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What's in a Name? History and Fantasy in *Game of Thrones*

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Abstract: Nowhere is the border between history and fantasy more blurred than in people's perceptions of names. People often assume that names in modern fantasy stories are medieval in origin. Some fault for this assumption can be laid at the feet of the Father of Fantasy, J.R.R. Tolkien, because many of his names are in fact genuine medieval names, and many of those which are not are explicitly marked out as such, originating in his constructed Elvish languages. A natural conclusion then is that fantasy names which are not otherwise identified as fantasy are plausibly medieval. This chapter discusses names in the *Game of Thrones* books and television series, and shows that this conclusion is not warranted. It considers not only the historicity of individual name elements, but also the patterns of the complete names, and their similarity to medieval naming patterns and practices.

Keywords: byname, given name, Middle Ages, onomastics, surname, J. R. R. Tolkien

Names: On the Border Between History and Fantasy

What's in a name? More specifically, what's in a medieval name, a modern name, or a fantasy name? On the one hand, it might seem strange to ask how historical the names in *Game of Thrones* are, given that both the books and the television series are fiction, stories of imagination. On the other hand, nowhere is the border between history and fantasy more blurred than in our perceptions of personal names. Because of the strong influence of the Middle Ages on authors of contemporary fantasy, readers often believe that names in modern fantasy stories are medieval in origin or reflect medieval sensibilities. This belief is not entirely misguided, as we can see by looking to the history of the genre of fantasy, but it is also not entirely justified.

Modern fantasy was significantly influenced and directed by two figures: William Morris (1834–1896) and J.R.R. Tolkien (1892–1973), who were themselves significantly steeped in medieval European culture and literature.ⁱ Morris's books *The Wood Beyond the World* (1894) and *The Well at the World's End* (1896) are widely regarded as the first fantasy novels, set in an entirely invented fantasy world.ⁱⁱ Morris's books were explicitly written in the style of medieval romances, and many of their characters had ordinary medieval names, such as *Ralph*, *Ursula*, *Blaise*, and *Richard*. Other characters have distinctly Scandinavian names, such as *Morfinn* and *Gandolf*, and were likely influenced by the translations of Icelandic sagas that Morris completed in the 1860s and 1870s.ⁱⁱⁱ Morris greatly influenced Tolkien not only in literary genre and style, but also in names. It is no coincidence that the similar names *Gandolf/Gandalf* appears in works by both authors.^{iv} Tolkien's academic work in historical linguistics is well known, and many of the names of his characters—such as *Gandalf*, *Thorin*, *Frodo*, *Theodred*, and *Peregrine*—are in fact genuine medieval names, and many more—such as *Eowyn*, *Eomer*, *Samwise*, *Hamfast*—are constructed along the lines of extant medieval names, most of Old English origin. Further, many of Tolkien's names which are not medieval are explicitly distinguished because they are drawn from one of his constructed, non-human languages such as Quenya, Sindarin, or Khuzdul. Given the works of these two influential figures, readers could easily assume that names in fantasy fiction which are not ostensibly marked out are medieval or plausibly medieval.

The strong influence of the Middle Ages on early fantasy fiction has had repercussions, particularly on authors such as G. R. R. Martin, who are interested in building a large fantasy world, as Tolkien did. This chapter considers how historical and how fantastical the names of people in the *Song of Ice and Fire* books and the *Game of Thrones* television show are.^v One might think that mere participation in a genre gives us insufficient reason to even ask this question, for one would not expect the names of the Dothraki people or names of Old Valyrian origin to be medieval, given that the languages from which they are drawn are constructed languages, not ones spoken in the European Middle Ages. Almost by definition, then, Dothraki and Valyrian names will not be medieval names, any more than Quenya or Sindarin names are, and for the same reasons. But the vast majority of the names in the books and television series are Westerosi, an unspecified vernacular language, and draw upon elements of contemporary English. With these names, then, we can consider the extent to of the influence of names and naming practices from the European Middle Ages. This will be more than a mere catalogue of which elements are medieval and which are not. While such a catalogue is interesting—and indeed, this chapter discusses the historicity of individual name elements—the question of “Are the individual name elements medieval?” takes too narrow a view of what counts as “historical”. We must also compare the way names are constructed and used with historical practices, considering broader questions such as “Are the patterns and types of names used medieval?” and “Are the ways the names are used medieval?” This will better reveal the extent to which names in *Game of Thrones* are historical.

