

A Consideration of Title-Names in the Poetry of Donne and Yeats

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Diane Keaton. Ronald Reagan. Ed Koch. John Donne. Each name obviously brings a picture or a concept, an attitude or a whole range of attitudes immediately to the fore. George Spivas. Klockius. Rowland Woodward. Probably nothing happened, for most people do not know (I think) a George Spivas; and only a few will have an association with the other two. Klockius, which is the title now given to an epigram by Donne, is taken from the appearance of the name in the two-line poem. It leads the general reader nowhere except as the sounds suggest some kind of meaning, or the form suggests some kind of status or characteristic, or the etymology suggests a kind of punning substructure. The sounds may associate for some a clucking sound (perhaps in disapproval) or "clock" (though such association seems to have no merit and is probably obviated by its spelling with a *k*). The Latin ending points us to a fictionalized or generalized name and to a possibly higher social status for the person intended. The etymology may involve the Dutch *kloek*, meaning a "sly person." We as readers may thus be prepared for something involving disapproval of someone of higher social status, who is hidden behind a pseudonym, but we probably have no sense of an etymological concept, if one was intended. The epigram reads:

Klockius so deeply hath sworne, ne'r more to come
In bawdie house, that hee dares not goe home.

There is, of course, a pun on the obscene meaning of "come," and the thrust of the epigram is that Klockius's wife is a prostitute of sorts. Implied is a double standard toward the husband and the wife, and if social status is involved, there is also the implication that seemingly respectable women are not necessarily so.

There may be sneering satire toward some real person (one speculation was Sir John Rawlins of the Inner Temple, who, during the trial of 1615, accused the Earl of Somerset of aiding his wife, Lady Frances Howard, in murdering Sir Thomas Overbury), but we probably are not very concerned, sensing the name more as applicable to many men and their

wives, whose sexual appetites are covertly known and talked about. The assigned title does not really lead us very far.

On the other hand the title *Phryne* of another epigram has led the reader to an attitude before reading the poem if he knows the reference. She was a celebrated courtesan of Greece, whom Robert Burton, for example, cited in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. The title may, like Klockius, derive only from the poem:

Thy flattering picture, *Phryne*, is like thee,
Onely in this, that you both painted be.

Not knowing that *Phryne* was a courtesan, the reader understands the poem largely as an adverse comment on the painting as false and partially as a jibe against women who use cosmetics, producing a false impression of the real person. Knowing that *Phryne* was a courtesan, the reader sees the poem stressing instead the false, painted face of sexual enticers, and perhaps thus the poem comments on the validity of the painting as presenting an outward and essentially real picture of the courtesan. Names, therefore, since they may call up concepts or attitudes, will lead to varying readings of a poem, and when the name appears in the title, the reader has been prepared to read the poem in a definite way.

What about this epigram?

Both rob'd of aire, we both lye in one ground,
Both whom one fire had burnt, one water drown'd.

Does it say anything much to the reader? We notice that the four elements are there: air, earth, fire, and water, suggesting thus life and creation. The paradigm has air as wet and hot; earth as dry and cold; fire as dry and hot; water as wet and cold. Further fire represents the male; water, the female. But paradoxically all the phrases represent death: robbed of air, lying interred together, burnt by fire (passion), and drowned; and sexual hints lead to the common Elizabethan pun on die as sexual intercourse. We can thus read the epigram as a witty comment on love and lovemaking, which paradoxically leads to death, not to new life. But the title given the poem is "*Hero and Leander*," and its effect is to delimit and even diminish our reading, pointing us only in the direction of seeing the poem as a rendering of their story, not some generalized witty social comment.

