

# Obscene Names and Naming in Folk Tradition

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IN HIS BRIEF INTRODUCTION to that pioneering venture into serious consideration of traditional erotica which appeared in a recent issue of the *Journal of American Folklore*,<sup>1</sup> Frank Hoffman pointed out that this field of study had received virtually no recognition by folklorists until the symposium of which he was chairman met to consider this matter in the winter of 1960. Hoffman and his colleagues made us clearly aware of the problems inherent in the systematic study and analysis of this area of folklore. They also reminded us of our obligation as scholars to consider all facets of folk experience and expression as objectively as possible and that, if mass acceptance of scholarly findings is not yet upon us, they should at least be made available to serious students of the discipline by way of articles in professional journals.

This paper will, therefore, be a consideration of erotica, or preferably *obscenity*, in the area of *nomenclature*. To my knowledge this has not yet been seriously attempted. Although much is known on this subject, and even more is assumed, very little if anything has been brought together in any systematic fashion for careful and considerate analysis. I hope, in this paper to present a brief, objective, and necessarily cautious introduction to obscene nomenclature by first presenting some kind of theoretical framework for its examination, followed by a tentative typology of such names, and a representative sampling of the relevant folklore.

## I

At the outset, it is necessary to define and delimit our subject and to place it in the proper perspective. As implied above, I

<sup>1</sup> "Symposium on Obscenity in Folklore," *Journal of American Folklore*, LXXV (1962), 189-265.

prefer the term *obscene* to *erotic* to avoid the more obvious limitations of the latter word. *Erotic* tends to be confined to the sexual realm, referring to the amatory desires and practices of human beings. It usually excludes those other acts or objects of a "private nature," those having to do with the bodily functions of elimination. Both sets of behavior, however, have come to be defined as obscene or offensive in our culture and to be regarded as inimical to the standards of common decency and morality, if not good taste or refinement. *Obscenity* is thus a more inclusive term.

What makes something obscene? I accept the proposition that there is nothing inherent in any act or symbol which suggests obscenity but that it is arbitrarily regarded as such by a particular group of persons in a particular cultural context. As the anthropologist Leslie White has pointed out, the meaning of any symbol is never "derived from or determined by properties intrinsic in its physical form."<sup>2</sup> There is nothing about the word *shit* (or the name *Schitt*), for instance, that would in any way denote the excretory function. There is nothing about the excretory act which would account for the meaning of the symbol attached to it. Neither is there any reason why the excretory function in itself should be regarded as obscene. Indeed, in many societies and among medical persons in our own, it is considered a perfectly natural topic for ordinary conversation. But the *average* person in our society is inclined to assume a negative attitude toward the excretory symbol and its referent, as toward the sex act and its relevant symbolism, defining them as stimuli likely to arouse feelings of lust. This seems to be even more true of excretory behavior, for the increased lessening of restraints which tend to characterize the new sexual morality in this country has not yet extended to the bodily functions. Most Americans are still self-conscious about elimination and feel uncomfortable when they must communicate this type of experience to others; as when one may have to mention, say, to a physician that he's "been having difficulty moving (his) bowels," or that he "has an unbearable itch just above the testicles." It is all apparently a reflection of our attitude that sex and bodily functions are "private affairs," not to be shared among persons, even close friends. So married couples often prefer to eliminate in private;

<sup>2</sup> "The Symbol: The Origin and Basis of Human Behavior," *Etc: A Review of General Semantics*, I (1944), 229-237.

children are not encouraged to dress or undress in the presence of their brothers or sisters of the opposite sex; bathroom doors are often closed, even for washing or shaving.<sup>3</sup>

A symbol's meaning, according to White, has been arbitrarily determined by the persons who have created the symbol and make use of it. Certain types of behavior have been popularly defined or evaluated in our culture as "obscene" because they are feared to arouse sex feelings which are viewed as unhealthy to the society. But such arousal need not occur and would not if such definitions were not given. (*Whence* this definition is an historical problem which does not concern us here.) Bodily elimination and the sex act are vital processes, and thus universal and necessary. An obscenity definition of them, however, is not. "Obscenity" comes with the suppression of a behavior – its characterization as "forbidden" or "taboo" (as with belching in our society) or with its restriction to certain sectors of human experience – in the privacy of the bedroom or the bathroom and with a minimum of vocalization about it. Violations of the obscenity taboos are generally responded to negatively. When we hear certain words, defined as "obscene," uttered in ordinary conversation or when we are confronted with its referent behavior, we are likely to feel shocked or embarrassed, or we may pretend that we really didn't hear it or that it means something else.

