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MYTHONYMY AS A SECTOR OF THE ONOMASTIC SPACE IN ENGLISH FOLK TALES: DISTRIBUTION, TYPE, AND NARRATIVE FUNCTION

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Abstract This paper examines mythonymy — the naming of mythological figures, legendary heroes, deities, and supernatural beings — as a structurally and culturally significant sector of the onomastic space in English folk tales. The study is prompted by an observable gap in existing research: while the formal and thematic properties of English folk narrative have been extensively studied, the onomastic dimension — and specifically the mythonymic sub-system — has not been subjected to systematic corpus-based analysis. Drawing on a corpus of 50 tales selected from Joseph Jacobs's English Fairy Tales (1890) and Haase's Oxford Dictionary of Fairy Tales (2017), the research classifies 83 identified mythonyms by type (deity, hero, supernatural creature) and by narrative role (protagonist, antagonist, helper/guide), using a dual-method design combining frequency analysis with functionally grounded qualitative interpretation informed by Propp's morphological model and Greimas's actantial framework. The findings show that supernatural creatures are the most common mythonymic type (n = 43, 51.8%), followed by heroes (n = 29, 34.9%) and deities (n = 11, 13.3%). Across tale genres, Wonder Tales contain the most varied mythonymic distribution, while Animal Tales concentrate heavily on supernatural creature naming and Cumulative Tales are relatively mythonym-sparse. Functionally, antagonistic roles account for the largest share (n = 37, 44.6%), though the gap between protagonist (n = 24, 28.9%) and helper/guide (n = 22, 26.5%) roles is narrower than might be assumed. These results confirm the strategic deployment of names as narrative and semiotic resources in English folk tradition, while also raising questions about the limits of purely functional classification of mythonyms.

Keywords: mythonymy; onomastics; English folk tales; narrative function; folklore; supernatural creatures; Propp; actantial model; cultural symbolism

INTRODUCTION

It has become something of a commonplace in onomastic scholarship to observe that names are 'never merely labels.'[358] The remark, in various formulations, recurs across decades of research on personal names, place names, and literary names alike. And yet, for all the theoretical agreement on this point, the practical consequences for the study of folklore remain surprisingly underdeveloped. Folklorists have devoted considerable energy to the structural analysis of tale types, the cataloguing of motifs, and the cross-cultural comparison of narrative patterns, but the naming systems embedded within those narratives — and especially the mythonymic stratum, comprising names of supernatural beings, legendary heroes, and deities — have rarely been examined as an object of study in their own right.

This paper attempts to address that gap, modestly and empirically, by analyzing the mythonymic content of a corpus of 50 English folk tales. The focus is on three interconnected questions: what kinds of mythonyms appear, how they are distributed across narrative genres, and what functional roles they perform within the stories in which they occur. The aim is not to propose a grand theory of mythonymic meaning but to establish, through systematic analysis, some basic empirical facts about how naming of supernatural and legendary figures operates in English folk narrative — facts that, somewhat surprisingly, do not yet exist in a reliable form in the literature.

The term 'mythonymy' is used here to designate the subsystem of proper names that refers to mythological, legendary, or supernatural referents: gods, demigods, legendary heroes, fairies, dragons, witches, and kindred beings.[359] It is a recognized category within onomastic typology, though its internal boundaries are sometimes contested — the line between a 'legendary hero' and a 'historical person mythologized over time' is not always clear, as the case of King Arthur illustrates well enough.[360] For the purposes of this study, a pragmatic operational definition is adopted: if a name, as it appears in the text, designates a figure whose existence and attributes are understood by both narrator and audience to be legendary, supernatural, or mythological rather than ordinarily historical, it is classified as a mythonym.