What's in a Medieval Name?

We begin by introducing the basics of medieval naming practices and some terminology of onomastics (the study of names), to give a benchmark against which we can discuss Martin's names. By “the

Middle Ages” or “medieval” we consider the period from roughly 500 to 1500. Our geographic frame of reference is all of Europe, though most examples come from the British Isles because they will be the most familiar. Despite this breadth of time and space, naming patterns were surprisingly homogeneous. The same types of constructions and the same types of usages can be found across different languages and at different times. This uniformity gives us reason to look in this chapter at broad practices and patterns of naming, and not just individual elements.

In the Middle Ages, people generally had a single given name, and zero or more bynames. These bynames originated as literal descriptives of a person—‘Bishop of Urgell’, ‘son of John’, ‘clerk’, ‘red’, ‘from London’—unlike names today, where one doesn’t expect *John Smith* to be a smith or *Jane Moore* to live on a moor. These literal bynames can be classified into four main types: (1) Relational bynames indicate the bearer’s relationship to someone else, e.g., ‘son of’, ‘wife of’, ‘nephew of’, ‘sister of’, etc. Of these, the most common type was the patronymic byname, indicating the bearer’s father’s given name. (2) Occupational bynames indicate the bearer’s job, e.g., ‘goldsmith’, ‘weaver’, ‘thatcher’, ‘butcher’, etc. (3) Locative bynames indicate the bearer’s place of origin, e.g., ‘of London’, ‘from the hill’, ‘the Scotsman’. (4) Other descriptive bynames include everything else. In this category we can find a wide variety, from English *Small* to German *Spring in Czeug* ‘jumps in stuff’ to Old Norse *meinfretr* ‘stinkfart’.

A consequence of this literal nature of bynames is that one person could have different bynames in different contexts. *Ralph* might be *fitzStephen* ‘son of Stephen’ in the context of his father’s will, but *le Bordwreghte* ‘the table maker’ when signing an apprentice contract or *Beribroun* ‘brown as a berry’ amongst his friends. A second consequence of this literal nature is the fact that names were also not fixed in a single language. *Henry of London* may have been known by that name amongst his English-speaking friends, but writing in Latin he would have signed his name *Henricus de Londonia*, and when traveling in France he would have answered to *Henri de Londres* or even *Henri l’Anglois* ‘the Englishman’.

Over time, these literally descriptive nicknames transmuted into the fixed, inherited surnames we are familiar with in modern times. How this happened varied depending on time and place, but often the mechanism was simple: If *Simon the Smith* had a son, he would likely follow in his father’s footsteps, and thus, he, too, would be *the Smith*. In other contexts, inheritance of surname was closely linked to ownership of land, and hence to social class. As land was handed down from father to son, so was the byname that referred to the land. There is a clear correlation between inherited surnames and social class: Those of the upper class were more likely to develop ‘dynastic’ names, such as the Lancasters, the Tudors, the Guelphs, the Visconti, the dei Medici, etc.

This transition from literal bynames to fixed inherited surnames impacted women’s names upon marriage. When bynames were literal descriptives, women did not generally change their name upon marriage: *Joan la Baxtere* ‘the female baker’ wouldn’t change her occupation simply by marrying *William le Weber* ‘the male weaver’. Similarly, *Alice* the daughter of *Henry* would still be the daughter of *Henry* even after marrying *Adam Thompson* ‘son of Thomas’. But when surnames were used primarily to indicate membership in a particular family, or lines of inheritance, then women started taking their husband’s surnames.^{vi}

This background material provides a number of dimensions along which to assess the historicity of the names in *Game of Thrones*. Are bynames literal descriptives or fixed family surnames? Can examples of all four types of bynames be found? Do people’s names vary depending on the context of use? Does a person’s class affect the types of names used? The extent to which these and other questions can be answered ‘yes’ determines the extent to which we can say that the names in *Game of Thrones* represent fantasy or history.

