

Pretty Is as Pretty Says: The Rhetoric of Beauty Salon Names

Albert E. Wilhelm

Kenneth Burke has pointed out that changes in names have overtones of magic. "The magical decree," he claims, "is implicit in all language; for the mere act of naming an object or situation decrees that it is to be singled out as such-and-such rather than as something- other" (5). Burke goes on to assert that any name is a kind of synecdoche — a "fetishistic representative of the named" (24). Hence, in life as well as in literature, a change of name frequently signals a change of identity. No doubt this is what Walter Shandy had in mind when he worried so much about the "strange kind of magic bias, which good names or bad names...irresistibly impress'd upon our characters and conduct" (Sterne 50).

In American popular culture fetishistic names are all around us. We may brush with *Gleem* toothpaste, anoint ourselves with *Joy* perfume, and drive around in an *Eldorado* automobile. Although such names can be found in all facets of our society, they seem to be especially prominent in the beauty culture industry. Names of beauty products provide an abundance of onomastic data that can reveal much about our values and aspirations. In this particular paper, however, I would like to examine not the names of beauty products but rather the names of beauty salons. As early as 1926 an essay in *The American Mercury* commented on the growing flamboyance of beauty salon nomenclature (Fishbein 161-168). Since in recent years this flamboyance has become much more pronounced, the implications of beauty salon names deserve more detailed study.

To obtain a representative but reasonably limited sample of names to be examined, I turned to the yellow pages of the 1983 Denver telephone directory. Directories for bigger cities would have provided larger samples, but the 965 names listed in the Denver directory proved to be adequate for detailed study. In addition, I assumed that the Denver names would be characteristic of those throughout the United States and would not display any pronounced regional or ethnic influence. Actually, several of the salon names in Denver were those

of national chains or franchise operations, and their branches can be found in many locations throughout the country. (The exact number of branch or franchise shops was impossible to determine from the yellow page listings. Some Denver names probably appear in other cities simply by coincidence.)

Before examining the rhetorical devices used in the Denver names, perhaps I should acknowledge some obvious features. One common characteristic is the frequent use of a personal name as a prominent part of the business name. In the Denver listings at least 319 shop names—almost one-third of the total—contained either a personal name or an initial. Obviously such data should not be surprising. Since many beauty salons are small and the services offered quite personal, they are frequently identified by the names of their proprietors. In several cases shop names in the Denver listings featured surnames, but much more frequently they contained given names (ranging from Aaron to Zoe). Apparently these beauty salon operators made heavy use of first names to create an impression of intimacy and individualized attention. Such a practice has been clearly documented in other businesses. Many years ago a study of restaurant names in fifteen Texas towns showed that “thirty-four per cent carried the names of the owners in some form” (Mencken 671). Here too first names were more common perhaps because they tended to promote “a bond of friendship and understanding.”

Another group of beauty salon names contained straightforward references to physical location. This group contained approximately sixty-six separate listings and included names as simple as *East Denver Beauty and Barber Shop* and as elaborate as *Crestmoor Downs Beauty Salon*. Most of these names contained little rhetorical embellishment, but a few apparently tried to capitalize on their addresses to suggest elegance (e.g. *Park Place Hairstyling* and *Polo Club Hair Designers*).

In contrast to these relatively simple names, others displayed much embellishment. As a part of their sales rhetoric the beauty salon names of Denver frequently used some rather contrived sound effects. At least 134 of the names listed made significant use of alliteration, consonance, or rhyme. In some cases the alliteration was painfully crude and focused primarily on the given name of the proprietor. *Bertha's Beauty Boutique* and *Crystals [sic] Cut and Curl* were two notable examples. Alliteration such as this probably functioned primarily as a mnemonic device to impress the name of the shop on the memory of a potential customer. In some other cases, however, the sound effects were more euphonious and seemed almost like incantations. If beauty operators are

workers of spells and dispensers of magic potions, it is quite fitting that their places of work be heralded by phrases such as *Foxy Locks, Hair Flair, Swirl and Curl, Razzle Dazzle*, and *Scissor Wizards*.

One kind of inventive shop name which appeared with great frequency was the name involving a pun. At least fifty-seven of the shop names in the Denver listings contained obvious puns. An important figure of speech in classical rhetoric, the pun had, of course, fallen into total disrepute by the end of the seventeenth century. Although the pun has never been restored to a high level of seriousness, some twentieth-century writers have emphasized its unique rhetorical force. According to James Brown the pun is "a symbolic device which can force us from the pragmatic realm of direct experience into...the magnificent realm of fantasy" (15). Since the pun requires a "simultaneous perception of multiple meanings," it "permits escape from the literal directness of simple names and points toward...incredible freedom of assertion" (14,18).