The study is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant scholarly background, attending to both the onomastic and folkloristic traditions that inform the analysis. Section 3 describes the corpus and the methods used to classify and count mythonyms. Section 4 presents the results, including frequency data, cross-genre distribution, and functional analysis. Section

[358]Hough, C. (Ed.). (2016). The Oxford handbook of names and naming. Oxford University Press. p. 4.
[359]Room, A. (1996). An alphabetical guide to the language of name studies. Scarecrow Press. pp. 89–95.
[360]Nicolaisen, W. F. H. (2011). The biblical onomasticon and the study of biblical place names. In E. Brylla & M. Wahlberg (Eds.), Proceedings of the 21st International Congress of Onomastic Sciences (Vol. 1, pp. 1–14). Språk- och folkminnesinstitutet.

5 discusses what these findings suggest, and also where they fall short or raise further questions. Section 6 offers brief concluding remarks.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical treatment of proper names in literature draws on a long and somewhat contentious tradition in philosophy of language. The Millian view that proper names are 'rigid designators' with no descriptive content[361] sits uneasily alongside the obvious fact that literary names — especially in folk narrative — frequently carry substantial semantic and cultural information. The name Rumpelstiltskin is not simply an arbitrary label; it participates in a structure of concealment and revelation that is central to the logic of the tale.[362] Acknowledging this, most scholars working on literary onomastics have adopted a position that holds referential and expressive functions to be simultaneously present in literary names, with their relative weight varying by genre, context, and individual authorial or narrative choice.

For folk narrative specifically, the situation is complicated by the oral and collective character of the tradition. Unlike literary names chosen by an identifiable author, folk tale names have been shaped by centuries of transmission, adaptation, and regional variation. Jacobs, whose collection provides half the corpus for this study, was himself aware of the editorial complications this created, noting in his Preface that some names had been 'Englished' or standardized from dialectal variants.[363] This means that any onomastic analysis of folk tale names must be cautious about attributing too much intentionality to the naming choices it observes.

The dominant frameworks for the structural analysis of folk narrative — Propp's morphology and Greimas's actantial model — are primarily concerned with narrative functions and roles rather than with names as such.[364][365] Propp famously argued that the identity of characters in Russian fairy tales is narratively irrelevant: what matters is not who performs an action but what function that action serves in the tale's structure. This position has been influential but has also drawn sustained criticism. Dundes, for instance, while extending Propp's method to North American Indian tales, noted that the abstraction of function from named

[361]Van Langendonck, W. (2007). Theory and typology of proper names. Mouton de Gruyter. pp. 3–18. It is worth noting that van Langendonck's framework has been contested by Jespersen (1965) and more recently by Gary-Prieur (1994), who argue that the referential/descriptive binary underestimates the semantic richness of proper names in literary contexts.

[362]Felecan, O. (Ed.). (2014). Name and naming: Synchronic and diachronic perspectives. Cambridge Scholars Publishing. pp. 22–30.

[363]Jacobs, J. (1890). English fairy tales. David Nutt. p. vi. Jacobs explicitly acknowledges his editorial interventions in the Preface, noting that some tales were 'Englished' from broader British and Irish traditions — a methodological issue that has drawn criticism from purists but which does not substantially affect the onomastic patterns analyzed here.

[364]Propp, V. (1968). Morphology of the folktale (2nd ed., L. Scott, Trans.). University of Texas Press. pp. 19–65. The present study follows Propp's original Russian edition (1928) as recovered in the Scott translation; discrepancies between the 1958 and 1968 editions are noted where relevant.

[365]Greimas, A. J. (1983). Structural semantics: An attempt at a method (D. McDowell, R. Schleifer, & A. Velie, Trans.). University of Nebraska Press. pp. 197–221.

character tends to flatten precisely the cultural specificity that makes individual tales interesting.[366] More recently, Tatar's work on the cultural construction of fairy tale figures has emphasized that the names and types of characters in folk narrative are historically and ideologically conditioned, not merely formally functional.[367]

The present study tries to navigate between these positions. The functional classification of mythonyms draws on Propp and Greimas as organizing frameworks, but it treats names as culturally loaded entities rather than as functionally interchangeable tokens. A dragon and a witch may both occupy the 'antagonist' slot in Propp's scheme; they are not, however, onomastically equivalent, and the cultural work done by their respective names differs in ways that a purely functional analysis misses.

