<https://doi.org/10.25623/conn002.2-harmon-1>

Connotations
Vol. 2.2 (1992)

Paronomastics: The Name of the Poet from Shakespeare and Donne to Glück and Morgan

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Let me begin in the mode of medieval hermeneutics and offer a commentary on Psalm Forty-Six. It is short, scarcely more than 200 words. Here are the beginning and the end in the familiar "King James" English Version, first published in 1611:

> God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.
> 2 Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea.
> 3 Though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof. Selah.
> . . .
> 9 He maketh wars to cease unto the end of the earth; he breaketh the bow, and cutteth the spear in sunder; he burneth the chariot in the fire.
> 10 Be still, and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth.
> 11 The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah.

To repeat: this is Psalm Forty-Six. Its forty-sixth word happens to be "shake." The forty-sixth word from the end (not counting Selah) is "spear." It was most probably drafted in 1609 or 1610, when William Shakespeare was either in his forty-sixth year or forty-six years old.

So what? Maybe nothing at all. But maybe something. It was an age that was fond of codes, ciphers, games, masks, and espionage. It was also an age in which playwrights and players occupied a comparatively low social level, lacking in dignity, possibly even rather scandalous—not the kind of person a conscientious committee would welcome into a project to translate sacred scripture—not welcome *by name* at any rate.

One of Rudyard Kipling's last stories, "'Proofs of Holy Writ,'" presents Shakespeare and Ben Jonson collaborating on a translation of the Sixtieth

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Chapter of Isaiah and eventually—what theology!—producing the great King James version, beginning, "Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee."

Why not guess, then, that King James's translators were able linguists and scholars—some, like Lancelot Andrewes, were gifted preachers—but were they smart enough to know that their words did not always achieve the grandeur appropriate for holy scripture? A few may have recognized that, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, there were more great writers flourishing in England than ever before (and, you could argue, than ever after). It would make sense to ask for help from some of these geniuses, even if one could not publicly acknowledge their aid. It would also make sense for one of them, however equable his temper and sweet his nature, to resent being unable to sign his work overtly and therefore to devise a way to sign one part of his work covertly, by introducing something of a charade on his name. "Shakespeare" is that kind of name, after all: you can shake a spear. The Shakespeare arms, granted to William's father John in 1596 but evidently requested by William, show an arm shaking a spear.

The Oxford Guide to Heraldry suggests that the term for such a practice is "canting arms," defined as "arms containing charges which allude punningly to the name of the bearer." I am not so sure that there is a proper pun in a design showing a spear being shaken in connection with the name "Shakespeare," any more than the *hind* on the arms of the Count of *Tier*stein is a pun as such. I do think it is a pun when the arms of a family named Moore or More show the head of a Moor.[1]

I shall return to the province of pun in a moment, but I want to devote one more paragraph to Psalm 46. As was known in Shakespeare's time, the *paytanim*, composers of Hebrew liturgical poetry, sometimes "signed" their works by placing their names or anagrams thereof as an acrostic at the beginning of each line of poetry. It is also said that certain Jewish names may have been formed as acronyms drawn from devotional formulae, as "Atlas" from *akh tov leyisrael selah* ("Truly God is good to Israel") and not from the name of the Titan or the German word for "satin."[2]

Now I want to try to distinguish three sorts of wordplay involving names; I am not certain that all of them qualify as paronomasia, or, as one might say, a "byname."

Already, poised on the brink of discussing the rebus, I find myself hesitating, because it is not, strictly speaking, wordplay: it is play that goes beyond the boundary of words, because in some forms it involves symbols that no longer represent letters that constitute words, even though the symbol may be indistinguishable from letters. The common American street sign

PED
XING

means "Pedestrian Crossing" (itself rather ambiguous, since "Crossing" can be a participle as well as a gerund). The X in the sign is not a letter X but a graphic picture of crossing. A charming rebus-logo is hard to pronounce adequately: a chain of women's clothing shops is called "Aileen," pronounced "I lean"; and in the trademark

Aileen

the *i* is *leaning*.

The second sort of name-wordplay I want to mention goes by a name that is bad French but established English: *double entendre*. I take this to be the realm of wordplay in which a single term has more than one meaning, or more than one level of meaning, including its use as a name. To show a shaken spear on the arms of Shakespeare is something of this sort, since we are dealing with a single term "Shakespeare" with two meanings: a name and an action.

