Edwin Arlington Robinson's Proper Names

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Tʜᴇ ɴᴀᴍᴇs ᴛʜᴀᴛ Eᴅᴡɪɴ Aʀʟɪɴɢᴛᴏɴ Rᴏʙɪɴsᴏɴ bestows upon the inhabitants of his Tilbury Town are as unforgettable as the characters themselves. Reuben Bright, the big burly butcher who cried like a baby and tore down his slaughter house when his wife died; Miniver Chevvy, the old lush who longed for what was not; Cliff Klingenhagen, the happiest man in town who insisted on drinking wormwood when his friends drank wine; and the most envied man in town, Richard Cory, who went home one night and put a bullet through his head, are four of the residents of the imaginary New England town. Robinson's choice of strikingly original and unusual sounding names adds much to the enjoyment of his poetry. However, pleasure often turns into delight when we discover that the poet selects names for reasons other than mere picturesqueness. Names that strike us originally as colorful or euphonious sometimes play an important part in a poem in the revelation of character. For some of his poetic creations, Robinson borrows appropriate names from persons, real or fictional. His other characters have names susceptible of punning interpretations. Some of the names are subtly constructed to have the appearance of a surname, without actually occurring as surnames. Robinson is deliberate in his selection of names, for it is through the choice of a name that he often artfully betrays a character's motivation or behavior in a poem.

    Some of Robinson's names are obvious borrowings. To the woman of Tilbury Town who warns the people against their worship of the Trinity of the "Dollar, Dove, and Eagle," but whom "None heeded, and few heard," Robinson gives the specially suitable name *Cassandra*. Another equally appropriate borrowing is the name *Amaryllis*. In his edition of Robinson's Tilbury Town poems, Lawrance Thompson has the following note on "Amaryllis."

In the pastoral tradition of poetry, "Amaryllis" is the name which usually represents the type of the perfect or ideal woman, frequently with spiritual or mystical and platonic extensions of meaning. Here, Robinson establishes a wistful and ironic antithesis between the *death* of Amaryllis and the *life* of the modern materialistic age, symbolized by Tilbury Town.[1]

The name of his New England town, as Emery Neff has pointed out, Robinson presumably took from the tilbury, a smart, two-wheeled open carriage often to be seen in the streets of Gardiner, Massachusetts, in the poet's youth.[2]

When Robinson adopts a historical or mythological name for one of his creations, he selects the name of a person with whom his character has a close or even ironic affinity. For the town liar whom the poet crowns "loveliest" "of all authoritative liars," and whom every child loved faithfully, Robinson selects the name *Uncle Ananias*. His reason for doing so is obvious. In the Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament, Ananias is the name of a disciple at Jerusalem who tried to lie even to the Holy Ghost. The Bible is the source of another of Robinson's names. Luke inscribes his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles to Theophilus, a Greek word meaning 'lover of God.' In his poem, "Theophilus," Robinson ironically bestows the name upon a malevolent and devilish old creature whom everyone likes best asleep.

The name of a rather obscure mathematician gives Robinson the name *Bokardo* for his shifty old coward who fashions his own downfall. Bokardo reviles the very people who befriend him, and he is too cowardly to commit suicide even though he derides religion and blasphemes God. In his note to the poem "Bokardo," Mr. Thompson comments that Robinson achieves an added symbolism here by naming the imagined character after a mathematician.[3] Mr. Thompson's comment is pertinent; for there is an implicit irony in naming a cowardly atheist after a scientist in light of the long-standing controversy between science and religion.

The name *Richard Cory* suggests another borrowing. In the sonnet Robinson carefully chooses words befitting a king. Richard Cory was a gentleman from head to foot, or as the poet says, "from sole to crown." Richard Cory was "imperially slim" and "he glittered when he walked." When Robinson says of Richard, "And he was rich—yes, richer than a king—" perhaps he is punning on the

accented syllable of the first name. Not only does Robinson's choice of diction suggest a king-like figure, but the name itself has suggestive overtones of royalty. *Cory* might well have been suggested by *Coeur,* and the complete name *Richard Cory* suggestive of Richard Coeur de Lion, the title given Richard I. By anglicizing and giving his imagined character the name of a king who has come down in history and legend as the embodiment of the romantic medieval knight but who was in reality spiritually corrupt and dissolute, Robinson underlines the contrast between Richard Cory's majestic outward appearance and his inner spiritual bankruptcy.

Perhaps the most interesting of Robinson's proper names are those in which he reveals his punning instinct. The poet's puns are not obvious ones. They are concealed, and the name must be carefully attended before the punning intention is recognized. The proper name is Robinson's favorite medium for his subtle linguistic antics, but his puns on names often have a deeper purpose than just clever word play. Once the play on words is discovered, Robinson's use of the pun as a clue to the character's psychological motivation or behavior becomes apparent.