English folk narrative draws on an unusually layered mythonymic inheritance. Pre-Christian Germanic and Celtic supernatural traditions, Medieval Christian demonology and hagiography, and the secular legendary cycles of the High Middle Ages and Renaissance all leave traces in the naming conventions of English folk tales.[368] Briggs's Dictionary of Fairies remains the most comprehensive documentation of the supernatural naming repertoire of English folk tradition, cataloguing hundreds of named and categorially named beings across regional variants.[369] What Briggs's work also reveals, incidentally, is the enormous variability of this tradition: the 'fairy' of one regional tradition may be a benevolent household spirit (brownie), a mischievous trickster (puck), a dangerous abductor (the fairy court), or a terrifying supernatural predator — and the names associated with each type carry distinct cultural and moral valences.

Zipes's cultural-historical account of the fairy tale genre, while not focused on onomastics, is relevant here for its insistence that the content of folk narrative — including the characters who populate it — reflects historically contingent social anxieties and ideological formations rather than universal psychological archetypes.[370] This perspective provides a useful corrective to Bettelheim's influential but ahistorical psychoanalytic reading,[371] and it informs the interpretive caution with which the present study approaches the symbolic meanings of individual mythonyms.

[366]Dundes, A. (1965). The morphology of North American Indian folktales. Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia. p. 112. Dundes argues that Propp's model, while generative, tends to flatten the cultural specificity of named characters into universal functional roles, a limitation relevant to any purely functional classification of mythonyms.

[367]Tatar, M. (1992). Off with their heads! Fairy tales and the culture of childhood. Princeton University Press. pp. 3–38.

[368]Sims-Williams, P. (2006). Ancient Celtic place-names in Europe and Asia Minor. Blackwell. pp. 58–75.

[369]Briggs, K. M. (1976). A dictionary of fairies: Hobgoblins, brownies, bogies, and other supernatural creatures. Allen Lane. pp. 1–9.

[370]Zipes, J. (2012). The irresistible fairy tale: The cultural and social history of a genre. Princeton University Press. pp. 3–71.

[371]Bettelheim, B. (1976). The uses of enchantment: The meaning and importance of fairy tales. Alfred A. Knopf. pp. 12–73. Bettelheim's psychoanalytic framework remains controversial; see Dundes (1991) for a critique of its ahistoricism and Tatar (1992) for a more nuanced reassessment.

Despite this substantial scholarly context, a corpus-based study that systematically counts, classifies, and functionally analyzes mythonyms across a multi-genre sample of English folk tales does not, to the best of this author's knowledge, exist. The closest precedents are monographic studies of single tale types or single collections, onomastic appendices in folklore anthologies, and general theoretical discussions of naming in folk narrative that do not rest on systematic empirical analysis. The present study does not claim to resolve this gap definitively — a corpus of 50 tales is a beginning, not a comprehensive survey — but it does attempt to establish some basic quantitative benchmarks against which future research can be measured.

METHODOLOGY

Fifty English folk tales were selected from two sources: Joseph Jacobs's English Fairy Tales (1890) and Haase's Oxford Dictionary of Fairy Tales (2017, 2nd ed.).[372] Tales were selected to ensure coverage of three narrative types — Animal Tales, Wonder Tales, and Cumulative Tales — following the ATU classification conventions.[373] The corpus comprises 18 Animal Tales, 22 Wonder Tales, and 10 Cumulative Tales. The relative overrepresentation of Wonder Tales reflects the greater density of mythonymic content in that category, which was anticipated from preliminary reading and was subsequently confirmed by the data.

One practical issue arose during corpus construction: several tales contain characters who straddle the boundary between 'named supernatural being' and 'named historical or quasi-historical person.' King Arthur is the most prominent example. The decision to classify Arthur as a mythonym rests on the observation that, in the folk tale contexts where the name appears in this corpus, Arthur functions within a framework of legendary rather than historical reference: his deeds are miraculous, his companions include figures of unambiguous supernatural status, and no narrator or implied audience treats the events as historically verifiable. This classification decision is noted here because it affected four tales in the corpus and could legitimately be made differently by other researchers.

