

Literary Onomastics Studies

Volume 11

Article 5

1984

Discovery of Delicious: Names and Naming in the Novels of Natalie Babbitt

Priscilla A. Ord

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/los>

Repository Citation

Ord, Priscilla A. (1984) "Discovery of Delicious: Names and Naming in the Novels of Natalie Babbitt," *Literary Onomastics Studies*: Vol. 11, Article 5.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/los/vol11/iss1/5>

This Conference Paper is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @Brockport. It has been accepted for inclusion in Literary Onomastics Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @Brockport. For more information, please contact kmyers@brockport.edu.

DISCOVERY OF DELICIOUS:
NAMES AND NAMING IN THE NOVELS OF NATALIE BABBITT

Priscilla A. Ord

Carlisle, Pennsylvania

It is no secret why the initial volumes of *Children's Literature*, the Annual of The Modern Language Association Division on Children's Literature and The Children's Literature Association, were entitled *Children's Literature: The Great Excluded*. With the association that supports this journal just ten years old, there are still those who fail to see children's literature as a subject deserving casual, let alone serious, study as a literary genre.

With respect to literary onomastics, there is no difficulty in recounting the linguistic contributions of Lewis Carroll, J. R. R. Tolkien, and others, but, it will be argued, they did not write children's literature. Children merely happen to read their work or enjoy having it read to them. Is there, then, children's literature that could be studied for its onomastic content? I contend that there is if you will allow me to provide you with some food for thought.

Natalie Babbitt began her career in children's literature as an illustrator. The first children's book that she illustrated, *The Forty-ninth Magician*, was written by her husband, the current president of Kirkland College. Then she began to write children's verse, illustrating the books herself. Finally, she was persuaded to try

her hand at writing children's fiction.

Her writing, which appeals not only to children as listeners or readers but also to adults reading to children, is fanciful, yet often thought provoking, fantasy, set in realistic situations with which both children and adults are comfortable. She is best known, perhaps, for *Tuck Everlasting* (1975), but I would rather that you tasted three of her earlier works of fiction for younger children, grades 4-6.

In two separate interviews with Lee Bennett Hopkins and Anne MacLeod, respectively, Natalie Babbitt reveals her love of words, as well as part of her strategy in presenting ideas in her fiction. "I have an inordinate fondness for words and the alphabet." (Hopkins, p. 27) "I am motivated first by a simple passion for the English language and second by a fascination with the many faces a single reality assumes when viewed through the filter of any given individual's biases, experiences, expectations, and/or desires." (MacLeod, p. 62) These tendencies are probably best seen in her first book of fiction, *The Search for Delicious* (1969).

The prime minister of an unnamed kingdom has decided to write a dictionary that, at the point the reader and/or listener joins the story, has progressed, but not without some difficulty, as far as the letter *D*. Pacing up and down in his workroom at the top of the tower in the castle, he bursts out,

"**There** will be civil war! ... Splits, upheavals,
and people taking sides! Smiles will be forgotten and

spring will escape notice! Little flowers will push up, only to be trodden down, and birds will sing unheeded."
(p. 13)

When Gaylen, his twelve-year-old adopted son and special assistant asks, "But why? What happened?" one learns,

"It was like this," said the Prime Minister, climbing onto the stool at his desk. "I went down, you see, to show the King how far I've gone on my dictionary. He was pleased with the first part. He liked 'Affectionate is your dog' and 'Annoying is a loose boot in a muddy place' and so on, and he smiled at 'Bulky is a big bag of boxes.' As a matter of fact, there was no trouble with any of the A's or B's and the C's were fine too, especially 'Calamitous is saying no to the King.' But then we got to 'Delicious is fried fish' and he said no, I'd have to change that. He doesn't care for fried fish. The General of the Armies was standing there and he said that, as far as he was concerned, Delicious is a mug of beer, and the Queen said no, Delicious is a Christmas pudding, and then the King said nonsense, everyone knew the most delicious thing is an apple, and they all began quarreling. Not just the three of them -- the whole court. When I left, they were all yelling and shouting and shaking their fists. The King and the General were glaring at each other, and the Queen was trying to get everyone to listen to the recipe for Christmas pudding."