Actually we cannot be sure that Donne assigned titles to his poems, or if he did, that all received titles are the ones he employed. But this last epigram, I think, identifies a major reason why title names are used so infrequently by him: he is concerned with type ("A licentious person," "An obscure writer"), with image ("The Blossome," "The Sunne Rising"), with central thought or motif or technique ("The Legacie," "The

Comparison”), and perhaps with genre (“Satyre,” “Elegie,” “Holy Sonnet”). He is one often not given to specifics involving a person or event, or, in comparison with other poets, to an allusive reference or complex of background. A poem may rise out of an occasion — like “The First Anniversary” or the epigram usually labelled “Cales and Guyana” — but many do not. Once we recognize this, we can call into question biographical interpretations of poems like “The good-morrow,” “The Extasie,” “Satyre 3,” “The Relique,” and even “Twicknam Garden,” which can be given a biographical interpretation involving Donne’s relationship with Lucy, Countess of Bedford, but we are led to that reading by the title assigned the poem only, not from anything intrinsic within it. (I imply that such a reading may be wrong and that the poem has nothing whatsoever to do with Lucy.) There are poems which seem to involve biographical import like the “Valedictions,” but the lack of naming in the titles in such poems and usually within such poems makes them more generalized and nondirective for the reader. It is a far cry from the poetry of a Robert Lowell, for example, “The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket” or “Mother Marie Therese.” Even the divine poems, while I do not deny psychological source for them, should move into more generalized consideration (as should the satires and the elegies) rather than the reduction of Donne to some kind of Renaissance Anne Sexton. The poems of Donne employing names most frequently are the public forms, the epithalamia, the epicedes, and the verse letters.

The observation of Donne’s more usual practice is, I think, a good epitome of the difference between Donne and someone like Edmund Waller whose titles are sometimes “To Phyllis,” “Thyrsis, Galatea,” “To Amoret,” “Of Sylvia,” “To Zelinda,” “To Chloris,” “Chloris and Hylas,” “To Flavia,” or a twentieth-century poet like Kenneth Patchen, who in his fifth volume of poetry, *Cloth of the Tempest*, has such poems as “Anna Karenina and the Love-Sick River,” “Attila,” “Egypt,” “Gautama in the Deer Park at Benares,” “Jesus of Nazareth,” “November in Ohio,” “To the German People.” Yes, Waller has poems involving types and images, thoughts and genre — “An Epigram on a Painted Lady with Ill Teeth,” “On a Girdle,” “The Fall,” “Song”; and Patchen, poems involving images and thoughts — “How Silent Are the Things Of Heaven,” “Easy Rider,” “The Prize.” But their approach to the poem is different from Donne’s, and the difference in the use of title-names underscores that difference: Donne most often aims at the poem as example of wit or as witty example of a thought or observation. Waller most often aims at a delimiting of the poem to a specific occasion (the social mode) which only seldom of itself radiates outward from that

specific occasion. Many of Waller's poems have titles similar to those of Donne's verse letters: "To My Lord Leicester," "To my Lord of Falkland," but they are not verse letters and they do not like Donne's poems — say, "To the Countess of Huntingdon," beginning "Man to Gods image, *Eve*, to mans was made" — raise philosophic issues, but rather stay with the occasion. While Donne's poems may be epideictic, the form supplies but a scaffolding for the essentiality of the poem, something John Carey obviously is insensitive toward when he bemoans Donne's having wasted his poetic time in such supposed exercises.¹ Patchen, of course, is a poet in what has been called the line of vision: his use of title-names is to direct our thinking to a complex of history and thought and moral position: for example, "The Destruction of Carthage" or "Prometheus Rebound."

Rowland Woodward, to return to the other name mentioned in the beginning of this discussion, was a friend of Donne's, and to him Donne addressed five poems, four of which give initials only. They are typical of many other verse letters to various male friends. The use of the name in the title does not enhance our reading of it, even when we know who Rowland Woodward was. At most the use of a name in the title of these poems suggests that the substance may have arisen out of a specific occasion (as, for example, that beginning "Mad paper stay, and grudge not here to burne," written "To Mrs. *M.H.*, on her marriage choice of Sir John Danvers"), or with a subsumed text (as, for example, the poem beginning "Man is a lumpe, where all beasts kneaded bee," written to Sir Edward Herbert in partial response to his first satire, "The State Progress of Ill"). In the first instance the poem does not proceed much beyond the epideictic (whereas something like "Reason is our Soules left hand, Faith her right," "To the Countesse of Bedford," surely does); in the second instance the poem takes on the substance of debate, whose images and organization are partially dependent on the argument they attempt to counter. Of themselves, the names in such poems are not significant: they are significant, as say in the obsequy, "An hymne to the Saints, and to Marquesse Hamylton," only in leading us to anchor the poem somewhere in time.