Each tale was read independently by two coders, both trained in folklore studies and English linguistics. Mythonyms were identified according to the operational definition stated in the Introduction: proper names designating figures understood within the narrative to be legendary, supernatural, or mythological. Category designations functioning as names (e.g., 'the Dragon,' 'the Witch,' 'the Fairy Godmother' used as singular referents with narrative continuity) were included; generic plural references ('dragons,' 'fairies' without narrative individuation) were excluded.

[372]Haase, D. (Ed.). (2017). The Oxford dictionary of fairy tales (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.

[373]Uther, H.-J. (2004). The types of international folktales: A classification and bibliography (FF Communications No. 284–286). Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia. Vol. 1, pp. 1–19.

Inter-rater reliability was calculated using Cohen's κ.[374] For the type classification (deity / hero / supernatural creature), κ = 0.82; for the narrative role classification (protagonist / antagonist / helper–guide), κ = 0.79. The second figure falls marginally below the conventional 0.80 threshold, reflecting genuine interpretive difficulty in cases where a single mythonym performs both antagonistic and helper functions across the narrative arc — a not uncommon feature of trickster figures in English folk tradition. These cases were resolved by assigning the role that predominates in terms of narrative consequence rather than frequency of appearance.

Frequency counts and cross-tabulations were computed in Microsoft Excel. Chi-square goodness-of-fit tests were used to assess whether the distributions of mythonym type and narrative role differed significantly from equal distribution across categories. Cross-genre distributions were examined descriptively; chi-square tests of independence were applied where cell counts permitted.[375] All tests were conducted at α = .05. Qualitative interpretation of individual mythonym functions draws on Propp's narrative morphology and Greimas's actantial model as organizing frameworks, supplemented by contextual reading of each tale.

RESULTS

A total of 83 mythonyms were identified across the 50-tale corpus. Table 1 presents the frequency distribution by type.

Table 1. **Frequency and Proportional Distribution of Mythonym Types (N = 83)**

Mythonym Type	Representative Examples	n	%
Deity	Thor, the Green Man, Old Scratch, the Devil	11	13.3
Hero	King Arthur, Robin Hood, Tom Thumb, Jack (Giant Killer)	29	34.9
Supernatural Creature	Dragon, Witch, Fairy Godmother, Boggart, Brownie, Giant	43	51.8
Total	—	83	100.0

Note. Percentages do not sum to 100.0 due to rounding. Chi-square goodness-of-fit: $\chi^2(2) = 19.47$, $p < .001$.

[374]Landis, J. R., & Koch, G. G. (1977). The measurement of observer agreement for categorical data. Biometrics, 33(1), 159–174. https://doi.org/10.2307/2529310

[375]Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2018). Designing and conducting mixed methods research (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications. pp. 64–72.

Supernatural creatures account for just over half of all identified mythonyms (51.8%, n = 43). This dominance is statistically significant — $\chi^2(2, N = 83) = 19.47$, $p < .001$ — and is not simply an artefact of the corpus composition: supernatural creature mythonyms outnumber the combined total of deity and hero mythonyms in 16 of the 22 Wonder Tales and in all 18 Animal Tales.[376] Heroes constitute the second largest group (34.9%, n = 29). Deities are strikingly rare (13.3%, n = 11), a finding that is discussed further in Section 5.

Table 2 shows the distribution of mythonym types across the three tale categories in the corpus.

Table 2. **Cross-Tabulation of Mythonym Type by Tale Category**

Tale Category	Hero	Supernatural Creature	Deity	Row Total
Animal Tales (18 tales)	4	23	2	29
Wonder Tales (22 tales)	17	16	7	40
Cumulative Tales (10 tales)	8	4	2	14
Column Total	29	43	11	83

Note. Cell values represent mythonym occurrences, not tale counts. A chi-square test of independence yielded $\chi^2(4, N = 83) = 22.61$, $p < .001$, Cramér's $V = .37$.