"That doesn't sound like civil war to me," said Gaylen, turning back to his book with a smile. "It only sounds silly."

"Of course it's silly." said the Prime Minister impatiently. "But a lot of serious things start silly."

Gaylen put his book down again and sighed. "Why don't you just leave Delicious out of the dictionary?"

"I can't do that," said the Prime Minister. "If this is going to be a proper dictionary, I can't leave anything out."

At that moment there was a great racket in the courtyard below. Gaylen ran to the window and looked down. People were pouring out of the castle door to form a noisy ring around two men shoving each other about on the grass.

After a moment, one knocked the other flat, shouted "Plums!" and strode triumphantly back inside, followed by the cheering crowd. The man who had been flattened swayed to his feet and went off muttering.

The Prime Minister shook his head sadly. "Now here's a pretty kettle of fish," he said.

"Or apples," said Gaylen. (pp. 14-16)

In order to save the kingdom from civil war, Gaylen is commissioned to poll the kingdom and register every subject's choice for the food that he or she "honestly believes to be the most delicious of all foods." A look at Gaylen's map, located on the inside board and fly leaf at both the front and back of the book, reveals nothing extraordinary about the place names. They are, in fact, rather pedestrian.

The Castle,
 First Town,
 The Woldweller's Forest,
 Apple Orchard,
 Second Town,
 The Dwarfs' Cave,
 Third Town,
 Nest of the Wind,
 The Lake, and
 Fourth Town, which he never reaches.

The cast of characters, however, is far more colorful.

The Prime Minister's name is DeCree. Gaylen later meets a shepherd boy on his way to Third Town. His name is Decry, and he informs Gaylen that "... some day I shall be the Prime Minister."

Gaylen's full name is Vaungaylen, which, the author informs us, means "little healer." This early knowledge, presented as it is in the second chapter, is prophetic. It is, after all, Gaylen who gains possession of a long lost stone key, that when presented to its rightful owner, the mermaid Ardis, persuades her to assist him in undoing some of the

treachery that has been perpetrated against the King and the kingdom by the Queen's unpleasant brother, thereby averting a war and "healing" the kingdom.

Hemlock, the Queen's brother, rides ahead of Gaylen and "poisons" the minds of the King's subjects by misrepresenting Gaylen's purpose, stating that, on the basis of the poll, the King intends to outlaw certain foods.

Gaylen's horse is, appropriately, named Marrow, from ME *marwe*, "a companion, fellow-worker, partner, or mate." When used with things, it is "a thing which makes a pair with another." (*OED*)

Hemlock's horse, on the other hand, is named Ballywrack, from *bally*, a mild imprecation and intensifier, a euphemism for "bloody," and *wrack*, "wreck," hence, a "bloody wreck," akin to *ballyhack* and *ballywack*, "a smash, wreck, or ruin."

In order of appearance, excluding the shepherd, Decry, Galen meets the following in his travels:

Medley, the daughter of the mayor of First Town, who must have been a mixture or combination of admirable qualities, for he marries her when he is older, and becomes the mayor of First Town in her father's stead;

The woldweller, the "forest" or "wood" "seer" or "wiseman," who lived in a huge oak tree in the "exact and precise center of the forest";

Canto, the minstrel, and his dog,

Muzzle, an interesting example of synecdoche;

Whimsey Mildew and her husband, Mildew, which would seem to be merely fanciful names, unless their choices for food had been honeydew melons, but they were, instead, fruitcake and plumcake, respectively;

Mrs. Copse, perhaps in keeping with the woods and forest theme, and her pet crow,

Maunder, whose "incoherent and aimless talk" provides Gaylen with several clues to the legend of Ardis that Canto had sung to him;

Veto, the mayor of Second Town, and

Winnow, the miller whom Gaylen meets there, whose favorite food is, predictably, bread; and

Bevel, Pitshaft, and Thwart, the dwarfs he meets when he seeks shelter in a cave during a fearsome storm in which Marrow slips, loses a shoe, and goes lame. These are the same dwarfs who discovered and maintained the spring that now provides water for the kingdom and that Hemlock is attempting to divert to bring the King and the kingdom to their knees.