It is *double entendre*, I believe, when William Shakespeare constructs elaborate jokes involving the word "Will," which seems to have been his byname. The various nouns and verbs all seem to be the same basic word, so the play is fairly simple. Certain texts of the *Sonnets* emphasize the possibility of play on the author's nickname. In Sonnet 57, "will" seems to be mostly a common noun:

> So true a fool is love that in your will,
> Though you do anything, he thinks no ill.[3]

Likewise in Sonnet 111, "Whilst, like a willing patient, I will drink . . . ." The situation is different, however, in Sonnets 135, 136, and 143, in which some uses of "will" are printed in the 1609 Quarto with an initial capital and italicized. Sonnet 135 seems to concern a surplus of Wills:

> Whoever hath her wish, thou hast thy *Will*,
> And *Will* to boot, and Will in overplus,
> . . .[4]

Sonnet 136 even includes a "*Will* will." Thereafter, the poet relents, except for the couplet ending Sonnet 143:

> So will I pray that thou mayst have thy *Will*,
> If thou turn back and my loud crying still.

We could engage in a discussion of the limits of the *double entendre* as it involves an author's name. I hate to think that every time a person named William says "will" there must be some kind of wordplay. I am William called Bill, and I am pretty sure that I say "will" and "bill" all the time with no awareness of their connection to my name. Likewise with "harmony," which sounds like my family name but is linguistically unrelated. (I might as well mention at this point that a friend of mine, Bland Simpson, once sought and received my permission—I could add my *indulgence*—to use the name "Billy Harmony" for an incidental character in a novel about country music. There is a humorous reference to a band called "Billy Harmony and the Harmony Grits"—a favorite food in my native South.)

Double entendre, then, has to do with proper names that are also common words. Such is the case more with family names than with first names, since surnames are more likely to be words like "Cook" and "Bauer." The movement in such wordplay could be called "vertical," since it shifts up and down among many meanings of a single word, including meanings as part of a name.

Many names are also common nouns, and now and again you get a potentially comic situation, as when you read a solemn poem by Wordsworth about certain literary personages who happen to die between 1832 and 1835, including three named Hogg, Crabbe, and Lamb.

The poem is called "Extempore Effusions upon the Death of James Hogg," and Crabbe and Lamb are mentioned by name; in the text of the poem, however, Hogg is spoken of as "the Ettrick Shepherd."[5]

I suppose that computer-assisted concordances will one day permit us to check on all such uses—for instance, how often did Oscar Wilde use "wild"? I can survey a few test-cases here. Thomas Hardy's earliest known poem, "Domicilium," contains the word "hardy":

> Red roses, lilacs, variegated box
> Are there in plenty, and such hardy flowers
> As flourish best untrained.[6]

It is difficult to think that the teen-aged Hardy did not know what he was doing. It is equally difficult to overlook all the occurrences of "frost" and "frosty" in the poems of Robert Frost. He seems at times to rub our noses in it, as when he says "Something there is that doesn't love a wall" and we provide the name "frost"; or in the witty late poem, "Peril of Hope":

> It is right in there
> Betwixt and between
> The orchard bare
> And the orchard green,
>
> When the boughs are right
> In a flowery burst
> Of pink and white,
> That we fear the worst.
>
> For there's not a clime
> But at any cost
> Will take that time
> For a night of frost.

In at least one of Frost's lines—"You see the snow-white through the white of frost?"—the poet includes not only his own name but also his wife's maiden name: White.[7]

I call this motion "vertical" because we have a single word "frost" with levels of meaning, one of which is the proper name. In English

these would look different, because we use capitals for proper nouns, thus:

Frost
frost

In German, however, all nouns are capitalized, so that the motion from name to word may be harder to detect. I want to suggest one example from prose. In the "Nachschrift" of *Doktor Faustus*, the narrator, Serenus Zeitblom, speaks movingly. "Es ist getan," he says, now writing as "ein alter Mann, gebeugt, fast gebrochen von den Schrecknissen der Zeit . . . ."[8]

I shall stay in German awhile to segue from *double entendre* to a kind of name-pun that better deserves the title "paronomasia." In Book X of *Dichtung und Wahrheit* Goethe describes a verse-note from the scoffing Herder:

> Der von Göttern du stammst, von Goten oder vom Kote,
> Goethe, sende mir sie.

That is:

> Thou, who from Gods art descended, or Goths, or from origin filthy,
> Goethe, send them to me.[9]

Goethe adds:

> It was not polite, indeed, that he should have permitted himself this jest on my name; for a man's name is not like a mantle, which merely hangs about him, and which, perchance, may be safely twitched and pulled, but a perfectly fitting garment, which has grown over and over like his very skin, at which one cannot scratch and scrape without wounding the man himself.[10]

Rebus and *double entendre*, then, are two sorts of wordplay in which names can be involved; the third that I want to talk about is closer to what we normally mean by pun, quibble, or paronomasia—that is, it concerns a lateral or horizontal movement from words that have the same or similar sounds. *Double entendre* has to do with a single word with multiple meanings or levels of meaning. Paronomasia has to do with a sound that signifies or suggests more than one word.