Medieval Elements in the Names of *Game of Thrones*

Slightly over 2000 people are named in *Game of Thrones*, many of them minor characters who are

mentioned only once or appear only in appendices. The vast majority of these characters have a single given name and a single, fixed, inherited surname, perhaps along with a descriptive nickname. A number are referred to just by a given name, with their byname or surname (if they had any) not known to the reader or viewer. Similarly, a few are referred to simply by title and surname, such as *Lord Ashford*, *Lord Cafferren*, *Lord Caswell*, and *Lord Staunton*, while a handful are known only by descriptions, such as the *Lady of the Leaves*, the *Daughter of the Dusk*, the *ghost of High Heart*, and the *Veiled Lady*.

Slightly more than half of the given names bear no resemblance to actual medieval names, and are clearly invented. These include the names of non-Westerosi peoples, such as the Dothraki and people from the Summer Isles and the Slaver's Bay city-states of Astapor, Yunkai, and Meereen. These names, and the cultures they come from, occupy much the same role in the *Game of Thrones* universe as Quenya and Sindarin names do in Tolkien: As the Dothraki speak an explicitly constructed language, it is unsurprising that the Dothraki names are almost all invented. Even when names from invented languages are identical with historical European names—such as *Drogo*, the name of both a son of Charlemagne and a 12th century French saint^{vii}—they bear this resemblance accidentally, because of the narrow pattern along which the Dothraki masculine given names are constructed (generally two syllables ending in *-o*). Surprisingly, the next largest group of constructed or invented names comes from a Westerosi family, the Targaryens, the former ruling family of the Seven Kingdoms, and their cadet branch, the Blackfyres. Almost all Targaryen given names—many of which can be identified by the characteristic *ae* vowel combination (*Aemon/Aemond*, *Daeron*, *Jaehaerys*, etc.)—are invented. They bear little resemblance to medieval European names, beyond the *ae* vowel combination, found in medieval Welsh dialects. This anomaly can be explained by looking at the historical roots of the family. The Targaryens ruled the Seven Kingdoms but originally came from Essos, where the historical language is Valyrian, which, like Dothraki, is an explicitly fictional, constructed language.

Setting aside the Targaryens, about one third (more than 600) of the given names of people from Westeros are either actual or plausible medieval names. Many are identifiable with modern English names, such as *Alan*, *Catelyn*, *Jon* and variants, *Jeyne* and variants, *Richard/Rickard*, and *Robert*, as well as nicknames such as *Beth*, *Cat*, *Jack*, *Meg*, *Nan*, *Ned*, and *Robin*.^{viii} Other less obvious names, like *Drogo* also have medieval origins: *Axell*, *Ellery*, *Hobb*, *Jarman* or *Jarmen*, *Melicent*, and the various forms of *Quenten/Quentin/Quenton/Quentyn*.^{ix}

The next largest class contains names constructed by taking a real historical name and changing a letter or two, usually a vowel, in such a way that the result is not consistent with medieval spellings. The most common change is the switch of *y* for *i*. This switch is found in medieval English names, with *Martyn* being a plausible variant of *Martin*, *Alyce* of *Alice*, *Denyse* of *Denise*, *Myles* of *Miles*, and so forth.^x However, it is not found in German, where *-fryd* is not a plausible variant of *-fred* or *-frid*. As a result names such as *Manfryd*, *Osfryd*, and *Sigfryd* fall on the unhistorical side of the fence. Another common respelling pattern is the substitution of *-ae-* for another vowel, for example, *Maerie*, *Margaery*, *Aemma*, *Aelinor*, and *Aemon*. These spellings are not medieval but they all derive from medieval names (*Mary*, *Margery*, *Emma*, *Elinor*, and *Éamonn*^{xi}). Sometimes a consonant is swapped; perhaps the best-known bearer of such an altered name is *Eddard Stark*. *Eddard* is neither a medieval name nor a plausible variation, but it clearly derives from the medieval name *Edward*. The connection is particularly apparent given *Eddard's* nickname *Ned*, the usual medieval English pet form.^{xii} Other medieval names of Old English origin, *Edmund* and *Edwin*, are reflected in the names *Emmon*, *Edmyn*, and *Edwyd*.^{xiii}