The poem, "John Evereldown," is an example of Robinson's flair for puns that are valuable in the portrayal of character. The poet has apparently constructed the name from the three words, *ever, held,* and *down,* which collectively convey the idea of having been repressed. Besides the humor of the play on words, the pun helps to explain the character's motivation which, in turn, assists in clarifying the meaning of the poem. John Evereldown fancies he hears the women of the town calling him. Sexual repression has made him a skirt-crazed reprobate who must "follow the women wherever they call." John Evereldown has become a slave to passion and his life is spent on the treadmill of desire.

The name *Eben Flood* in "Mr. Flood's Party" is a second example of Robinson's use of subtle puns. Here Robinson constructs a name that puns on the phrase "ebb and flood," a variant form of "ebb and flow," which refers to the rise or fall of the tide. Figuratively, the phrase is used in speaking of the rise and fall of human fortunes. Shakespeare makes figurative use of the phrase in *The First Part of Henry the Fourth* when Prince Hal says to Falstaff, ". . . for the fortune of us that are the moon's men doth ebb and flow like the sea."

(I, ii, 35–37) Robinson has undoubtedly run together the words *ebb and* to make the first name *Eben* and used the familiar surname *Flood*. Mr. Flood's life is ebbing away in the same town where he has enjoyed life at its flood. In the flood of life, Eben had many friends. Left alone, Mr. Flood is surrounded by strangers; the only friend left is his jug. The appropriateness of the name is pointed up in the concluding lines:

> There was not much that was ahead of him,
> And there was nothing in the town below—
> Where strangers would have shut the many doors
> That many friends had opened long ago.

In creating a name for his bibulous and belated romanticist who "missed the medieval grace of iron clothing," Robinson converted into proper names two nouns suggestive of the days for which his hero sighed. The "child of scorn's" first name puns on the word *miniver,* a fur highly esteemed in the Middle Ages as a part of the costume, and *Cheevy* was no doubt suggested by Chevy Chase, the scene of a famous Border skirmish celebrated in the well-known medieval ballad. Robinson's choice of words associated with "the days of old / When swords were bright and steeds were prancing," shows how he deliberately constructs names to assure a punning interpretation.

Robinson's punning intentions are never on the surface. Sometimes the puns are concealed so well that they almost evade the reader. An example of Robinson's tendency to make hidden puns is the name *Flammonde.* The name is surely a compound of the French words *flam* and *monde* which may be translated together into English as 'light of the world.' Here Robinson is perhaps punning on the translation of the name. The phrase, Biblical in origin, is used frequently in the New Testament. There are references in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, to Christ as the "light of the world," and Jesus speaks of himself in John 8:12 and 9:5 saying, "I am the light of the world." Also there is a close affinity between the characters of Jesus and Robinson's "Prince of Castaways." Flammonde is described as a man "from God knows where," and the description may be interpreted either colloquially as not being able to say where he comes from or literally as God knows where Flammonde comes from. Like Jesus, Flammonde is an enigma to the

people of Tilbury Town. His conduct, his mien, his ethics are so out of the ordinary that everyone is bewildered by the man with "incommunicable ways" who makes the people ponder while they praise. In characterizing one so different from others, Robinson asks, "What small *satanic* sort of kink was in his brain?" The choice of the adjective *satanic* is significant for its implications. Would not the people of Tilbury Town or any town judge a modern-day Christ as a devil rather than a saint?

There is also a parallel between the careers of Flammonde and Christ. Flammonde's acceptance of the woman with "a long-faded scarlet fringe" has its counterpart in Christ's forgiveness of the sinful woman who anointed His feet in a city of Galilee. Flammonde's recognition of the "boy that all agreed / Had shut within him the rare seed / Of learning," is parallel with Jesus' restoration of the deaf and dumb man in the Book of Mark. When Flammonde "said what was wrong / Should be made right" and settled the dispute between the two men who had fought for many years over nothing, there are echoes of Jesus' peaceful reconciliations of ancient rivalries and enemies of long standing. The many similarities between Jesus' and Flammonde's characters as well as the parallels between their careers suggest that the poem is Robinson's re-telling of the Christ story in modern language, and the concealed pun on the name Flammonde gives strength to such an interpretation.