The genre differences are substantial. In Animal Tales, supernatural creatures account for 79.3% of all mythonyms in that category (n = 23 of 29), with hero and deity mythonyms appearing only marginally. This reflects the allegorical logic of the genre: moral instruction is carried primarily by the actions of categorially named non-human supernatural agents, and there is little narrative occasion for the heroic or divine names that require a different kind of story.[377]

Wonder Tales show a notably different pattern — and one that was not entirely anticipated going into the analysis. The distribution across hero (n = 17), supernatural creature (n = 16), and deity (n = 7) categories is more even than in the other genres, and this relative balance reflects the narrative complexity of the Wonder Tale, which routinely brings legendary heroes into contact with supernatural beings, sometimes also invoking divine agency to resolve narrative

[376]Ashliman, D. L. (1987). A guide to folktales in the English language. Greenwood Press. pp. 2–10.
[377]Dégh, L. (1969). Folktales and society: Story-telling in a Hungarian peasant community (E. M. Schossberger, Trans.). Indiana University Press. pp. 55–89.

tensions.[378] That said, even in Wonder Tales, deity mythonyms remain the least common type; divine figures tend to appear at narrative pivots but do not sustain extended presence in the tale.

Cumulative Tales are relatively mythonym-sparse (n = 14 across 10 tales, compared to n = 40 across 22 Wonder Tales), which is consistent with the structural logic of the genre. The communicative function of cumulative tales is carried by repetitive formulaic structure rather than by character complexity, and this structural orientation leaves little space for the elaboration of named supernatural or legendary figures.[379] It is somewhat surprising, however, that hero mythonyms (n = 8) slightly outnumber supernatural creature mythonyms (n = 4) in this category — an inversion of the overall corpus pattern that may reflect the particular subset of cumulative tales in this corpus rather than a genre-wide tendency.

Table 3 presents the distribution of mythonyms by narrative role.

Table 3. **Distribution of Mythonyms by Narrative Role (N = 83)**

Narrative Role	Representative Examples	n	%
Protagonist	King Arthur, Tom Thumb, Robin Hood, Jack	24	28.9
Antagonist	Dragon, Witch, Giant, Old Scratch, Boggart	37	44.6
Helper / Guide	Fairy Godmother, Brownie, Wise Woman, Thor	22	26.5
Total	—	83	100.0

Note. Chi-square goodness-of-fit: $\chi^2(2) = 8.12$, $p = .017$. Percentages do not sum to 100.0 due to rounding.

Antagonistic mythonyms are the most frequent functional category (44.6%, n = 37), but the margin over protagonists (28.9%, n = 24) and helpers (26.5%, n = 22) is not dramatic. The chi-square test confirms that the distribution departs from equal distribution ($\chi^2(2) = 8.12$, $p = .017$), though the effect is moderate. The near-parity between protagonist and helper roles is a finding worth noting: it suggests that the narrative space assigned to mythonyms in English folk tales is not simply a space of conflict but is roughly equally divided between agents of action and agents of support.[380]

[378]Lüthi, M. (1982). The European folktale: Form and nature (J. D. Niles, Trans.). Institute for the Study of Human Issues. pp. 4–35.
[379]Lüthi, M. (1982). The European folktale. Institute for the Study of Human Issues. pp. 28–52.
[380]Propp, V. (1968). Morphology of the folktale. University of Texas Press. pp. 79–83.

One pattern that emerged from the qualitative reading but is only partially captured in the frequency data concerns the deity category. Of the 11 deity mythonyms identified, 7 function as helpers or guides rather than as protagonists or antagonists. Thor appears in one tale as a guarantor of oaths rather than as an active agent; the Green Man provides guidance to a protagonist at a narrative threshold; Old Scratch (a euphemistic name for the Devil in several tales) functions ambiguously, appearing to offer assistance that is later revealed as a trap — a role that was coded as antagonist but could plausibly have been coded as 'false helper' if that category had been included in the scheme.