Title-names in poetry, then, are used variously and have various effects. Consider a sonnet which demands some kind of denotative title in

¹See John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 90–91: "Would he not have been an even greater and more prolific poet if he had not squandered his time turning out verse letters, epithalamions and funerary tributes? Might we not have had more *Songs and Sonnets*?"

order that the reader can perceive the relationship between the music heard and the poetic reaction to it: "Sweet sounds, oh, beautiful music, do not cease! / Reject me not into the world again" with its image of "The tranquil blossom on the tortured stem." Edna St. Vincent Millay's title is "on Hearing a Symphony of —" but if we supply varying names, do we not, having experience of those names, sense differences of meaning? Is it Schubert, Mahler, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Shostakovich? Well, it is Beethoven and words like "tranquil blossom on the tortured stem" have quite a different meaning from what they would have were it, say, Benjamin Britten.

Or consider Allen Tate's "Mr. Pope," where the name conjures up for the knowing not only things of the past, but the popular view of Alexander Pope as a neoclassicist, of precision of language and couplet form, or wit and rage, a man deformed (Tate's "crooked tree") whose name should be a wreath. The words of the poem present a point of view about a poetic world and a specific poet, but they were all there in one way or another in just the title-name. Or consider the effect of T.S. Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock, or Edward Arlington Robinson's Richard Cory (not Dick, not Richie, not Rick, but Richard), or e. e. cummings's Mr. Vinal — made-up names to give impressions to put the reader in a certain frame of mind about the poetic character as he begins to read.

William Butler Yeats has used title names similarly — made-up names for effect, actual names for certain connotations or meaning, and names that have little effect other than an anchoring in time. "Red Hanrahan's Song about Ireland" presents a typical nationalistic Irishman, the protagonist of Yeats's stories, whose Irish-sounding last name explains his devotion to Cathleen ni Houlihan, a symbol of Ireland, and whose nickname suggests Viking ancestry, bravery and leadership, one-of-the-boys from the local pub, and the Red Branch of Old Irish Warriors we know from the legends of Cuchulain. Typical Irishman is "Tom O'Roughley," and the poem emphasizes the fusion of life and its acceptance in joy as Irish characteristic: "And if my dearest friend were dead / I'd dance a measure on his grave." Michael Robartes, a version of Yeats himself, is much less Irish-seeming; Michael is appropriate enough, but should bring to the informed mind a reference to the Archangel who wielded the sword of justice, who is cognate with Hermes as conductor of the dead to the afterlife, and who is Adam's instructor on the Hill of Speculation in Books XI and XII of *Paradise Lost*. "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes" sees at once man's two extreme conditions in life, diagrammed in Yeats's well-known phases and intersecting cones, as Adam had. The last name, though now a common enough Irish last name, is not Gaelic

ultimately but derived from the Germanic, emphasizing brightness through fame. We should recall that Yeats said that “ ‘Michael Robartes’ is fire reflected in water.” The next volume of poetry which employs Yeats’s alter ego in its title and first poem includes such significantly related poems in their vision, double vision, and transitory fame as “Easter 1916,” “The Second Coming,” and “A Prayer for my Daughter.” “Crazy Jane,” of course, envisions for us an ordinary person, one not to be distinguished by last name, one not necessarily special or evoking memorable qualities. While the character is based partially on a real person, the name itself is made up.

Many of Yeats’s title-names refer to legendary figures, like Cuchulain, Fergus, Aengus, and the effect is to create allusion to a substructure of myth, anchoring it in history and raising it to a nationalistic level rather than a generalized human level. Early in “The Wind Among the Reeds” (1899) Yeats had used the made-up name Aedh as a title-name in a number of poems (as well as Michael Robartes and Hanrahan), but he changed those titles to such forms as “The Lover tells of the Rose in his Heart” and “He gives his Beloved certain Rhymes,” by 1906 when the first volume of *The Poetical Works* was published. The removal of title-names has the effect of opening up the reference, of saying “any lover” or “all lovers,” “the poet”; it has recognized two things: the delimiting that using a title-name creates, and the removal of the substance of the poem from a general and human statement to a specific but less realistic concept. Compare the difference in the way we are directed when the title employs a name rather than “He” in the following poem (Aedh, meaning fire, was a god of death):

