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A Response to William Harmon*

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While it is tempting for someone, normally keeping his love of puns and his keen interest in the function of names in literature discretely apart, to continue, on this occasion, Harmon's quest for "the name of the poet," this may not be the most felicitous way of doing the author's deftly and amusingly argued article the justice it fully deserves. For that reason, my comments will be restricted, on the one hand, to some of the examples he quotes and, on the other, to a not unrelated phenomenon, i.e. the practice of teasing and mystifying anonymity. Harmon's illustrations draw attention to some of the delicate nuances of which writers bent on infiltrating their own texts onomastically are capable. Never underestimate their ingenuity and secret self-advertising when it comes to making it known to their readers in general and occasionally to targeted readers (lovers, admirers, enemies) in particular that the external creator is also inside the text and, despite a game of hide-and-seek, wishes to be found out at his ludic assertion of creative ownership. In some instances, it is not easy to say with conviction whether the critic's observation reflects reality or coincidence, and Harmon's opening discussion of Shakespeare's potential involvement in the shaping of Psalm 46 for the so-called "King James" translation may well be a case in point. Coincidental placing of the words "shake" and "spear" by whoever among the assorted divines was responsible for rendering Hebrew or Latin (not forgetting Luther's German) psalms into English may be the sceptic's preference in explaining this intriguing state of affairs; this would, however, lose considerably in persuasion if the Bard's

*Reference: William Harmon, "Paronomastics: The Name of the Poet from Shakespeare and Donne to Glück and Morgan," *Connotations* 2.2 (1992): 115-25.

hand could be detected elsewhere in the psalter. Ordinarily, the rigorous scholar would ask for additional proof in order to be convinced but the thought of the Swan of Avon taking up King David's pen (pardon the pun) or harp does have its special piquancy and allure.

Let us not question, however, Harmon's other selected examples from, among others, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Hardy, Frost, Mann, Glück, Pound and Poe. As his illustrations indicate, the temptation to pun on one's own name or on those of others must be particularly great when audibly and/or visually these names have obvious lexical meaning or can be, without too much sinuous effort, secondarily reinterpreted as being semantically transparent. In my own personal experience, both my most commonly used first name, *Bill,* and my surname when understood to mean "Son of Santa Claus" or, less positively, "Son of (Old) Nick," have given inveterate punsters plenty of room for playing their little games; the opportunity to do so is also never absent in my own involvement with my name as a marker of my own identity. Since not every poet is blessed or cursed with a name that allows or encourages paronomasia, but as wordplay is an essential part of a creative writer's craftiness, one wonders whether the punning instinct may find other satisfying outlets as, for example, in the naming of characters, or in such devices as the acronym or the titular use of initials. Essentially, then, the playful literary usage of a writer's own name(s) not only occupies a specially reserved niche in the function of names in literature but also permits shyly concealed and yet blatantly trumpeted insights into the author's own self-understanding. Needless to add, this onomastically self-indulgent smuggling of the invisible writer into a literary presence always runs the risk of deteriorating into inappropriate, or at least questionable, trivialisation because puns do not good poetry make.

Whether as *double entendre* or *rebus* (to use two of Harmon's concepts of authorial wordplay), the ludic insertion of writers' names ultimately aims at display, at solution, at discovery. Disclosure, however thinly disguised, cunningly hidden, or apparently denied, is its goal if it has any right to be present at all. Otherwise it becomes a sham and a trickster's cheap sleight of hand. This coy or brash (coyly brash?) placing of one's own name where it legitimately has no locus or at least makes

a surprise appearance, has a seemingly unconnected but nevertheless closely related counterpart in an author's deliberate withholding of his identity through the fronting of a pseudonym. *Ellis, Currer* and *Acton Bell,* the names of the auctorial personae of the three Brontë sisters, build paradoxical bridges by retaining their true initials, thus not totally abandoning the connection between their private and public lives, between the familiar intimacy of Haworth and the threatening harshness of the world, thus leaving the door open just a crack for potential, maybe even desired, recognition.

The situation is quite different in the case of Sir Walter Scott. Here the planned concealment of true authorship, however temporary (from 1814 to 1827), is genuine even in its creation of puzzlement and behind-the-hand whispers of knowledgeable hunches. Innuendo has it that the concealment of the eminent lawyer, poet, critic and public figure behind the bland label of "The Author of Waverley" (after the first novel) was nothing but a tremendously successful publicity stunt but such acerbic comment underestimates both the ludic and the serious facets of Scott's self-imposed pseudonymity. Scott's disappearance behind single, double and sometimes triple onomastic screens—Jedediah Cleishbotham, schoolmaster of the parish of Gandercleugh, and Peter Pattison in the novels grouped under *Tales of my Landlord,* Mr. Chrystal Croftangry of the *Chronicles of the Canongate,* Captain Clutterbuck (*The Monastery, The Abbot,* etc.) and the Rev. Dr. Dryasdust of York (*Peveril of the Peak*) or Dr. J. A. Rochecliff, eminent antiquarian (*Woodstock*)—permits him not only the doubtful privilege of reviewing his own books but also the introduction or assumption of personae of proto-Dickensian names and scurrilous habits. Ever intent on preserving his standing in society, he carries the inherited desire for authenticity and obtainable verification to new lengths. Such is his self-confessed fear of failure in the new genre of the historical novel, that he consistently refuses to be recognised as the front man for his tales. Success and literary fame make such an attitude difficult to maintain but it takes Scott well over a decade to give the author "a local habitation and a name."

Arguably, then, the wish for potentially penetrable disguise and the desire for total concealment are only different perspectives of an author's intention to be present but not revealed, whether through the ludic

exercise of paronomasia or the equally playful device of onymic misguidance and fudging of identity. Yet, whether pun or protestation, intrepid intrusion or discreet deception, the name game is more than a masquerade of manipulated illusions because authors of fiction cannot help knowing (or if they are not aware of it paronomasticians will poke their noses into it) that they are also fictitious authors, continually reinventing themselves, and that the ultimate achievement does not lie in telling the truth but in sounding believable.

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