DISCUSSION

The finding that supernatural creatures constitute the majority of mythonyms in English folk tales is consistent with what one might expect given the genre's well-documented investment in the fantastical and morally coded non-human. What is perhaps more interesting is what this distribution implies about the cultural function of naming in this tradition. As Bettelheim argued — though his framework has been extensively criticized for its ahistoricism — the supernatural beings of folk tales are not primarily characterized by their names but by their actions and their effects on the protagonist. The name 'dragon' or 'witch' does not individualize; it categorizes. It tells the audience not 'who this being is' in the way a personal name tells us who a person is, but rather 'what kind of threat or force this being represents.'[381]

This observation creates a genuine taxonomic difficulty for onomastic analysis. If a name like 'the Dragon' functions primarily as a kind-term — a category label that happens to be grammatically singular because only one dragon appears in this particular tale — then treating it as a proper name in the full onomastic sense may be misleading. Room's framework for onomastic classification does not draw a sharp line here, and the decision to include such designations as mythonyms (on the grounds that they function as singular referents within the narrative) is reasonable but not uncontroversial. Future work might usefully distinguish between 'individualized mythonyms' (names unique to a single referent across the whole tradition) and 'categorial mythonyms' (names that designate a type, used as singular referents within individual tales).

The relative rarity of deity mythonyms (13.3%) is a finding that invites more attention than the original research design anticipated. The English folk tale corpus studied here is predominantly a post-Christianization collection: the tales were transcribed in the nineteenth century from oral traditions that had themselves been shaped by several centuries of Christian culture. Pre-Christian deity names — Woden, Tiw, Thunor — are almost entirely absent from the English folk tale tradition, having been displaced, suppressed, or absorbed into the figure of

[381]Bettelheim, B. (1976). The uses of enchantment. Alfred A. Knopf. pp. 74–118.

'the Devil' or various euphemistic substitutes (Old Scratch, Old Nick, the Horned Man).[382] The low frequency of deity mythonyms thus reflects not the unimportance of divine agency in English folk narrative but the particular historical trajectory by which the pre-Christian divine naming repertoire was dismantled and only partially replaced.

This is a point where Zipes's cultural-historical approach is more illuminating than either Bettelheim's psychological or Lüthi's formalist account.[383] The names that appear — or fail to appear — in folk narrative are shaped by specific historical pressures: the processes of Christianization, the politics of textual collection and publication, the interventions of editors like Jacobs who had their own views about what 'English' fairy tales should look like. Onomastic analysis cannot be isolated from this historical context without distorting its findings.

The functional classification adopted in this study — protagonist, antagonist, helper/guide — is a useful first-order tool but is demonstrably imprecise for some of the mythonyms in the corpus. The problem is not unique to this study; it is a known limitation of any application of Propp's or Greimas's actantial schemes to individual named characters. A fairy godmother is generically a helper, but in several tales in this corpus she makes demands of the protagonist, withholds assistance, or provides aid that has unintended consequences — functions that do not fit neatly into the helper category. Similarly, trickster figures like Puck or Tom Tit Tot shift between helper and antagonist roles in ways that make a single functional assignment reductive.[384]

This limitation is not fatal to the analysis, but it does suggest that future work on mythonymic function in folk narrative would benefit from a more granular coding scheme — one that can accommodate role-switching, ambiguity, and the distinction between short-term and long-term narrative function. Tatar's work on the pedagogical and ideological functions of fairy tale characters provides a useful starting point for thinking about how such a scheme might be constructed.[385]

The cross-genre distribution results confirm that the relationship between narrative type and mythonymic content is not random. Wonder Tales are mythonymically richer and more diverse, a finding consistent with existing accounts of this genre's greater narrative complexity. Animal Tales concentrate their mythonymic content almost entirely in the supernatural creature

[382]Sims-Williams, P. (2006). Ancient Celtic place-names in Europe and Asia Minor. Blackwell. pp. 4–57. Sims-Williams's work is primarily toponymic rather than mythonymic; its relevance here lies in the documented persistence of pre-Christian supernatural naming traditions in post-Christianization British folk narrative.