Finally, there are:

Murk and Rankle, with their odious sounding names, who are building the dam at The Lake for Hemlock.

With the collapse of the dam, and the restoration of water to the parched streams, rivers, and lakes, one hears,

"Delicious!" a man called to his neighbors, and they answered, "Yes, yes, delicious."

"Why, listen to that!" said the King. "There's your definition, DeCree. After today no one could ever disagree with it."

"You're right!" exclaimed the Prime Minister. "I do believe you're right. That's it, of course. That's it at last! 'Delicious is a drink of cool water when you're very thirsty.'" And they all laughed and clapped each other on the back. (p. 156)

A little later, back at The Castle,

"Well," said the Prime Minister as they all sat down to supper at the castle. "It certainly is a relief to have all that nonsense over with. Now I can finish up my dictionary in peace."

"So you can, at that," said the King, "What comes next, after Delicious?"

"Oh, I'm way past the D's," said the Prime Minister. "As a matter of fact, I've got to the G's. I've just done Golden. 'Golden is the setting sun.' How's that?"

"You can't be serious." said the King. "Setting suns are pink. Everyone knows that. Why not say 'Golden is a ripe lemon'?"

The Queen took a sip of wine and said, "Excuse me, my dear, but lemons are yellow. 'Lemon yellow' is how the phrase goes. As for Golden, I'd rather see it read 'Golden is a clump of daffodils.'"

"Or 'Golden is a mug of beer,'" suggested the General.

"Now, by Harry," said the King, "I won't have it. Let DeCree say what he wants, can't you? 'Golden is a ripe lemon' will do perfectly well."

"'Golden is the setting sun' is what I was planning to say," put in the Prime Minister. He sighed heavily. "Writing a dictionary is certainly no bed of roses."

"No bed of *daffodils*," murmured the Queen. (pp. 158-159)

In her second work of fiction, *Kneeknock Rise* (1970), the names of the characters, except for the young hero, Egan, are rather ordinary. They are, however, fitting for the imaginary time and place in which the story is set. There are:

Egan, an apparent alternate for Hugh;

Uncle Anson, a clock maker;

Aunt Gertrude, who makes Mar-no-mores, pouch-shaped objects that go over the legs of chairs and tables to keep the floor from getting scratched;

Cousin Ada and her detestable cat,

Sweetheart, a classic misnomer; and

Uncle Ott, who writes poetry but has wandered off before the beginning of the story, leaving behind his faithful, old dog,

Annabelle.

The landscape to which we are introduced is far more interesting.

The Mammoth Mountains, about which the local people are fiercely proud, are an example of decided hyperbole, for they are a relatively modest range of hills, rising from the surrounding countryside that lies "as flat as if it had been knocked unconscious." (p. 3)

Because of this pride of the people's, you were well advised, on passing through, to remember the famous and somewhat true story of an early visitor who rashly remarked that anyone who could call those molehills mountains had to be either a blindman or a fool. It was suggested to him that he was already a fool himself and in grave danger of becoming a blindman on the instant. So, we are told, he wisely thought better of it, looked again, and said, "I see that I was mistaken. No mere mole could have made those mounds. They must have been the work of a mammoth!" The people were satisfied, the visitor escaped unharmed, and the mountains were christened. (p. 3)

Kneeknock Rise, home of the mythical Megrimum, whose sighs and moans on a cold, harsh, stormy night are enough to make anyone's knees knock together, is one of the "mounds" of the Mammoth Mountains that is slightly taller, rockier, and more clifflike with its crest always shrouded in a little cloud of mist.