On the other hand, under certain conditions, these same behaviors and/or their symbolic representations may be treated humorously. Instead of avoiding the taboo symbols they may be joked about, perhaps reflecting either the popular tendency to make light of a serious matter or (as Allen Walker Read suggests) the desire to seek a thrill by "doing the forbidden."<sup>4</sup> But the very

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<sup>3</sup> Moreover, euphemisms are freely employed for such "private affairs" (itself the classic euphemism). See H. L. Mencken's discussion of "Forbidden Words" in his *American Language*, Supplement I, (New York, 1945), pp. 639ff.

<sup>4</sup> Allen Walker Read, *Lexical Evidence from Folk Epigraphy in Western North America: A Glossarial Study of the Low Element in the English Vocabulary* (Paris, 1935), p. 9.

The use of offensive nomenclature may also serve as a political weapon. In the early nineteen twenties, at the peak of the Socialist fervor in Italy, some parents are known to have vented their hostility toward the existing political, religious, and moral systems of the country by giving their children ridiculous or offensive (and even obscene) names. Though, somehow, it was felt that this would be suf-

fact that we find humor in *these* behaviors and symbols connotes obscenity. When we ridicule persons bearing certain kinds of names, saying how we'd die if we had to go through life with a name like "Mary Schitts," for instance, so that Mary is made to feel that she should change it as soon as she can, we are demonstrating our sensitivity to this sort of thing. Telling stories such as those related in this paper for their titillating effect when their humor is no more intrinsic than an account of a man shaving or brushing his teeth, or laughing at names like "Mary Schitts," whereas surnames like Toothaker or Shaver, not uncommon in this country, are met with matter-of-factly, is no different from leering at pictures of nude women instead of accepting them as being as natural as a still life or a pastoral scene.

Thus it is the context in which any symbol is used rather than the symbol itself which makes it obscene; how, for instance, a transmitter of an item of folklore may regard that item or how his audience may receive or define it should determine its obscene significance. By implication, then, what is defined as obscene or offensive will necessarily vary from group to group or even from individual to individual within a group as well as from one time to another. For instance, certain names which Americans today tend to define as obscene had no such connotation in Medieval England when they were more common. Charnock, in his classic and reasonably reliable *Ludus Patronymicus* (London, 1868), an etymology of curious

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ficiently insulting to the despised regime, apparently no thought was given to the effect such names as Massacre, Anarchy, Lucifer, Freethought, and Lustful would have on the children. Finally, when the practice seemed to be getting out-of-hand, a law was passed prohibiting the indiscriminate selection of children's names and providing for the substitution of "acceptable" names for those already given. (*The New York Times* [July 18, 1927], p. 6: 7.)

Paul Tabori, in *The Art of Folly*, notes a similar practice during the French Revolution when the disavowal of the traditional Saint's Calendar and anything else smacking of clericism led to a new patriotic fervor encouraging the adoption and assumption of names reflecting a new free spirit of creativeness and imagination. Some of the "oddities" to come out of this movement are given on pages 152-153 of his book.

Another example of the insult function of offensive naming was sent to me by Louis Feipel of Brooklyn, New York who pointed out that "Mrs. Barbauld, the sister of Dr. Aiken, was facetiously called 'that pleonasm of nakedness' by Coleridge, the idea of nakedness being reduplicated and reverberated in the two syllables of her name — 'bare' and 'bald.'"

English surnames, points out that the origin of such names as *Goose* (and *Goosey*), *Cock*, *Bottom*, *Puss(e)y*, *Rape*, *Sex*, *Suckbitch*, *Urine*, *Pisse*, and *Vulgar* were not at all what they now suggest to us.

