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Recommended Citation
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.4246

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Onomastic Musings: What's Your Library Nom du Jour?

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Shakespeare’s rose not withstanding, studies in the field of onomastics (the science of names) reveal that the names we use, and our acts of naming, carry great significance. The naming of the animals by Adam and Eve established the dominion of humans over beasts. Some cultures postpone naming a child until a significant or portentous event occurs. Initiates into certain societies, organizations, or adulthood sometime take new names. The names of the mighty are vessels of power. Others become synonyms of treachery and shame such as Judas Iscariot and Benedict Arnold.

There are, of course, historical appellations for those who spend their days (and nights) laboring in libraries. The earliest entry in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) for a word meaning either a bookseller or a librarian is librarian (c. 1483). Of ketelmakers and librarians” (c. 1483) and Waterhouse (1667), “Mr. Spencer, the aboriginal Librarian, yet living and yet faithfully attending the remains of the Books,” are cited as examples of early use. The initial listing under librarian in the OED defines the word as “A scribe, a抄ist.” The citations are interesting. “The Booksellers got these books transcribed by unmeet librarians,” (Gale, C. Gentiles, II, IV, 1770). The adjective preceding the noun librarians here, of course, means improper, unseemly. In Notes on Pope’s Odyssey, XII, 131, William Broome wrote, “This is the error of the Librarians, who put...” Samuel Johnson refers to the same error in A Dictionary of the English Language (1767). “Charibdis throve swallows, and thrice refunds, the waves: this must be understood of regular tides. There are indeed but two tides in a day, but this is the error of the librarians” (emphasis in the original). Perhaps it’s just as well that we are not still copyists.

The OED goes on to explain that prior to being supplanted by our present sense of librarian, those in charge of the library were known as library-keepers. This, it must be supposed, was in the sense of housekeepers, beekeepers, or barkeepers. The first entry for the word librarian for “the custodian of a library” is cited as occurring in 1713. Richard Steele, writing in the Englishman, N. I, 8, asks, “Why aren’t I be witty, as a Man that keeps a Librarian is Learned?” Thus, we move from being keepers to being kept. The sense of the word kept is not explained here. Neither is the gender of the librarian clear, since it is not until 1862 that Trollope provides our example of the correct title for a female librarian. “The librarians best looked pretty and learned...” It’s clear which attribute Mr. Trollope noticed first.

On the American scene, Melvil Dewey dubbed librarians library economists in the 1880s. The link with economics seems a bit puzzling until it is considered in light of a sister profession, home economics. Clearly, the library was becoming a female domain, and so it remains. This has inspired some way to define the au courant job title “information scientist” as “a male librarian.” However, “male librarian” brings to mind such gender-clarifying phrases as “male nurse” and “lady doctor.” Stereotypes die hard, but they do sometimes die, or at least change names. Even given the ubiquity of women in the profession, one seldom runs into a librarian anymore. Librarian, originally a masculine pronoun, has now come to be thought feminine. Presumably this is meant to represent progress. After all, naturalists tell us the lions do all the work while the lion sleeps, roars, eats (what the lionsesses have caught) and mates. Maybe the librariansesses were on to something.

We librarians haven’t done particularly well at picking our own monikers either. Take bibliographer, for instance. Who knows what a bibliographer is? Everyone knows what a librarian is. Of course, nobody is exactly sure what a librarian does. Even we can’t seem to make up our minds about whom or what we are. There are, however, people quite willing to define us.

Cultural historian and former Columbia University provost Jacques Barzun has likened librarians, along with journalists, to “intellectual middlemen” and computer professionals to “machine salesmen.” Let me repeat. Professor Barzun places librarians and journalists in the same cohort. No offense to journalists, but this is troubling. According to recent polls, journalists are among the least respected occupational groups, along with salespeople (machine salesmen?) and politicians. Is Professor Barzun the only person with such opinions about librarians? Hardly.

Writer, critic, and semiotician Umberto Eco is well known for his ambivalence toward libraries and librarians. He points out that they do as much to block access as provide it with their labyrinthine stacks and confusing catalogs, adding that he often perceives a hostile attitude toward patrons. In Eco’s medieval literary mystery The Name of the Rose, the old librarian is blind (interesting), humorless, power hungry, and a murderer to boot. Thomas Carlyle despised the way librarians organized materials and compared them to haberdashers stashing everything away in drawers. He got so fed up he started his own library. Although an advocate of libraries, John Henry Newman called them, and by extension, librarians, “embalmers of past genius.” The humanist scholar and library director John E. Burchard referred to librarianship as “the Waterloo of science,” and wrote that the more a researcher wades through mounds of materials, the more he comes to hate librarians. In his novel, The Gold Bug Variations, Richard Powers refers to a librarian as a gas station attendant of the mind.” And of course, there’s Nicholson Baker.