Instep, the village that is located, appropriately, at the *foot* of Kneeknock Rise, is where the annual fair is held in the autumn when storms are fierce and frequent, allowing all who attend an opportunity to hear the dreaded Megrimum's groans.

And the Megrimum? Natalie Babbitt has admitted that her books usually begin with a word or a phrase. (Hopkins, p. 27) This one must have started with *megrimum* by placing a false Latin neuter singular on *megrim*, but whether it is the singular of "migraine," which is doubtful, or of "whim, fancy, or fad," which is more likely, is unclear. Without regard to its linguistic origins, the "creature" is well grounded in folklore in Instep as well as some borrowed from the real world, mostly pertaining to werewolves and the devil.

It likes cats, and it particularly likes them to kill the

kneeknock birds.

If one leaves a candle in the window, the Megrimum knows that all the occupants are safe inside the house.

If one places a wishbone on the hearth, the Megrimum knows that all the food has been eaten.

If one hangs onions on the door hinges, it keeps the Megrimum outside.

If one places an iron weathervane on the roof, it will "crow" and scare the Megrimum away.

If one rings a bell, both the Megrimum and the devil will run.

Natalie Babbitt enjoys severe storms, which figure in several of her stories, and that is when the Megrimum and his moaning and groaning is at its best. Egan, goaded by his spiteful cousin Ada, climbs Kneeknock Rise to confront the creature, but he finds that its audible manifestations are nothing more than volcanic steam escaping from the mouth of a cave. His real surprise, however, besides finding Uncle Ott, is that the Insteppers would rather continue to believe their myth and perpetuate their awe and fear for years to come than listen to his explanation of the phenomenon.

There is no need to guess at the inspiration for *Goody Hall* (1971), for Mrs. Babbitt readily admits that "*Goody Hall* really began with my affinity for the word *smuggler*." (Hopkins, p. 27) Here in a gothic novel for juvenile readers, there is:

Midas Goody, an extremely wealthy man, as the connotation of the name Midas might imply, who supposedly died, five years prior to the present action of the story, of a fall from his horse.

Mrs. Goody, his wife, who hardly mourned her husband's accidental death and now leaves the mansion twice a year to visit

a nearby city, without apparent concern -- in the opinion of the neighbors, the cook, and the housekeeper -- for her son.

Willet Goody, whose given name is a double diminutive of William, is a typical boy with typical interests who revels in using his favorite exclamation, "Bugfat!"

Dora Tidings, whose first name is a variation of Dorothea or Dorothy, from the Greek Theodora, "gift from God," is the housekeeper at Goody Hall and is as good a gossip as her surname implies.

The remaining servants at Goody Hall are:

Alfreda Rom (all free to roam), a serving girl, and her father,

Alfresco Rom, the gardener, who, of course, works "out of doors." The Roms are gypsies, as their surname Rom, a shortening of Romany, indicates.

Hercules Feltwright, whose father was a hatter, in fact the descendant of a long line of hatters, and whose mother thoroughly enjoyed the coincidental and parallel events that tied her son to his namesake, the Hercules of Greek mythology. Loathing the trade of a hatter, he has tried his hand as an itinerant actor, but he presents himself at Goody Hall as a candidate for the position of tutor to the Goody's son Willet.

Hercules begins to suspect that Midas Goody is not really dead, and his suspicions prove to be correct. Mr. Goody is really

John Constant, who is "steadfast" and "resolute" and who has disguised himself frequently as

Mott Snave, the master thief, but was caught five years ago and has been in jail ever since.

