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The Poetics and Politics of Naming: The Case of Sir Walter Ralegh and His Queen

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Abstract

In a manuscript poem by Sir Walter Ralegh, the poet as "Ocean" makes his complaint to a cold and cruel lady, "Cynthia" (the moon). Naming serves as a counterpoint to his argument, which establishes a dialectic of despair set against hope, the poem ending in an epiphany of faith in an eventual restoration to his lady's favor. The cruel lady is Queen Elizabeth, which gives the poem an added political dimension.

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At the head of a long manuscript poem written in Sir Walter Ralegh's own hand, entitled "The 11:th and last booke of the Ocean to Scinthia,"[1] appear the personifications of Ralegh as *Ocean* and Queen Elizabeth I as the moon-goddess *Cynthia*. The naming of Ralegh as *Ocean* originates with Edmund Spenser who in "Colin Clouts Come Home Againe" names his friend Ralegh, the courtier, seaman, explorer, and poet, the *Shepheard of the Ocean*.[2] The pastoral *shepherd* was conventional style for poets of the period; by assigning Ralegh the role of the ocean's shepherd, Spenser also acknowledges his friend's mastery of seamanship.

Ralegh in *his* poem simplifies his name to the abstraction, *Ocean*. By so doing he avoids the appearance of rivalry with his queen. Spenser's poem had already dubbed her "a great shepheardesse" (line 234); thus Ralegh's naming himself *shepherd* might have suggested an over-familiar equality which he wisely eschewed. Nevertheless, his self-styling manages to establish a more subtle note of intimacy with his queen, for she had called him, as her favorite, by the name of *Water*; he expands the range of personification for himself from *water* to *ocean*.[3]

Although we cannot be sure that the name for the queen, *Cynthia*, originated with Ralegh,[4] we do know that he is credited with having originated the moon cult at Elizabeth's court in the 1580s (Strong 48). By linking the two names, *Ocean* and *Cynthia*, Ralegh reveals tact as well as wit, doubling his reminder of former intimacy in a mutuality of naming, for he in the happy past had been named by her and she had by him been popularized at court by her name.

Moreover, as Stephen Greenblatt observes, these names are

> splendid and suggestive images for the relationship of subject and queen: the ocean eternally drawn by the moon but never reaching her, the moon constantly changing and yet always reaffirming herself, the moon cold, distant, and beautiful. (86)

The names also establish a hierarchical relationship, the moon above, the ocean below, and an elevation of both; the queen as goddess and her favorite as the embodiment of her realm's maritime power.

It is generally believed that Ralegh wrote his poem while imprisoned in the Tower of London, when he was in disgrace with the queen.[5] It is a 522-line complaint which laments the poet's mistreatment at the hands of a cruel but beautiful lady. The names of the title travel in divergent paths with the poem; the poet in despair undercuts the grandeur of his own personification, whereas the name of *Cynthia* is obscured, replaced, and, ultimately, symbolically invoked.

The poem's water imagery lends insight into the process whereby Ralegh's *Ocean* is gradually corrupted, demeaned, and belittled by disappointment and sorrow. The "pleasinge streames" of the past no longer flow "fast to the ocean wendinge" (line 33). The poet's woes are "Lost in the mudd of thos hygh flowinge streames" (line 17). These "streames" are the poet's "thoughts in hygh heauens and below" (line 36), which have been muddied and blocked in his distressed state.

A new image, of waves, entirely rejects the grandeur of his designation as *Ocean*:

> Our Ocean seas are but tempestius waves
> And all things base that blessed wear of late ... (273–74)[6]

and a final reference invokes his name only to reinforce the hopelessness of complaint by a "trobled ocean":

> Words cannot knytt, or waylings make a new.
> Seeke not the soonn in clovdes, when it is sett ...
> On highest mountaynes were thos Sedars grew,
> Agaynst whose bancks, the trobled ocean bett. (481–84)

The water imagery concludes with a reference to the tragic Leander, whose "hoped port" was Hero, "On Sestus shore" (485–88). An unspoken comparison is made ineluctable here as this latter-day Leander seeks his "hoped port," his queen. Leander's tragic fate is suggested by the reproach: "Hero hath left no lampe to Guyde her love" (488). The comparison takes shape in the warning to himself: "Thow lookest for light in vayne" (489). The myth he invokes combines both a reproach and a

warning to the queen, who has "left no lampe" for him, her "trobled ocean."

Cynthia's name undergoes a far different process. Reading the poem as a political plea as well as a poet's complaint we find, beyond tact and wit, an admirably subtle manner of naming. Although there are numerous references to the queen, some specifically defining her as a monarch—"Oh, princely forme" (41); "such love in maiestye" (115); "A Lion" (328)—the name *Cynthia* appears only once within the poem. This occurs as the poet ruminates over his happy past: "What stormes so great but Cinthias beames apeased?" (118) Her name is encased within a question, followed by another question: "What rage so feirce that loue could not allay?" (119) These rhetorical questions are set aside and her name is submerged in silence.

