

"Humors" Names in Shaws Prentice Novels

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THAT BERNARD SHAW USED "humors" names in his plays as an important device in characterization is well known. That the device first appeared in Shaw's prentice work during his youthful novelist days is not. A detailed study of this predilection in the plays appears as "What's in a Name," an appendix to Arthur Nethercot's treatise on Shavian characterization, *Men and Supermen* (Harvard, 1954). There Professor Nethercot writes:

It is noteworthy, indeed, that the habit of using such designations does not begin to set in until he begins to write plays of his own. It is scarcely noticeable at all in the novels. Consequently, when in the last of these, *An Unsocial Socialist*, Sidney (after Sidney Webb?) Trefusis in his rustic disguise takes the name of Jeff Smilash, which he ultimately explains as "a compound of the words smile and eyelash. A smile suggests good humour; eyelashes soften the expression and are the only features that never blemish the face," the reader is struck by the introduction of a new type of nomenclature, which is followed up in Shaw's first play, *Widowers' Houses*, with such names as Lickcheese . . .¹

Weaned on Fielding, Smollett, Dickens, Thackeray and Lever, Shaw was unlikely to wait to use "humors" nomenclature until he had abandoned novel writing and tried his pen at playwriting. While completing his first novel, *Immaturity*, in 1879 (more than a dozen years before *Widowers' Houses* was completed), he had written many hack essays and journalistic pieces, hoping to hawk them among the numerous ephemeral publications then adding to London's refuse disposal problem. One of the few pieces to find a buyer—editors were repelled by Shaw's over-careful prose—was an essay entitled "Christian names," which appeared in *One and*

¹ *Men and Supermen*, p. 292.

All on October 11, 1879. For it the author received fifteen shillings.

The essay itself shows interest in the connotative power of nomenclature already generated, Shaw warning parents against capricious endowment of offspring with eccentric or ludicrous names. The twenty-three year old author further insisted on the necessity for selecting appropriate names, and iterated his basic rules of nomenclature. "Never confer," he wrote, "an uncommon name, or peculiar combination of common names, which has been borne by any personage known to history. A person so christened resembles a jackdaw with a peacock's tail. . . ."²

In Shaw's first novel—completed by the time "Christian Names" was published—his interest in connotative nomenclature is readily apparent. From the author's own testimony we may observe first of all that Cyril Scott, the painter in *Immaturity*, owed his surname to Shaw's mistaken belief that his prototype, the young artist Cecil Lawson, was a Scot.³ Scott's Christian name, it is easily seen, is as close to the original as Shaw could safely come. (Lawson, though failing in health at the time of the writing of the novel, was still alive.) Halket Grosvenor, patron of painters in the novel—who purchases and exhibits Scott's landscapes—seems endowed with an appropriate surname from the recently opened Grosvenor Gallery in London; while Robert Smith (the author's barely-hidden *alter ego*) keeps the books for the rug merchants Figgis and Weaver. The first Shavian "slapstick" name appears in *Immaturity* also, in the person of Mr. Woodward's grave footman, Cornelius Hamlet.

Miss Marian Lind (later Mrs. Ned Conolly) in *The Irrational Knot* (1880) appears first as an amateur soprano of such mediocre talents that her surname—echoing that of the great Jenny Lind, who had retired to a country seat in Malvern ten years earlier—may have been jejune Shavian humor. Lady Constance Carbury in the same novel remains constant throughout her playboy-fiancé Marmaduke Lind's sinful cohabitation with Lalage Virtue, a vivacious music-hall actress with a conspicuous disregard for conventional standards of virtue. Mme. Virtue's off-stage name—Susanna

² Archibald Henderson, *George Bernhard Shaw: Man of the Century* (New York, 1956), p. 283.

³ Bernhard Shaw, Preface to *Immaturity* (London, 1931), p. xliii.

Conolly—may be an attempt to indicate her American origin: from the land of “Oh! Susanna” no doubt. Also in the cast of *The Irrational Knot* is Elinor McQuinch (“McQuench” as late as the novel’s serialization in Annie Besant’s monthly *Our Corner*⁴), whose flow of acid discourse is seldom shut off.

In *Cashel Byron’s Profession* (1882) the boxer-hero, Byronic in physique, attends a Sunday evening lecture by a German professor addicted to ponderous generalizations, Herr Abendgasse. Always deft in delineating secondary characters, Shaw created one of his supporting-cast masterpieces in Bashville, the bashful, village-bred footman to the priggish young millionairess whom Cashel, too, loves (at first) from a great distance.

At the sign of the Green Man in the village he was known as a fluent orator and keen political debater. In the stables he was deferred to as an authority on sporting affairs, and an expert wrestler in the Cornish fashion. The women servants regarded him with undissembled admiration. They vied with one another in inventing expressions of delight when he recited before them, which, as he had a good memory and was fond of poetry, he often did. They were proud to go out walking with him. But his attentions never gave rise to jealousy; for it was an open secret in the servants’ hall that he loved his mistress. He had never said anything to that effect, and no one dared allude to it in his presence, much less rally him on his weakness; but his passion was well known for all that, and it seemed by no means so hopeless to the younger members of the staff as it did to the cook, the butler, and Bashville himself. Miss Carew . . . had no suspicion that she was waited on by a versatile young student of poetry and public affairs, distinguished for his gallantry, his personal prowess, his eloquence, and his influence on local politics.⁵

In the fifth—and last—of Shaw’s completed novels, *An Unsocial Socialist*, appears the aforementioned Jeff Smilash, who is attracted to the wily and appropriately named Agatha Wylie. Sidney Trefusis (Smilash *sans* disguise), as Nethercot indicates, may be Shaw’s left-handed compliment to his friend Sidney Webb, who

⁴ Bernhard Shaw, *The Irrational Knot, Our Corner*, XII (January, 1886), 39.

⁵ Bernhard Shaw, *Cashel Byron’s Profession* (New York, 1907), pp. 98–99. Later, when Shaw transformed the novel into a blankverse parody of Elizabethan drama, *The Admirable Bashville* (1901), the Crichton-like footman — this was before Barrie’s play — became the title role.

in personality (although not in his devotion to the socialist cause) was at the opposite pole from the quixotic hero of the novel.

In nomenclature the Shavian novels seem to anticipate the connotative technique of the plays. However the Shaw of the novels was immature in the handling of the materials of the novelist. Only flashes of the later Shaw are visible in the earlier *opera*, although an increasing sureness of hand is evident through each succeeding fiction. Here nomenclature supplies a minor clue to G. B. S.'s year-by-year progress as an artist. In the first two fictions his use of names is juvenile, although his interest in "humors" application of them is already manifest. In his third—*Love among the Artists*—no obvious use of "humors" nomenclature is evident. The fourth and fifth of the completed novels show increasing deftness in the use of connotative names: Shaw was almost ready to transfer the technique to the medium which he soon was to discover more congenial to his gifts—the drama.

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Faubus. — No American who reads newspapers or listens to the radio could have avoided during the last six months stumbling over the American family name Faubus and wondering what this somewhat unusual name means and where it came from. The *Dictionary of American Family Names* by Elsdon Smith, past president and member of the Editorial Board of the *ANS*, gives this information:

Faubus (German). From Phoebus (bright), a name taken by Jews as equivalent to Me'ir and Uriboth with the same meaning.