Confused? It is to be expected. Further confusion prevails with Hercules' frequent misquoting of lines from several of William Shakespeare's tragedies. The bard himself even appears, unbidden, during a seance to caution Hercules about the misuse of his lines. An example follows:

Where the sea bucks, there buck I.
 In a proud ship's bell I lie.
 Dum da de dum, de dum dum,
 Dum da dum, I forget this part
 Mariner, mariner shall I live now
 Under the mosses that hang on the prow.¹ (p. 33)

Reviewers feel that Mrs. Babbitt's references to Greek mythology and Shakespeare are far above the heads of the intended readers and/or listeners. I believe, however, that not all such references are for the children's benefit but for that of the adults who may be reading to children. Surely, they deserve some light-hearted humor for the tedious task that they have willingly or unwillingly undertaken.

Natalie Babbitt's later novels, *Tuck Everlasting* (1975) and *The Eyes of the AMARYLLIS* (1977), are for slightly older children. The subject matter is of a more serious nature -- life, death, and immortality -- and the selection of names, while appropriate to the time and circumstances, shows some restraint.

In *Tuck Everlasting*, set in the 1880's, the action takes place in or not far from the town of

Treegap, which had been founded during the days of this country's westward expansion in a clearing or gap on the other side of a great wood.

The Tuck family, Angus and Mae and their two sons, Miles and Jesse, have had to keep themselves "tucked away" from the mainstream of life ever since they drank from a spring in the center of the wood eighty-seven years ago and became immortal. In the story they meet

Winnie (Winifred, "beloved protector") Foster, from Forester "an official in charge of a forest," whose family actually owns the wood. She proves herself the trusted friend that

her given name implies when she assists the Tucks in an escape from Treegap without revealing their secret.

The Eyes of the AMARYLLIS is the story of a sea captain's wife who, after seeing his ship go down in a hurricane while she watched with her son from a bluff in front of their house, has waited thirty years for the sea to bring her some sign from her husband, some piece of wreckage from the ship, to somehow make his death and the ship's sinking real.

Morgan, "sea bright," Reade was captain of the

AMARYLLIS, a two-masted bark, that he had named after the six-petaled, lily-like, reddish flower because it reminded him of his wife,

Geneva Reade, whose married name complemented her red hair.

When Geneva falls and breaks her ankle, she asks her granddaughter and namesake, Jenny, to come help her continue the vigil at the sea's edge. The two Geneva Reads must be "ready" at each high tide to keep

Seward, the "guardian of the sea," in the form and likeness of the drowned Nicholas (the patron saint of, among other things, mariners) Irving, the talented artist who had carved the ship's figurehead as a likeness of Mrs. Reade, from finding the sign before they do and returning it to the sea before they have had an opportunity to see it.

Mrs. Babbitt's most recent novel is *Henry Rowbarge* (1982). Its title alone is enticing, but its contents also promise to yield tasty onomastic morsels as soon as I have the opportunity to "sink my teeth into it."

Priscilla A. Ord
Carlisle, PA

NOTES

¹The original is as follows:

Where the bee sucks, there suck I;
 In a cowslip bell I lie,
 There I couch when owls do cry.
 On a bat's back I do fly
 After summer merrily:
 Merrily, merrily shall I live now
 Under the blossom that hangs on the bough.

The Tempest, Act V, Sc 1, line 88-94.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Babbitt, Natalie. *The Eyes of the AMARYLLIS*. New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1977.
- _____. *Goody Hall*. New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1971.
- _____. *Herbert Rowbarge*. New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1982.
- _____. *Kneeknock Rise*. New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1970.
- _____. *The Search for Delicious*. New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1969.
- _____. *Tuck Everlasting*. New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1975.
- Hopkins, Lee Bennett. "Natalie Babbitt." *More Books by More People*. New York: Citation Press, 1974.
- MacLeod, Anne S. "BABBITT, Natalie." *Twentieth Century Children's Writers*. Edited by D. L. Kirkpatrick. New York, St. Martins Press, 1978.