The final class of names which are not obviously invented contains elements which were used mediievally as bynames or surnames, and not as given names. One example is the well-known *Game of Thrones* given name, *Brandon*. The origin of this name is various medieval English places named *Brandon*, constructed from Old English *brōm* 'broom' and *dūn* 'hill'.^{xiv} In the Middle Ages, *Brandon* could have been incorporated into a locative byname meaning 'from Brandon', but it wasn't used as a

given name until modern times. Many people erroneously believe *Brandon* is related to the given name *Brendan*, the name of a saint ultimately of Old Irish origin, but the two names are completely separate.^{xv} Interestingly, just as *Eddard* is not medieval but *Ned* is, while *Brandon* is not a medieval given name, the diminutive *Bran* is. The name is identical with *bran*, the word for ‘raven, crow’ in medieval Irish.^{xvi} This connection is fitting, given Bran’s identification with the three-eyed raven. Other given names that originally derive from names of cities or places include *Clarence* (from Latin *clarensis* ‘of/from Clare’), *Co(u)rt(e)nay* (France), *Desmond* (Ireland), *Mortimer* (France), and *Walder* (from Old English *weald* ‘woods, forest’).^{xvii}

Names of Nobles, Names of Peasants: Dynasty and Inheritance

Around three-quarters of the characters have some sort of byname, and the majority of them have relatively ‘modern’ style names in that they have one single fixed surname, which is generally shared with other members of their family. The surnames of the eight main Westerosi houses—*Arryn*, *Baratheon*, *Greyjoy*, *Lannister*, *Martell*, *Stark*, *Tully*, *Tyrell*—which along with the Targaryens of Essos make up around one-tenth of the characters, are medieval, pseudo-medieval, and invented in roughly the same distribution as the given names, with *Baratheon*, *Lannister*, and *Targaryen* falling on the far right-hand side of the spectrum. On the far left, *Stark* is a medieval nickname deriving from Old English *stearc* or Old High German *stark* ‘firm, unyielding’, *Martell* can either be a nickname of *Martin* or from Old French *martel* ‘hammer, war-mace’, and *Tyrell* is a derivative of Old French *tirer* ‘to pull, draw’.^{xviii} As we noted earlier, the use of inherited “dynastic” names is closely linked to the upper classes, who had the wealth, land, and status worth keeping in the family. It is thus not surprising to see that the main characters, who come from these noble houses, have inherited surnames.

Perhaps the least historical of all the names and naming patterns found in *Game of Thrones* is the surnames of bastards born to parents of high birth, which are given according to a rigid and fixed pattern: All such bastards born in a particular area of the Seven Kingdoms have the same surname: *Flowers* (the Reach), *Hill* (the Westerlands), *Pyke* (Iron Islands), *Rivers* (the Riverlands), *Sand* (Dorne), *Snow* (the North), *Stone* (the Vale of Arryn), *Storm* (the Stormlands), and *Waters* (the Crownlands), though some bastards were recognized and then took their father’s surnames (e.g., *Ramsay Snow*, recognized as *Ramsay Bolton*). The only remotely similar medieval practice was the occasional use of the byname *FitzRoy* (‘son of the king’) by recognized illegitimate children of English kings. Apart from this, there was no consistent or specific type of naming pattern specifically used for bastards. In medieval Europe, particularly among noble families, bastardry was not considered the moral slight that it is considered nowadays. Bastards were often recognized by their fathers or adopted by uncles. For example, Lorenzo de Medici adopted his brother’s illegitimate son, Giulio dei Medici (later Pope Clement VII). Other illegitimate dei Medicis include Ippolito dei Medici, a grandson of Lorenzo who was Lord of Florence between 1523 and 1527. Pope Clement replaced Ippolito with another illegitimate dei Medici, Alessandro, who was recognized as the son of Lorenzo II, grandson of Lorenzo, but may have possibly been the son of Clement himself.^{xix}