Evidence to support Brown's assertions can be found in some important works of modern literature. For example, the multilingual puns in Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* are surely worth noting. At the same time, Brown's comments on the power of puns may say more about the mechanics of popular culture than about serious literature. No doubt puns appear prominently in the names of beauty salons because they are rhetorical tools which help to evoke that "magnificent realm of fantasy" which is the beauty salon's major product. The phrase *Shear Magic* is one punning shop name which illustrates the point. In this case the attributive *shear* obviously refers to the action of the hairdresser's scissors, but as a pun it simultaneously suggests the adjective *sheer*, meaning absolute or unqualified. Thus, the sales message proclaimed by the punning name is bold but simple. In the hands of the proper beautician, a mundane pair of scissors can presumably perform magic.

Puns involving the word *shear* appeared in seventeen shop names in the Denver listings, but most names followed the basic pattern described above. One name promised *Shear Art*, another *Shear Style*, and a third *Shear Genius*. Two other names used *shear* to suggest even more sybaritic beauty treatments. One of these establishments bore the enticing name *Shear Pleasure*, while the other called itself *Shear Delight Beauty Salons of Colorado*. Still another shop had an unusually candid and unassuming name—*Shear Honesty Hair Design*. Although this straightforward name seems to be totally free of puffery, it may convey a subtle sales message. Such a name may imply that this shop specializes in artful renditions of the natural look. It promises to discover the real

beauty innately present and waiting to be revealed within each customer. The final shop whose name contained a pun on *shear* was called *Shear's To You*. This approximation of a popular toast is a clever way of emphasizing the importance of each individual customer. It may also suggest that those who patronize the shop will become the center of attention – the recipients of honor and public acclaim.

Several shop names in the Denver listings also contained puns on the term *mane* – usually to suggest the primary or most important element. Names making such claims of pre-eminence included *Mane Event Hair Design*, *Mane Illusion*, and *Mane Street Hair Stylists*. Puns on the word *head* appeared even more frequently to make this same point. Several shops contained the terms *headlines* or *headliners*. One shop called itself *Headquarters*, while another group of beauticians were *Head Honchos*. Still other variations of this pun were *A Head Above*, *A Head of Our Time*, and *Years-a-Head*.

Another common punning word was the verb *cut*. Names such as *Cuttin' Up* and *Cutting Loose* and *Confetti* seemed to associate beauty treatments with mildly mischievous behavior or even with wild abandon. Similarly, names like *Prime Cut* and *A Cut Above* emphasized luxury or exclusiveness.

As one might expect, the punning word used most often and most outrageously in the Denver listings was *hair*. Several of these examples played on the adverb *here* to imply that the shops in question were totally *au courant*. Note, for example, such trendy names as *Roffler Hair and Now*, *Hair's the Rage*, and *Hair It Is*. Puns which exploited the similarity between *hair* and *air* were also numerous. Several of these names evidently attempted to create a jet-setter image. At least half a dozen shops were called hairports, one was called *United Hairlines*, and still another had the names *Hughes Haircrafts*. In even more inventive puns on *hair*, the name *Haircutect* (architect?) offered artful styling and careful construction, *Hair-O-Scope* suggested favorable astrological omens, *Hairizon* implied broad new vistas, and *The Best Little Hair House in Denver* promised good times.

I have noted that several beauty salon names used alliteration and rhyme to produce an incantatory effect. Furthermore, in many names the pun functioned as a kind of linguistic slight of hand – a means of conjuring up a “magnificent realm of fantasy.” Under these circumstances it should not be surprising to discover that many beauty salon names made explicit reference to magic. The mirror, of course, is a basic tool both for the magician and the hairdresser-cum-illusionist, and one shop was appropriately named *Mirror*

Magic. In the same vein another shop owner alluded to Lewis Carroll's world of magic by borrowing the name *Through the Looking Glass*. The word *magic* appeared prominently in names like *Magic Comb* and *Roffler Hair Magic*, and such powers were at least suggested in many names like *Touch of Beauty*, *Hair Wizard*, and *Merlin's Approach*. Finally, the name *Golden Touch II* presumably alluded to alchemy or to the powers of Midas. Names like these suggest, of course, an effortless transformation, and such promises are pervasive in the entire beauty culture industry. As a matter of fact, the word *makeover* has become a mantra-like buzzword of the subculture. A recent volume of the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* (Vol. 42) listed ninety-five articles from popular magazines under the heading "Personal Beauty." Out of these ninety-five articles, fourteen titles, or almost fifteen per cent, contained either *makeover* as a noun or *make over* as a verb. Among the more intriguing titles were "Please Make Me Over," "Sexy Makeovers to Bring Out the Sizzle in You," and "Makeover Magic."

This emphasis on magical makeovers may help to explain the unusual grammatical pattern of several beauty salon names. Most names of business establishments take the form of phrases rather than complete sentences. In the Denver listings, however, several salon names contained complete sentences cast in the imperative mood. If the magical beauty makeover is to be accomplished simply by fiat, then it is entirely appropriate that the shop name give a command. The role of the beautician as sorcerer is clearly established in shop names which order the customer to *Come Alive*, *Renew You*, or *Spruce Up*. Although the name is not present in the Denver listings, I am familiar with one salon called the *Be Lovely Beauty Shop*. Such a name promises much to a potential patron. Most imperative business names would simply order (or strongly request) the purchase of a product or a service. This name, however, might require a complete transformation of the customer. With the help of the beauty shop staff, a customer could cast off the old self and become a new person radiating beauty and all other qualities necessary to inspire affection.