Finally there are names that suggest a punning intention, but the puns are so well concealed that any interpretation offered must be conjectural. One of Robinson's most complex and obscure puns is suggested by the name that he gives the Shylock of Tilbury Town, the unkempt miser whose eyes shone "like little dollars in the dark." Aaron Stark's first name is Jewish in origin, and the name goes back to the first high priest of the Hebrews and the brother of Moses (Exodus 4:14). In the Biblical account of Aaron, his rod or staff turned into a serpent when he cast it before Pharaoh. Later, the rod is supposed to have burst into bloom and bore almonds. Today the botanical term *Aaron's rod* is applied to any of several plants with a tall flowering stem. The Biblical associations with the name are skillfully evoked when Robinson describes Aaron Stark as "A loveless exile moving with a staff."

At first glance, it might be assumed that Robinson used the re-

vered Jewish name with its Biblical overtones and the adjective *stark* as a surname to suggest the utter degeneration of one of God's chosen people. However the poet's frequent use of names containing hidden word play suggests another interpretation. It is possible that Robinson's knowledge of the term *Aaron's rod* suggested both the name and the possibility of making a concealed pun on the name. Using the possessive *s* on the name Aaron as the first letter of the surname and inserting a *t* for euphony, Robinson could have formed the name *Aaron Stark* from the phrase *Aaron's Ark*. The choice of *ark* as the word in the surname to pun upon would have certainly been a fortunate one, for the word has an intimate connection with the history of the Jewish race and is susceptible of several interpretations.

In the Middle Ages an ark was a chest, coffer, covered basket, or other receptacle for storing money, bonds, gold, or other valuables. Webster's New International Dictionary cites the following quotation from Pollock and Maitland as an example of the use of the word in dialectical English:

His (the Jew's) choice of a dwelling place seems to have been confined to those towns which had "*arks*," or as we might say, "loan registries."[4]

If Robinson is punning on either of the above meanings of the word, he is referring to Aaron's money hoard. But the pun increases in complexity when it is recalled that ark can also refer to the oblong chest occupying the most sacred place in the sanctuary in which were the two tables of stone containing the ten commandments. Besides punning on the word *ark* as a place for storing money, Robinson could also be playing on the meaning of *ark* as in Ark of the Covenant. Finally, the ark can be the vessel in which Noah and his family were preserved during the deluge; hence, figuratively speaking, ark may be a place of refuge. Robinson could have chosen the word for all its associations with Jewish history and used it to suggest a multiplicity of meanings. The poet may be playing with the idea of the miser's finding refuge or solace in both his money and his Jewish heritage; hence, his scorn of those that pity him.

Another equally suggestive but somewhat esoteric instance of word play is the name Cliff Klingenhagen. Cliff drinks wormwood as his friends drink wine, but he remains the happiest man in town. Cliff is a spiritual cousin of Mithridates in Housman's "Terence!

This is Stupid Stuff . . ." Cliff takes his bitterness in small daily doses in order to protect himself against any sudden and overwhelming disaster. Klingenhagen is a compound of two German words *klingen* and *hagen*. One of the meanings of the German verb *klingen* in English is to clink or to emit a sound as the one produced by two wine glasses being touched together. The second word may be translated as fence or place fenced in. There is a German idiom in which the word may mean protection against damage done by hail. Klingenhagen is a not unlikely proper name, and Robinson may have selected it for its Germanic sound; but his practice of choosing names with punning interpretations suggests that he might have had in mind the English equivalents when he chose the name and was playing with the idea of clinking wine glasses as a fence or insurance against future misfortune.

American and British literature is long on names suggesting word play. In *The Story of Our Names,* Elsdon C. Smith has cited Scott, Dickens, Bunyan, and Thackeray as examples of writers particularly noted for the apt names they have chosen for their characters; and Mr. Smith comments that Dickens' names are appropriate because they contain a subtle, half-suggestion of words in our language associated with traits embodied in Dickens' characters so named. *Squeers* suggests 'squints' and 'queer'; *Moddle* was weak, bringing to mind 'mollycoddle'; and *Phunky* signifies both 'flunky' and 'funk.'[5] Although Robinson chooses names with puns for many of his Tilbury Town characters, it is improbable that any of his names will ever have the wide popularity of Scott's *Dryasdust* or Sheridan's *Malaprop.* To be generally accepted, the word play in a name must be on the surface and almost immediately perceived. The pleasure that comes from Robinson's name puns is a qualified one; the reader must sometimes exert a great deal of effort to unravel the mystery of the pun. But the reward justifies the effort, for it gives insight into Robinson's nature and reveals a facet of his mind often overlooked.

NOTES

[1] Lawrance Thompson, *Tilbury Town: Selected Poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York, 1953), p. 139.

[2] Emery Neff, Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York, 1948), p. 61.

[3] Thompson, *op. cit.,* p. 136.

[4] *Webster's New International Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass., 1954), p. 149.

[5] Elsdon C. Smith, *The Story of Our Names* (New York, 1950), pp. 260–261.