February 2003

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

Larry Madison

Millsaps College, madisle@millsaps.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>

Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Madison, Larry (2003) "Op Ed -- Onomastic Musings: What's Your Library Nom du Jour?," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 15: Iss. 1, Article 12.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.4246>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

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

by **Larry Madison** (Instructional Services Librarian, Millsaps College;
Phone: 601-974-1072) <madisle@millsaps.edu>

Shakespeare's rose notwithstanding, 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*. **Caxton**, "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 copyist." The citations are interesting. "The Booksellers got these books transcribed by unmeet librarians." (Gale, *Crt. Gentiles*. II. IV. i. 370. 1670). 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 ____ for ____." **Samuel Johnson** refers to the same erratum in *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1767). "Charibdis thrice 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 use of 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 mayn'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 librarianesses 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 wag 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 librarianess 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 lionesses do all the work while the lion sleeps, roars, eats (what the lionesses have caught) and mates. Maybe the librarianesses 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-referential titles: feminist librarians, anarchist librarians, groovy librarians, guerilla 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-*

continued on page 42

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 *professoresses* (here we go again.), as in "The female college with its *professoresses* and *hostlerresses*, and other Utopian monsters." Do we sense a hostile pattern emerging?

While *librianesses* and *professoresses* 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 *Nadowe-is-iw*, 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 *Ocheti shakowin* (Seven Council Fires). The Gulf Coast tribe *Yuk-hiti ishak* are now forever remembered as *Atakapa*, Muskohegan 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. **Barzun**, 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 deposits 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,

Yr obedient servnt.

Tracking Not Yet Published Material: Using the Bibliographic Record The Smart Way

by **Rosann Bazirjian** (Assistant Dean for Technical & Access Services, University Libraries, The Pennsylvania State University, 507 Paterno Library, University Park, PA 16802-1812; Phone: 814-865-0404; Fax: 814-865-3665) <rvb9@psulias.psu.edu> and **Betty Nirnberger** (Fiscal & Data Services Team Leader, University Libraries, The Pennsylvania State University)

Summary

In July 2001, the Pennsylvania State University Libraries stopped placing purchase orders for materials that were deemed not yet published or available. It was important that our carry-over encumbrances not be too high since that would impact the Libraries' purchasing power for the following year. In addition, it was felt that the collections budget should be spent on titles that are readily available, rather than tied up in materials that may not be published for one to two or even five more years. It should be noted that Penn State's fiscal cycle runs July 1 to June 30, at which time State appropriated funds should be fully expended. Any outstanding orders for library materials are then applied against the new year budget(s). For the first year of implementation of this new policy, manual files that were reviewed at specified intervals, were kept of all titles not yet published. This was a time-consuming and tedious process. In an effort to make this process much more efficient, and to take advantage of our new library management system's capabilities, our Budget Coordinator worked with a group of individuals¹ in Acquisitions Services to develop a procedure that was not only automated, but would allow selectors to gain up to the minute information on not yet published requests via the Web with a WebCat (public catalog) view of their titles.

Budget Efficiencies Achieved By Not Placing Orders For NYP Materials

It was imperative to see positive results from the holding of NYP materials prior to embarking on a technological way to address the process. To

demonstrate the budget efficiencies, our Fiscal and Data Services Team took a look at the University Park² budget performance figures at the end of FY 2000/01 and compared them to June 30, 2002. Please note, however, that 2001/02 figures do include a small number of NYP orders placed later in the fiscal year.

- Encumbrances carried over from FY 2000/01 = \$72,162
- Encumbrances carried over from FY 2001/02 = \$31,053 (some NYP)

continued on page 44