



Moon Unit, Meet Januvia; Januvia, meet Paracelsus



By John Ostrich, MD

Reading this article qualifies you for one hour of credit towards a certificate as a Master of Onomastics.

FRANK ZAPPA STARTED IT, or at least got it rolling. "It" being the practice of giving one's offspring unusual and off-beat names.

Zappa fathered four children and named them, in birth order, Moon Unit, Dweezil, Ahmet Emukha Rodan, and Diva Thin Muffin Pigeen. Moon Unit, who now goes simply by Moon, herself gave birth to a daughter whose given name is Mathilda Plum.

I can, as a presently 60-plus year old American citizen, still remember when Moon Unit was born in September of 1967 and how much attention her name attracted. I think it depended on whether you were a fan of her father and his band, the "Mothers of Invention," that you considered the child's name as either unfortunate or brilliantly concocted. As for myself, I think I preferred Louis Prima and Keely Smith and Frank Butera and "The Witnesses" to Zappa's group, so now you know where my prejudices lay at that time.

By the way, one of Zappa's best selling albums was titled "Sheik Yerbouti," so it is clear that his legend as a nomenclator extended well beyond the naming of children.

And so Frank Zappa started the modern trend towards goofy kids' names, but he was not by any means the first, for in December of 1493 there was born to Dr. and Mrs. Wilhelm von Hohenheim, in Einsiedeln, Switzerland, a son whom they christened Theophrastus Philippus Aureolus Bombastus von Hohenheim.

Legend has it that the father, Wilhelm, a struggling physician, earned extra money playing lead lute in a local bar band, "Das Mutters von Erfindung," but this is not well documented. I also am not sure, in spite of lengthy research, whether Wilhelm sired any more children, but, even if he did, you can bet that Theo had the coolest name of all the kids in Einsiedeln.

Theo was a smart fellow and went off to earn doctorates at the universities in Basel and Ferrara and eventually became famous in Europe as a medical practitioner, alchemist, and philosopher. As his fame grew, so did his dissatisfaction with his cumbersome name. You can imagine how long he would have to take at a book signing to autograph a couple of hundred copies of one of his best sellers, "Philosophia Occulta." ("Would you mind writing 'To My Dearest Friend, Mathias' above your signature, Herr Professor?")

Anyway, he decided that he was going to simplify his name, and he considered himself to be the modern equivalent of the great Roman physician Celsus, whose medical philosophy had replaced Galenical teachings and were the basis of much of the therapeutic theory in the early Renaissance.

And so he called himself Paracelsus, the Equal of Celsus, and, by the way, he has achieved a modicum of recent fame as one of the chocolate frog characters in two of the

Harry Potter books. As Paracelsus, he had a much easier time at book signings or if he had to wear a name tag at a medical convention.

Centuries passed before the naming of children in Europe changed very much. As far as we know, in spite of Paracelsus's fame, that fame did not translate into thousands of little boy babies being named Paracelsus, or Theophrastus, or even Bombastus.

Most newborns were named after Biblical figures or kings and queens and most of these names derived from Germanic, Norman or Frankish roots. The name Louis, for example was almost never given in England but every male in France not named Louis was either Charles, Henri, or Francois.

In England, most male children were named John, William, George, Edward, Thomas or Richard, and there were a few Henrys now and then depending on whether the House of Lancaster or the Tudors were on the throne. In 13th and 14th century England, based on church baptismal records, the vast majority of newborns were named John and Mary.

But the Brits had a bunch of names in reserve that they knew no one else would ever use and would remain truly and everlastingly British, although some of these names became popular amongst the upper crust folks in their colonies around the world.

Here in post-Revolutionary America, one would not meet a Chauncey, Dudley, Basil, Crispin or Algernon except in Boston, New York, Richmond or Charleston at some swell affair. Similarly snooty female names such as Alexandra, Cordelia, Edwina, Mavis or Oriana were rarer still.

Two now quite popular originally British female names, Vanessa and Wendy, began as literary inventions. Vanessa was coined by Jonathan Swift as a pet name for a female acquaintance whose real name was Esther Vonhomrigh, and for whom he wrote a poem. Wendy, of course, was concocted by James Matthew Barrie as a name for the lead female character in his play, "Peter Pan".