The inevitable reaction against stereotyping and misunderstanding has produced a plethora of self-referral titles: feminist librarians, anarchist librarians, groovy librarians, guerrilla librarians, self-mutilating librarians (OK, they call themselves modified librarians), even naked librarians. The creative potential for definition and job titles seems boundless. Over 300 job titles for library workers have appeared in the periodicals American Libraries and College and Research Libraries News, and on a Web site that monitors such things. Among the listings are Category Architect, Cybrarian, Imaging Coordinator, Interface Specialist, Metadata Development Specialist, Product Analyst, and Virtual Services Librarian. The last noted position was doubtless created for librarians who prefer not to deliver real services.

To complicate matters further, academic librarians have been given faculty rank and/or status at many institutions, although studies indicate that they are not considered peers by a majority of teaching and research faculty, and that a sizable minority of faculty see librarians as semi- or paraprofessionals. So to MLS and say, Metadata Specialist, we add the title Assistant or Associate Professor. Once again, the OED proves edifying. According to this reliable source, pro-
fessor was derived from the Northern French profiteri, which means "To declare publicly, to profess." Originally applied to one who made a religious vow, "the modern sense is largely due to the creation of Five Regius or King's Professors by Henry VIII." Professor referred to one who held a master's or doctorate degree and had a license to teach. The modern usage of professor retains the idea of one who professes something. So, we might ask rhetorically, what exactly do librarians profess? And digressing, one wonders why holders of a doctorate degree are addressed as doctor, but those holding a master's are not called master. Is there some sort of snobbery or discrimination at work here?

Originally, of course, all professors were men. When women inevitably entered the ranks (their own separate ranks, actually), they were called professories (here we go again), as in "The female college with its professories and hostleresses, and other Utopian monsters." Do we sense a hostile pattern emerging?

While librarians and professors have gone the way of the whalebone corset and the bustle, it is, in fact, often our adversaries that give us the label that sticks. For example, this seems to have been common among certain Native American tribes. Sioux is a French corruption of Nadowey-iwé, which means "adder" or "snake." This venomous epithet was coined by the Sioux's age-old enemy, the Chipewa. The Sioux called themselves the much nicer sounding Ochdot shakowin (Seven Council Fires). The Gulf Coast tribe Yik-hit-ishak are now forever remembered as Atakapa, Muskogeean for "man-eater," because of the peculiar culinary nature of some of their rituals.

Some savvy folks, however, use negative images to their own advantage by adopting the names or symbols foisted on them by their enemies. In 1841, during Andrew Jackson's presidential campaign, his opponents called him a jackass because of his populist politics. In response, Jackson had a picture of a donkey put on his campaign signs. He not only won the election, but the donkey became the symbol of the Democratic Party.

It seems clear that devising fancy or esoteric titles leads to neither respect nor remuneration. Perhaps the most prudent course is to follow Old Hickory's lead. Barzin, who is not really our enemy, actually describes my job very well. I am an intellectual middleman. If we are honest, that's what most of us librarians are. The majority of us are not scholars, researchers, or teachers in the same sense as traditional faculty (exceptions noted). As H. Curtis Wright has wisely pointed out, our "primary function is to attend to the research interests of other people. The administrative and scholarly functions of librarians... are merely instrumental to their primary function."

Yet even when we perform routine clerical duties or clear paper jams, we are the links between the seekers of knowledge and the depositories of information and data. We bring the two together. No matter what our title or job in the library, that connection is the reason we exist. Of course, people have a tendency to want to cut out the middleman. In our line of work, this inclination is now more pervasive than ever. The Internet has made everyone an information expert in his own mind. But perhaps technology is not entirely to blame. It may be that too many of us have abandoned the middle ground while trying to reach what we see as more prestigious horizons. And that would be too bad, for the middle is where people need us whether they always realize it or not. This really is a service profession. Shall we let our insecurities or ambitions lead us to places where we are neither truly wanted nor needed? Do what you must. I shall remain, Yt obedient servnt.