"Will" and "will" came together most vividly toward the end of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* (insofar as we can trust the 1609 arrangement); "ein Mann" and "Mann" coalesce in the "Nachschrift." It seems that the inscription of an author's name in a literary work or whole corpus comes, as it comes in a letter, toward the end. Just so, Donne's deepest paradoxical punning on his own name occurs in one of his last poems, "A Hymne to God the Father," composed during an illness in the winter of 1623: "done" recurs at the end of each stanza:

> . . .
> When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
> For, I have more.
>
> . . .
> When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
> For, I have more.
>
> . . .
> And, having done that, Thou haste done,
> I have no more.[11]

Some modern poets have addressed their own names by way of the supposed meanings of those names in another language. On one occasion, Louise Glück ended a poem with the translation of her German last name:

> . . . Extend yourself—
> it is the Nile, the sun is shining,
> everywhere you turn is luck.[12]

John Frederick Nims, nearing eighty, has recently published a book called *Zany in Denim*, a title explained in the poem called "The Consolations of Etymology, with Fanfare":

> *Zany*—from *Giovanni* (John)
> Through Venetian *Zanni*.
> *Denim*—from *de Nîmes*. Right on,
> Sing hey nonny nonny!
> Once I thought my name—well, blah.
> *Zany in denim*, though! Ta DAH![13]

I can think of one counter-example: a poet alludes to a line by another poet but changes it so as to remove his own name. The line comes in Ezra Pound's Canto IV:

> Beat, beat, whirr, thud, . . .[14]

The source is patently Whitman's "Beat! Beat! Drums!" where the relevant lines read

> Beat! beat! drums!—blow! bugles! blow!
> . . .
> So fierce you whirr and pound you drums—so
> shrill you bugles blow.[15]

Whitman nowhere says "thud," but he does say "thump." What Whitman does say after "whirr" and what Pound carefully does not say is "and pound."

I suppose that qualifies as suppressed or concealed *double entendre* in reverse (assuming that "Pound" and "pound" are the same word); also from American literature comes an instance of suppressed or concealed paronomasia. The poem is Poe's "To the River——." Careful research finally established, a century or more after the poem's first publication, that the river is the Po (and Poe seems to have been thinking of Byron's "Stanzas to the Po").[16] There happens to be a Po River in Virginia not far north of Richmond, where Poe was raised. No one will need to be told that Poe punned on his own name a good deal, including the word "poetry" itself and such names as Pym, Dupin, and Politian. In our time his spririt has returned in the cipher text of *Dr. Strangelove,* where P.O.E. seems to be derived from "Peace on Earth" and "Purity of Essence." (Kubrick also pays respect to Poe in *Lolita.*)[17]

This is as good a place as any to recall Kenneth Burke's speculations about names that may be encoded in Saint Augustine's *Confessions.* Burke "inclines to the notion that the adjective for 'modest' (*modica*) is Augustine's pun-name for 'Monica' [his mother . . . and] the similarly enigmatic name for himself would be the word 'strait' or 'narrow': *angustus.*"[18] Augustine *was* an orator and verbalizer; when he calls Carthage a "frying pan" he is punning somewhat on *Cartaga* and *sartago.*

When we do have a name, such as Kurtz in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, we may be permitted to work back to possible sources. We know that Conrad, during a momentous journey to the Belgian Congo, met a failed idealist named Antoine Klein, whose initials are also those of another failed idealist, Apollo Korzeniowski: Conrad's father. But, if we did not know about Klein and Korzeniowski, there would be no way to get them via Kurtz. Likewise, if we knew only the book-version of Louis Zukofsky's "*A*-2"—

> —Clear music—
> Not calling names, says Kay,
> Poetry is not made of such things . . . .

we should never be able to reconstruct the earlier version published in a magazine:

> The clear music—
> Zoo-zoo-kaw-kaw-of-the-sky.
> Not mentioning names, says Kay,
> Poetry is not made of such things.

where the most conspicuous difference is the presence of the name "Zukofsky" anatomized into puns.[19]

Once we are alerted to such practices, we can keep our ears and eyes open. With A. R. Ammons, for example, we notice parts of his name turning up in odd places in his poems: he himself mentions that his first name "Archie" is embedded in *Starchief* (a model of Pontiac motorcar); and in Ammons's coinage "lowerarchy" we can see a lot of complex play that touches not only "hierarchy" but also Don Marquis's lowercase archy, a cockroach who writes.[20] It is not unthinkable that Ammons can capitalize and anatomize his last name into AM MONS.[21] Similarly, we should not be surprised to find the line "Mountain ash mindlessly dropping berries" in a poem called "Rural Objects" by John Ashbery.[22] Nor should we be surprised to find "pieces of the morgenland" at the end of a poem at the end of a book by Robert Morgan.[23]

Musicians must envy writers. We might recall from Mann's *Doktor Faustus* that the composer Leverkühn devises a motif that "spells" words. Not only can Bach spell his name (with "B" being B-flat and "H" B-

natural) but even such an unlikely person as Dimitri Shostakovich can divise what one critic calls a "musical monogram DSCH (*D*imitri *SCH*ostakowitsch, in the German transliteration, becoming the notes D-E flat-C-B)" in many works: the first violin concerto, the eighth string quartet, and the tenth symphony among them.[24] The familiar three-note motif used by the National Broadcasting Company of America began, I hear, as G-E-C: the musical initials of NBC's owner, the General Electric Company.