In the second half of the past century, the naming of American children changed dramatically, and perhaps students of onomastics, such as we, will look back to Moon Unit's birthday, September 28, 1967, as the beginning of that dramatic change. Many of the names were chosen because they sounded great and/or they connoted some parentally imagined quality or essence. In addition, and in spite of a growing secularism in the land, Biblical names became hugely popular and there was an eruption of Joshuas, Davids, Michaels, Sarahs and Rachels in the land.

Jennifer was the most popular given name for girls for 10 years after Erich Segal's book (and subsequent movie), "Love Story," made its appearance in the late 1960s. The lead character, Jennifer Cavelleri, played in the movie by Ali MacGraw, dies of leukemia looking quite lovely, as I recall, but maybe chemotherapy in those days was kinder and gentler, or maybe there was none. But I digress.

Kayla, a female character in the TV soap opera, "Days Of Our Lives," has bestowed her made-up name to many thousands of American young ladies. In England, the name Keira is now the 12th most popular, concomitant with the popularity of actress Keira Knightley.

In England, the USA, Canada and Australia, Emma is in the top five female given names, due, it is believed, to the name given to the TV baby born to Jennifer (q.v.) Anniston's character Rachel (q.v.) in the TV show "Friends".

But celebrities' real baby names continue to be the source of new and often bizarre monikers for the newborn. Once again, depending on your age, you might find these names amazingly creative or downright distasteful and designed to doom the recipient during his or her life to unending ridicule and much behind-the-back snickering.

The recent best-seller, "Freakonomics," devotes a chapter to the premise that one's given

name can influence one's chance of social and financial success, and, as I recall, the answer was not clear-cut.

It is clear, however, that we have quite a crop of great and unusual names out there, and the ones we all know about, the celebs' kids, will probably have enough money and inherited fame to be able to blissfully disregard the snickering they hear behind their backs.

So do not feel sorry for Victoria ("Posh Spice") and soccer star David Beckham's sons Brooklyn and Romeo. Same goes for Bruce Willis's daughter, Tallulah Belle, or rock promoter Bob Geldof's three daughters, Fifi Trixabelle, Peaches Honeyblossom and Little Pixie, or for Sylvester Stallone's little girl, Sage Moonblood.

But you might want to say a little prayer for the daughter of deceased Australian rocker (his band was "INXS") Michael Hutchence, who is yclept Heavenly Hiraani Tiger Lily. According to Wikipedia, she likes to be called "Tiger" but apparently does not play golf. If I ever meet her, I think I will call her Lily.

Well, you may say, more power to those imaginative and creative folks who are simply setting new standards in the naming of children and pushing the envelope of onomastics, as it were.

But, the main reason I wrote this little article was to let you all know (and perhaps you have a child of your own on the way, or know someone who is about to become a parent) that there is a new universe of unused, often unisexual and often strangely poetic and evocative names out there that have been vetted by panels of experts to be sure they are not scatological in even the most obscure languages. And they are, of course Drug Trade Names.

Every new generic and patented drug name in this country is reviewed by the FDA and the U.S Adopted Names Council (USAN Council). After a generic name is selected, it is further reviewed by WHO, then final approval of the patented name is given the FDA imprimatur.

And what a marvelous selection of unused boys' and girls' names we have!

Wouldn't "Lyrica" Zappa be better than Dweezil, and just as inventive? If your last name is Butts, and you are thinking of calling your son Seymour, why not call him "Lucentis" or "Eraxis" instead?

Frankly, most of the drug names sound feminine, but I bet there are plenty of young women out there who would be happy to be called "Daytrana" or "Seasonique". How about "Januvia" or "Byetta"?

Some of the more masculine drug names conjure up Greco-Roman gods and heroes or long forgotten Mesopotamian empires and kings. Expecting a boy? Try "Zelapar" or "Xyzal," maybe "Emsam" or the aforementioned "Lucentis" or "Eraxis." There is "Chantix" too, but that is a bit more feminine than masculine, I guess.

"Amitiza" and "Apidra" could be sisters, and "Yaz" their brother. Yaz is a cool name as it reminds us of the great Red Sox player, Carl Yastrzemski, but if you give it to your little boy, he will take on the mantle of a sensitive New Age guy, since "Yaz", as everyone knows, is the trade name for "the first and only oral contraceptive that effectively treats the physical symptoms of pre-menstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD)".

Any fellow named Yaz would not want his sweetie to suffer with PMDD, and would want her not only to be with Yaz, but to take Yaz as directed.

By the way, the most popular given boy's name in England is Jack. The Brits know a good

solid name when they see it.

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