Outside of the noble houses, it is sometimes difficult to tell if a byname is being used literally or if it is inherited; this is the case when there is only one character with the name, or where no information about the character’s parents or descendants is provided. In this group we can include bynames such as *Browntooth*, *Blackthumb*, *Stackspear*, and *Tangle tongue*, each of which could be interpreted as a straightforward descriptive or as an inherited surname. There are also bynames of locative origin, such as *of Duskendale*, *of Myr*, *of the Hill*, and *of the Vale*. In other cases, bynames have a specific connection to the person beyond simple family membership, and the use of such bynames shows a clear difference between the dynastic names used by nobles and the types of names used by the lower classes. For example, consider the names of singers, a specific lower class group which illustrates three of the four types of medieval bynames, as well as fixed, inherited surnames: *the Blue Bard* and *the Rhymer* (occupational); *of Braavos*, *of Cuy*, *of Eysen*, *of Oldtown*, and *of*

Sevenstreams (locative); *Silvertongue* and *Whitesmile* (descriptive); *Costayne* and *Frey* (inherited). Only patronymic bynames are omitted (indeed, they are conspicuously rare across all contexts in *Game of Thrones*).

A Rose by Any Other Name: The Role of Nicknames

Across all social classes, however, there is ample evidence of the medieval practice of literal bynames borne on the basis of some significant characteristic or event. Examples include *the Kingslayer* (Ser Jaime Lannister), *the Imp* (Tyrion Lannister), *Stormborn* (Daenerys Targaryen), and *of the Blackwater* (Ser Bronn). Some of the literal nicknames are historical medieval bynames; some are consistent with medieval practices without being themselves explicitly found; and some follow invented, ahistorical patterns. For example, *Imp* itself is a medieval word, but in Middle English it had a very different connotation than what it does today. While the modern word also connotes mischief and tricksiness, this connotation is lacking in the Middle English usage.^{xx} Originally, the word literally meant ‘a shoot, sprig’ of a plant or a tree. It was used metaphorically to indicate the scion of a family (usually noble), or more generally as a representative of some class.^{xxi} The metaphorical use of the term then shifted to the further metaphorical use of the word to mean ‘child’, and then further to meaning ‘short’ or ‘small’. Tyrion, the dwarf, was known as *the imp* due to his short stature.

Examples of names which are constructed in an ahistorical fashion include *Shieldbreaker*, *Ironmaker*, and *Bonebreaker*: These do not follow the standard pattern of constructing action-based bynames in English, where the verb is put before the noun, as occurs in *Stackspear* (noted above), as well as the familiar historical name *Shakespeare*. To be constructed in a medieval fashion, these three names would have to be *Breakshield*, *Makeiron*, and *Breakbone*. Then they would be in keeping with the actual medieval nicknames *Brekelaunce* ‘break lance’, *Brekeleg* ‘break leg’, *Brekespere* ‘break spear’, *Makedance* ‘make dance’, and *Makejoye* ‘make joy’.^{xxii}

For the most part, the story does not say explicitly how individuals received their nicknames, whether they were chosen by the bearer themselves or cast upon them by others—though presumably people would only adopt pejorative nicknames themselves in special circumstances! The principle use of such bynames was to remove ambiguity, which particularly arises when there are multiple people in a narrow context with a shared given name. This is the case with the *Frey* family, many of whom are named *Walda* or *Walder*. To remove ambiguity, distinguishing nicknames are used, such as *Fair Walda*, *Fat Walda*, *White Walda*, *Big Walder*, *Black Walder*, *Little Walder*, and *Red Walder*. A different reason for using a nickname rather than a dynastic name is for pseudonymous purposes. One noteworthy example is *Arya Stark*, known variously as *Arry*, *Weasel*, *Salty*, and *Cat of the Canals*. Arya not only rejects her family name, but also her more personal identity, in order to become part of the Faceless Men.