The most common rhetorical strategy in Denver beauty salon names is the one that is probably most used in advertising in general. Hundreds of shop names display some attempt to attract customers by using the mechanism of transfer. According to Clyde R. Miller, transfer is the "device by which the propagandist carries over the authority, sanction, and prestige of something we respect and revere to something he would have us accept" (15). In the case of beauty salon advertising this device attempts to transfer the glamour of some-

thing we lust for to services we are asked to purchase. For example, many names in the listings conveyed an aura of wealth. Allusions to gold were prominent in names like *The Golden Comb*, *Golden Mirror Hair Designers*, *The Golden Razor*, and *Golden Scissors*. References to other precious metals and to gemstones were less common, but the listings did include a *Silver Scissors Beauty Salon* and a *Diamond Cut Hairstyling Salon*. One shop was even called *A Treasure House of Beauty*. Several shops used references to royalty or the aristocracy in names such as *Empress*, *Imperial*, and *Patrician*. Many shops attempted to capture the glamour of the theater or movies through names like *Command Performance*, *Act I Hair Design*, and *Studio One Hairstyling*. Allusions to exotic foreign locales were also numerous. Names in this general category contained references to Europe (*Chambord*, *Touch of Spain*, and *Villa Italia*); to Caribbean and Pacific Islands (*The Bermuda Connection* and *Aloha Beauty Shoppe*); to renowned cities of ancient history (*Helen of Troy*); and even to romantic mythical locations (*Camelot Hair Care* and *Shangra-La Beauty Salon*).

One would naturally expect great variety in the attributive or adjectival portions of beauty salon names. In addition, the Denver listings showed a wide range of substantive terms to identify such businesses. The generic salon appeared occasionally, but it was evidently far too prosaic for the taste of many proprietors. Instead they used nouns referring to all types of buildings, such as castle, chalet, chateau, palace, and villa. Several names referred not to an entire building but to one of its parts. These included the cozy *Archie's Beauty Nook*, the ethereal *Brooks Tower of Beauty*, and the very fundamental *Hair Cellar*. Many names had commercial overtones, but they went far beyond the commonplace *shop* or *shoppe*. Note, for example names such as *Hair Atelier*, *Hair Fair*, *Hair Stall*, *Imperial Tonsorium*, *Image Emporium*, *Parker Hair Exchange*, and *Style Store*. Some names contained no allusions to buildings or to business but suggested instead the great outdoors. The name *La Salle Isle of Beauty*, for example, conjured up an image of a remote island paradise hidden within the bustle of a big city. Several names no doubt reflected the regional culture of the West. For example, one establishment was called *Hair Saloon*, another was named *Hair Corral*, and a third was identified as *Beauty Wagon*. (This final shop even had a drawing of a prairie schooner in its display advertisement.)

Such immense variety in substantive terms is surely striking. A few other groups of business names (names of restaurants or gift shops, perhaps) may also display this sort of inventiveness, but it could hardly be more pronounced. The name of one salon in the Denver listings provides a simple explanation for this

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onomastic diversity. Recognizing our culture's constant hunger for the new and the unique, this particular shop chose a name which promised *Images Unlimited*. Surely the major product of the beauty culture industry is change. It must always offer something more than what it sold the day before. Perhaps, then, an inventive shop name is an attempt to suggest the creative powers of the beauty operator inside. A striking new name is a promise to the customer of a striking new look.

Ultimately, then, the wide range of shop names noted here is a testimony to American inventiveness. All linguists know that a language has or develops a vocabulary to meet the needs of its users. Since the Eskimo, for example, must live within a snowy environment, "his language has many words for many different kinds of snow" (Pyles 16). Since Americans live in a culture that hungers for variety and demands constant promises of a new look, their beauty shop names reflect this commitment. Such names offer a sharp contrast with the onomastic patterns in certain East European countries. Where the prevailing ideology calls for social conformity, the products offered in all stores are virtually identical and those stores are identified merely by numbers rather than distinctive names.

Many of the beauty shop names in Denver show also that we still want to believe in magical power, especially when it relates to hair and hairstyling. Such a desire is not necessarily linked to gender and may be felt by men and women alike. (Indeed, many shop names in Denver and throughout the country prominently advertise "unisex" services.) In traditional symbolism abundant hair suggest fertility, power, and "the will to succeed" (Cirlot 135). Heinrich Zimmer has pointed out that those who take vows of celibacy and asceticism must frequently sacrifice their hair. The "must simulate the sterility of an old man whose hairs have fallen and who no longer constitutes a link in the chain of generation" (157). To be sure, our prevailing folk-religion emphasizes indulgence rather than self-denial and success rather than sacrifice. If the shop names I have examined are representative, then the beautician is apparently the high-priest or priestess in this hirsute cult and the beauty salon is the major locus for its mystic transformations.

Tennessee Technological University

Beauty Salons

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