*Bottom*, for instance, referred to a bottom or valley and appears also as part of such not uncommon names as *Bottomley*, *Higginbottom*, and *Winterbottom*.<sup>5</sup> *Cock*, alone or as the stem of many other names, may be derived from the rooster (the French *coq*) or is, more likely, an appendant term of endearment as in *Hitchcock* (little Richard) or *Allcock* (little Hal, for Henry).<sup>6</sup> *Puss(e)y* comes from *Pewsey* or *Pusey* which are parishes in Wiltshire and Berkshire.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, *Goosey*, is a tithing in the parish of Stanford-in-the-Vale, Berkshire, while *Goose* comes from the Cornish *gûs* (a wood), or else is a corruption of *gasse* (Danish for gander) or even a translation of the German *gans*.<sup>8</sup> *Rape*, Charnock suggests, is a corruption of *Rolfe*.<sup>9</sup> *Sex* (like *Six* or *Sax*) might stem from the Anglo-Saxon *Seaxa*, meaning a Saxon, which, itself, might derive from *seax* (a dagger or short sword) suggesting that the Saxons were persons who used such implements.<sup>10</sup> *Urine*, which has a Cornish counterpart in *Euren*, derives from the Cornish *voren* (strange); or it could be a corruption of *Uren* (not uncommon as a surname in many parts of the United States) from the old personal name *Urwyn* (Irvine); or it could have come from *Irvine*, a parish in Ayrshire (also spelled *Irwyn* and *Irwine*).<sup>11</sup> *Pisse*, according to Charnock, is a variant of the name *Piesse*, and he quotes Lower to the effect that the *Piesse* family came to England from Bretagne following the revocation of the Edict of Nantes and that their "name was derived from the order of knighthood created in 1560 by Pope

<sup>5</sup> Charnock, p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17. (Charnock claims, erroneously, that Hitchcock derives from *Isaac*. Actually, *Hitch* is a pet form of Richard.)

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79. (*Pussy* once referred to a girl, much as "broad" does today; in this country it signifies the female copulative organ.)

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91. (Cf. Robert Ferguson, *English Surnames and Their Place in the Teutonic Family* (London, 1858), p. 218.)

<sup>11</sup> Charnock, p. 125. (Henry Barber, in *British Family Names, Their Origin and Meaning* (1903), p. 267, suggested that the name might have had a Welsh antecedent in *Urien* [heavenly]. *St. Urien*, a locality name, was of probable Norman origin.)

Pius IV" and corrupted into *Pies* or *Piesse*.<sup>12</sup> Even the name *Vulgar* may be traced to the Saxon *ulf-ger* (very helping.)<sup>13</sup>

Sometimes, obscene-sounding names occur as variations in spelling or distortions of other names due to a misunderstanding in oral transmission. Lillian Lowry tells of a white female from western Kentucky whose name *Feelyer* might have been a corruption of *Ophelia*.<sup>14</sup> *Crap* and such related forms as *Crapp*, *Crappe*, *Krapp*, and *Krappe* were probably orthographic variants of the name *Crabbe* (or *Krabbe*, the German or East Frisian spelling) which suggests one who dealt in crustaceans; or else it refers to persons who walked like crabs or who were ill-tempered, irksome, or unpleasant (alleged crab-like qualities; hence persons who "crab a lot.")<sup>15</sup>

It may not be too unlikely that some of our "obscene" names in English have followed what Robert Ferguson once suggested is "the tendency to corrupt toward a meaning."<sup>16</sup> A name which has no apparent meaning in the language of a particular generation is likely to be forgotten or as little ready to be brought to mind as one whose meaning is clear to those who must deal with it. A name which refers to a familiar item or action is often the better remembered. This might explain the presumed derivation of such names as (1) *Death* from *D'Aeth*, denoting one who came from the city of Ath in Belgium's Hainault Province;<sup>17</sup> (2) *Body* from the Anglo-Saxon *Boda* (a messenger) or the Old Norse *Boddi*, a diminutive of *Bödvarr* (wary in battle);<sup>18</sup> (3) *Smellie* from *Smeley*, an Essex place name, or possibly from *Semilly*, a Norman name, or from the Anglo-Saxon *smala*, *smael*, or *smel* meaning small;<sup>19</sup> (4) *Ass* which Ferguson suggests may derive from the Old Norse *assa* (eagle), if not from the animal of that name, better known to us as the

<sup>12</sup> Charnock, p. 75.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>14</sup> "Christian Names in Western Kentucky," *Midwest Folklore*, III (1953) 131-136.

