Malygris
Maal Dweb
Mmatmuor

(Ted White, The
Sorceress of Qar)
Qar
Zominor
Shanathor
Vagar

(Dave Van Arnam,
The Players of Hell)
Tza
Tir'u
Tchambar
Shagon
Shassa

(Gary Myers,
"Xiurhn")
Xiurhn
Hazuth-Kleg
Skaa
Dylath-Leen
N'tse-Kaambl
Thish (the robber)

(Lin Carter, "The
City in the Jewel")
Thongor
Yllimdus
Zazamanc the
Enchanter
Mountains of
Mommur
Kathool of the
Purple Towers

## NOTES

[1] Tymn, Zahorski, and Boyer, Fantasy Literature: A Core Collection and Reference Guide (New York: Bowker, 1979), p. 23.

[2] Discoveries in Fantasy, ed. Lin Carter (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), pp. 7-56, and The Year's Best Fantasy Stories: 2, ed. Lin Carter (New York: DAW Books, 1976), pp. 28-33 ff.

[3] Lin Carter, Imaginary Worlds (New York: Ballantine Books, 1973), p. 18.

[4] Lin Carter, Imaginary Worlds, p. 41.

[5] Ibid., p. 194.

[6] Ibid., p. 195.

[7] Ibid., p. 196.

[8] Ibid., p. 201.

[9] Carter has a whole chapter on what he calls "neocognomina" in Imaginary Worlds, pp. 192-212; I owe him a great deal. As for some brief comments on syllables and stress, see my "Look! Up in the Sky! It's What's-His-Name!" Literary Onomastic Studies 5 (1978), 46-47.