Fantastical history or historical fantasy?

This chapter has been able to touch on only a few aspects of the names and naming patterns in *Game of Thrones*. It completely ignores the names of places, objects, animals, and more. From the evidence of personal names, it is clear that there are many historical echoes both in the individual name elements and in the ways names are constructed and used. Nevertheless it should not be forgotten what a small percentage of the personal names have these echoes: More than half bear little resemblance to medieval European naming patterns. In contrast with some of his predecessors, Martin uses names that are more fantastical than historical, and where there are historical influences, they are often no more than happenstance.

Biographical notes

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- ⁱ L. Sprague de Camp. *Literary Swordsmen and Sorcerers: The Makers of Heroic Fantasy*. (Sauk City, WI: Arkham House, 1976).
- ⁱⁱ Lynn Carter, ed. *Kingdoms of Sorcery*. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1976), 39.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Michael W. Perry, ed. *On the Lines of Morris' Romances: Two Books that Inspired J. R. R. Tolkien—The Wood Beyond the World and The Well at the World's End*. (Seattle: Inkling Books, 2003), 9.
- ^{iv} Perry, *On the Lines of Morris' Romance*, 63.
- ^v In this chapter, 'Game of Thrones' is used to refer to the books and the television show collectively.
- ^{vi} In England, the practice of women taking their husband's surnames was established in urban centers by the 15th century (cf. Richard McKinley, *The Surnames of Oxfordshire*, English Surnames Series III (London: Leopard's Head Press, 1977), 191).
- ^{vii} Sara L. Uckelman, et al. *Dictionary of Medieval Names from European Sources*, Edition 2016, no. 2, s.n. Drew. <http://dmnes.org/>. (*DMNES*)
- ^{viii} *DMNES*, op. cit., s.nn. Alan, Elizabeth, Joan, John, Katherine, Margaret, Robert; P. H. Reaney & R. M. Wilson. *A Dictionary of English Surnames*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), s.nn. Catin, Nanson; E. G. Withycombe. *Oxford Dictionary of English Christian Names*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), s.n. Margaret.
- ^{ix} Gunnar Knudsen, Marius Kristiansen, & Rikard Hornby. *Danmarks Gamle Personnavne*, Vol. I: Fornavne. (Copenhagen: G.E.C. Gads Forlag, 1936), s.n. Absalon; *DMNES*, s.n. Germain, Milicent, Quentin; Reaney & Wilson, s.nn. Hillary, Hob; Withycombe, s.n. Quentin.
- ^x *DMNES*, s.nn. Alice, Denise, Martin, Miles.
- ^{xi} *DMNES*, s.nn. Eleanor, Emma, Margaret, Mary; Donnchadh Ó Corráin & Fidelma Maguire. *Irish Names*. (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1990), s.n. Émann.
- ^{xii} Withycombe, s.n. Edward.
- ^{xiii} Withycombe, s.nn. Edmond, Edwin.
- ^{xiv} Victor Watts, ed. *Cambridge Dictionary of English Place-Names*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), s.n. Brandon.
- ^{xv} Ó Corráin & Maguire, s.n. Brénainn.
- ^{xvi} Ó Corráin & Maguire, s.n. Bran.
- ^{xvii} Reaney & Wilson, s.nn. Clarence, Courtenay, Mortimer, Walder; Withycombe, s.n. Desmond.
- ^{xviii} Reaney & Wilson, s.nn. Martel, Stark, Tirrell.
- ^{xix} Ferdinand Schevill, *History of Florence: From the Founding of the City Through the Renaissance* (Frederick Ungar, 1936).
- ^{xx} *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. imp, n., especially senses (4) and (5). <http://www.oed.com/>
- ^{xxi} *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. impe, n. <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/>
- ^{xxii} Reaney & Wilson, s.nn. Breaklance, Breakleg, Breakspear, Makejoy.