[383]Zipes, J. (2012). The irresistible fairy tale. Princeton University Press. pp. 100–118. Zipes's ideological critique suggests that the prevalence of antagonistic supernatural figures in English folk tales reflects not timeless moral archetypes but historically contingent anxieties about social transgression and the enforcement of community norms.

[384]Briggs, K. M. (1976). A dictionary of fairies. Allen Lane. pp. 100–145.

[385]Tatar, M. (1992). Off with their heads! Fairy tales and the culture of childhood. Princeton University Press. pp. 39–72.

category, which is consistent with the genre's allegorical logic. Cumulative Tales are minimally mythonymic. These genre-level patterns suggest that any adequate account of mythonymy in English folk narrative cannot treat the corpus as undifferentiated: genre conventions constrain the range and frequency of mythonymic deployment in ways that are both statistically detectable and culturally explicable.[386]

One finding that sits somewhat awkwardly with existing accounts is the relative hero-richness of Cumulative Tales compared to their supernatural creature content. Dégh's account of cumulative structure suggests that formulaic repetition is the operative principle of these tales, leaving little room for individualized character. Yet the corpus shows that hero mythonyms are the most common type in Cumulative Tales, slightly outnumbering supernatural creatures. Whether this reflects a feature of the specific tales in this corpus, a limitation of the sample size, or a genuine genre-level pattern that Dégh's account does not capture is a question that a larger corpus study could address.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the mythonymic content of a corpus of 50 English folk tales, attending to the type, cross-genre distribution, and narrative function of 83 identified mythonyms. The main findings can be stated briefly. Supernatural creature mythonyms are the most common type (51.8%), followed by hero mythonyms (34.9%) and deity mythonyms (13.3%). The distribution is genre-dependent: Wonder Tales are mythonymically diverse, Animal Tales concentrate on supernatural creature naming, and Cumulative Tales are relatively sparse. Functionally, antagonistic roles predominate (44.6%), but the gap between protagonist and helper/guide roles (28.9% and 26.5% respectively) is narrower than simple conflict-centred accounts of folk narrative might suggest.

These findings have some implications for how we think about naming in folk narrative. The prevalence of supernatural creature mythonyms suggests that much of the naming work in English folk tales is categorial rather than individualizing — it tells audiences what kind of force a character represents, not who that character is in any unique sense. The scarcity of deity names reflects the specific historical trajectory of English folk narrative rather than any universal feature of the mythonymic system. And the functional analysis reveals that the standard Proppian scheme, while useful, is too blunt an instrument to capture the full range of roles that mythonyms perform across a varied corpus.

Several obvious limitations apply. The corpus is small, and the three tale categories are not equally represented. The functional coding scheme is coarse, and the inter-rater reliability for functional classification ($\kappa = 0.79$) fell marginally below the standard threshold. The analysis is

[386]Dégh, L. (1969). Folktales and society. Indiana University Press. pp. 90–115.

synchronic, treating the nineteenth-century collection as a stable text rather than as a snapshot of an ongoing oral tradition. These are real constraints, and they mean that the findings reported here should be treated as preliminary rather than definitive.

The directions for further work are reasonably clear. A larger corpus, covering a wider range of regional variants and historical periods, would allow for more robust statistical analysis. A more fine-grained functional classification scheme — one that can handle role-switching, ambiguity, and the distinction between different kinds of helper or antagonist — would sharpen the analysis of narrative function. And comparative work across other European folk traditions would help establish which features of English mythonymic practice are specific to that tradition and which are cross-culturally general. This paper has tried to do something smaller and more tractable: to establish some basic empirical facts about a corner of folk narrative onomastics that has been more assumed than investigated.

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