Let me end with a quick survey of writers who have somehow embedded their initials in titles or names of characters. The earliest that I know are in the nineteenth century, both born, in fact, in 1812: Charles Dickens created Charles Darnay and David Copperfield; Robert Browning created *The Ring and the Book*. Vladimir Nabokov has scattered his name and initials in many forms throughout many works: there is a "Vivian Darkbloom" and a "Van Veen." Aldous Huxley wrote *Antic Hay*, Hilda Doolittle *Hermetic Definition*, Hart Crane *Cape Hatteras*, Robert Frost "Range Finding" and *A Further Range*, T. S. Eliot *The Elder Statesman*. One of J. D. Salinger's characters is named Jean de Daumier Smith. One of my most brilliant students noticed a kinship between Bob Dylan and *Don't Look Back* (syllabically b-d-l and d-l-b). Bob Kane, who invented Batman, has confessed to devising an autobiographical name for his hero's alter ego, Bruce Wayne: "Bruce" alliterates with "Bob," and "Wayne" rhymes with "Kane."[25]

Finally, I want to quote the first lines of one of Stevens's last poems, the great "Madame La Fleurie":

> Weight him down, O side-stars, with the great weightings of the end.
> Seal him there. . . .[26]

The poem is full of puns ("a dew" must be seven or eight different locutions!) and the first two lines begin with "W" and "S."

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NOTES

[1]Thomas Woodcock and John Martin Robinson, *The Oxford Guide to Heraldry* (Oxford: OUP, 1988) 63, 83, and 198.

[2]See William Harmon, "Eiron Eyes," *Parnassus: Poetry in Review* 7.2 (Spring/Summer 1979): 17.

[3]William Shakespeare, *Complete Works*, ed. A. Harbage (New York: Viking, 1969) 1462.

[4]The phrase "sweet will" (l. 4) appears in later poems by Wordsworth and Keats, who were both named William.

[5]David Perkins, ed., *English Romantic Writers* (New York: Harcourt, 1967) 318-19.

[6]*The Variorum Edition of the Complete Poems of Thomas Hardy*, ed. James Gibson (New York: Macmillan-Collier, 1982) 3.

[7]*The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rineheart and Winston, 1969) 33, 445, 148.

[8]Thomas Mann, *Doktor Faustus* (Berlin: Fischer, 1947) 540.

[9]This example was suggested by my friend Professor Christoph Schweitzer.

[10]*Goethe's Autobiography: Poetry and Truth*, trans. R. O. Moon (Washington: Public Affairs Press, 1949) 356.

[11]John Donne, *Complete Poems*, ed. J. Shawcross (Garden City, NY: Doubleday-Anchor, 1967) 392.

[12]Louise Glück, "The Undertaking," *The House on Marshland* (New York: Ecco Press, 1975) 27.

[13]John Frederick Nims, *Zany in Denim* (Fayetteville: U of Arkansas P, 1990) 45.

[14]Ezra Pound, *The Cantos* (New York: New Directions, 1970) 13.

[15]Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, eds. Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley (New York: Norton, 1965) 283.

[16]E. A. Poe, *Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. T. O. Mabbott (New York: Modern Library, 1951) 407.

[17]See N. Kagan, *The Cinema of Stanley Kubrick* (New York: Holt, 1972) 118-28; Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, ed. Alfred Appel Jr. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970) 330-33.

[18]Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961) 83. See also 120n.

[19]*Louis Zukofsky*, "A" (Berkeley: U of California P, 1978) 6. The original publication was in *Poetry* 40 (April 1932): 26-29.

[20]A. R. Ammons, *Collected Poems 1951-1971* (New York: Norton, 1972) 369.

[21]The SNOW of his *Snow Poems* may be regarded as an inversion of MONS.

[22]John Ashbery, *The Double Dream of Spring* (New York: Dutton, 1970) 44.

[23]Robert Morgan, *At the Edge of the Orchard Country* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1987) 68.

[24]See Christopher Norris, ed., *Shostakovich: the Man and His Music* (Boston: Boyars, 1982) 71-74, 154, 158-59, 179.

[25]Interview, "Entertainment Tonight," CBS Network, June 1992.

[26]Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems* (New York: Knopf, 1978) 507.