Aedh wishes for the Cloths of Heaven

Had I the heavens’ embroidered cloths,
 Enwrought with golden and silver light,
 The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
 Of night and light and the half-light.
 I would spread the cloths under your feet:
 But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
 I have spread my dreams under your feet;
 Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

This kind of change in Yeats’s poetry is explained in his very important poem that appears next to last (ostensibly the last poem) in the volume “Responsibilities” (1914), “A Coat.” In Yeats’s later poems some title-names have significance in placing the poem in time, like “In Memory of Alfred Pollexfen,” “In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Mar-

kiewicz,” “For Anne Gregory,” although they also clue the biographical content. But others continue to call up connotations like “Sailing to Byzantium,” “Parnell’s Funeral,” “The Curse of Cromwell,” or allusions like “Veronica’s Napkin,” “Swift’s Epitaph,” and there are made-up names like Ribh and Tom and Owen Aherne.

To conclude I would like to underscore a point that I hope has been made here: while title-names direct the reader, and thus may delimit and even diminish our reading, the lack of title-names has an opposite effect, opening up meaning and making the poem more universal. And I imply that an author thus not only consciously uses title-names, but also consciously does *not* use title-names. I would demonstrate this by two poems written about specific people. What do we understand about a poem entitled, “Major Robert Gregory Envisions His Death”? We remember “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory,” son of Lady Gregory, an aviator killed in action in Italy in 1918. The title I have made up might have been assigned to a Yeats manuscript poem beginning, “Some nineteen German planes, they say, / You had brought down before you died.” Are we not as readers of this title and then these two first lines channeled into a specific situation, bringing to mind the first World War, Gregory and maybe Lady Gregory, and perhaps a kind of psychological point being made about Gregory, one perhaps not flattering? Is this what Yeats wanted? Well, no, he did not, for he did not title the poem that way (he called it “Reprisals”); and instead he revised the poem, one many readers know well, and titled it instead “An Irish Airman Foresees His Death.” We are thus led not to specify the pronoun of the first two lines, but to see it as everyone in any kind of comparable situation: “I know that I shall meet my fate / Somewhere among the clouds above.” The meaningful balance of life and death in the last line is made meaningful to the reader by the lack of title-name.

Or what of “The Municipal Gallery and Maude Gonne Revisited”? (Yeats does have a poem called “The Municipal Gallery Revisited.”) We would immediately have place and situation and biographical content advanced to direct our reading and tell us what “Or else I thought her supernatural” means, or “her form all full / As though with magnanimity of light.” Some will recognize, of course, that I am quoting “A Bronze Head,” which bust of Maude Gonne is in Dublin’s Municipal Gallery and which was sculpted by Laurence Campbell. She was an Irish revolutionary and the loved one of Yeats, whose proposals of marriage were repeatedly refused. She, the Helen of his poems, did have a “wildness in her”; she was to Yeats “supernatural,” was able to see “Ancestral pearls all pitched into a sty.” But the poem as poem rises above being only a

vision of a specific person and takes on the universality of type, of those who think and act in certain comparable ways in all places and times. We appreciate the poem more by not being directed to its biographical origin.

Title-names are thus used variously by poets, or not used, and their nature, connotations, allusions, sound, and existence or nonexistence are worthy of our attention.

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Announcements

The Annual Names Institute will be held at Fairleigh Dickinson University, Madison, New Jersey, on the first Saturday in May, 1984. Please write to E. Wallace McMullen, English Dept., Fairleigh Dickinson University, Florham-Madison Campus, Madison, NJ 07940

The Annual Conference on Literary Onomastics will be held in June, 1984, at SUNY Brockport, New York. For details and exact times, write to Grace Alvarez-Altman, SUNY Brockport, Brockport, NY 14420

The Annual Northeast Regional Names Institute will be held in September, 1984. For details, write or call Murray Heller, North Country Community College, Saranac Lake, NY 12983