The poet goes on to ruminate over his "mishapp" (124), and to transform the name *Cynthia* into a new, a cognate, name and epithet, *Belphebe*. *Phoebe* is another name for the moon-goddess. The prefix *Bel/Bell* adds the quality of beauty to her personification, which in Ralegh's term becomes *faire*:

> Bellphebes course is now obserude no more,
> That faire resemblance weareth out of date. (271–72)

Belphoebe's name, like Cynthia's, is relegated to the past, which is now "out of date." That "faire resemblance" refers not only to her beauty (a constant theme in the poem), but also to her fairness, her sense of justice.[7] Her semblance, her resemblance, is at one stroke made to serve both attributes of the queen.

This subtle reproach reappears in the second and final reference to the name:

> A Queen shee was to mee, no more Belphebe,
> A Lion then, no more a milke white Dove. (327–28)

The questioning which enveloped the first reference to the name is now gone; she is "no more Belphebe ... no more a milke white Dove." The phrase "no more," repeated twice, underscores the setting aside of the name and establishes a dialectic of hope set against despair. It illuminates the Hero-Leander passage and adumbrates the epiphany to come.

The fair Belphebe is evoked only symbolically at the end of the poem after a final self-admonitory "no more":

> Strive then no more, bow down thy weery eyes,
> Eyes, which to all thes woes thy hart have guided. (491–92)

The dialectic of hope and despair accompanies a burst of passion at the poem's climax, asserting, indeed insisting, that Belphebe, unnamed but signalled by her attribute, her fairness, is "ever faire": "Shee is gonn, Shee is lost! Shee is fovnd, shee is ever faire!" (493) An epiphanic synthesis of the poem's struggle contradicts all the negative musing which precedes it; she is "fovnd," recovered, restored to him, because she has been "ever faire."

We have no record of whether the poem was ever shown to the queen; it is generally agreed that the poem in the fragmentary form in which we have it could not have been shown to her (Duncan-Jones 147; Greenblatt 79).[8] Since there is no agreement on the date (note 5) we cannot judge whether Ralegh's politics of naming succeeded with his queen. The great seaman-adventurer, an ocean reduced to mud, appealling to his queen, a goddess emblematic of all beauty and justice, who in disgrace is denied his calling, seems to be artfully addressing his appeal to the woman beyond the confines of his poem. Whether or not she saw the poem, the last epiphanic moment of hope seems to reach out to her.

Setting aside any extra-textual considerations, the poem's power lies in the hopeless struggle, first evoked by the appeal in its title, of the ocean to the moon. It contains within it a tragic inevitability against which no struggle can avail. The ocean's cry for intimacy with the moon foreshadows by its mythic overtones the essence of true tragedy.

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Notes

1. All references to the poem are to the text in Latham's 1951 edition. Ralegh's hand is identified in Latham's 1929 edition (77). In that edition (172) the manuscript title is written "The 11:th"; in the transcribed text, "The 11th:" (25).

2. The question whether *Shepherd of the Ocean* was a name of Spenser's devising or self-styled by Ralegh is discussed by Horner (198).

3. Spenser clearly considered the queen shepherd-in-chief, for under her charge are placed Triton and Proteus (lines 284–88). Dodge, the editor of the poem, suggests that Triton may be Lord Howard of Effingham and Proteus, Hawkins (810). This leaves Ralegh as shepherd somewhere at third or lower rank in command; Spenser gives him the following lines:

> And I among the rest, of many least,
> Have in the ocean charge to me assigned. (lines 252–53)

Ralegh, within his poem, refers to himself as a *shepherd* (lines 29, 504), but this is

clearly within the poet-shepherd tradition of pastoral poetry and distinct from his official naming of himself as *Ocean*.

Both Bradbrook (34) and Greenblatt (193–94, note 39) consider *Water* to be Elizabeth's nickname for *Walter*; the silent *l* however seems to be the contemporary pronunciation of the name (Kökeritz 152, 311). Nevertheless, the queen's usage seems to have had resonance peculiar to Ralegh himself, for Sir Christopher Hatton, Ralegh's rival for Elizabeth's favor, once sent the queen as a token of reproach a small bucket to signify (and to demean, apparently) *Water* (Bradbrook 34). It might seem, therefore, proper to consider *Water*, at the court at any rate, to be the name Elizabeth had assigned to Ralegh, and that Ralegh's naming himself *Ocean* was designed to strike an intimate note with the queen.

4. Latham (1929 edition 178) discusses a suggestion by Spenser. The origin of the name *Cynthia* is also dealt with by Buchan (468). The importance of the name is discussed by Wilson (316–20).

5. There has been much speculation in assigning a date to the manuscript; much of it is centered on one or another of Ralegh's two prison terms, in 1591 and 1603–12. For arguments for composition in 1592 and before 1603 generally, see Buchan (463ff.), Greenblatt (12–13), and Latham (1929 edition 179); for dating 1603 or after, see Duncan-Jones (143ff.) and Latham (1929 edition 175; 1951 edition xxiv ff.). For summaries of dating, see Latham (1929 edition 175ff; 1951 edition xxiv ff.), Mills (234–35), and Oakeshott (136ff.).

6. The ellipsis here and at the end of line 482 are Ralegh's own marks. Latham (1951 edition 124) believes they may signal some abrupt turn in sense.

7. The word *fair* in contemporary usage meant not only physical beauty, but *fairness* as well (*OED*: "legitimate," "free from injustice").

8. Bradbrook, however, assumes that the queen had seen the poem, and that it helped Ralegh to recover the queen's good graces.

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