<sup>15</sup> P. H. Reaney, *A. Dictionary of British Surnames* (London, 1958), p. 81. (Cf. Ferguson, *op. cit.*, p. 183.)

<sup>16</sup> Charnock, *op. cit.*, p. xiv.

<sup>17</sup> Reaney, *op. cit.*, pp. 91-92.

<sup>18</sup> Barber, *op. cit.*, p. 98; and George F. Black, *The Surnames of Scotland: Their Origin, Meaning, and History* (New York, 1946), p. 85.

<sup>19</sup> Barber, p. 243; and Ferguson, *op. cit.*, p. 303.

donkey (Old Norse *ess* or *esse*);<sup>20</sup> (5) *Belch* or *Belcher* from the French *belchere*;<sup>21</sup> (6) *Bare* from the Old English *baer* meaning unarmed, defenseless, deserted, or indigent;<sup>22</sup> (7) *Gotobed* which, according to Lower, might have been derived from the example of a lazy person who slept too much,<sup>23</sup> but which might also have come from the Old Germanic *gott-bet*, meaning "pray to God," or from *Guth-beade* (Anglo-Saxon "war counselor"), or from *Boda* (see above);<sup>24</sup> and (8) *Suckbitch*, a family name in the west of England which has been traced back to the fourteenth century and may have been derived from *sokespic* which may be nothing more than chaw-bacon.<sup>25</sup> [Charnock, however, believes it came from *soc* (liberty) and *spic* (bacon) or possibly the Old French *spec* (an inspector)].<sup>26</sup> In any case, it has nothing whatever to do with bitches sucking.

Still other names found in Medieval English sources and current in our day have derivations that lack any significance of the obscene. Those milder forms of obscenity encountered as American surnames – *Hell* and *Damm* – were not unknown in the 13th century. *Hell* and *Helle* were surnames denoting residence at the side of a hill, or were possibly variants of *Ellis*.<sup>27</sup> Most of the *Hell*(s) in America, however, are of German descent; *Hell* denotes an ancestor's origin in Halle or near *Halle*, a city on Saxony-Anhalt. Similarly, *Damm*, of Old English as well as modern German or

<sup>20</sup> Ferguson, pp. 94, 164.

<sup>21</sup> M. A. Lower, *Patronymica Britannica: A Dictionary of the Family Names of the United Kingdom* (London, 1860), p. 30.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>24</sup> Charnock, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

<sup>25</sup> E. S. in *Notes & Queries*, 1st Series, V (May 1, 1852), 425.

<sup>26</sup> Charnock, *op. cit.*, p. 108. (A similar sounding name was *Sucksmith*, borne by at least one family in the West Riding, Yorkshire. A correspondent to *Notes & Queries* (4th series, III, [June 19, 1869], 579) believed that this name was a corruption of *Soke Smith* (i.e. parish smith, from the Danish "sogn smed"). Just as in feudal times lords often gave a local miller a monopoly over the milling of flour and meal for the parish (the mills were called "soke mills") similar exclusive franchises may have been given to smiths, and this could have accounted for the name. Thus, *Sucksmith* may simply have been "blacksmith." Another correspondent (*Ibid.*, V [June 18, 1870], 590) suggested that the *Sucksmith* progenitor was a country blacksmith who specialized in making coulters, called "sucks" in local dialect; this word coming from the Norman-French "soc" meaning a ploughshare or coulter.

<sup>27</sup> Reaney, *op. cit.*, p. 160.

Dutch derivation, was a name given to dwellers at the site of a dam or dike.<sup>28</sup>

Other offensive-sounding names not infrequently found today but which had more innocent origins are *Bowel(ls)*, *S(c)hit(t)* and its many other variants, *Outhouse*, *Backhouse*, *Leak(e)*, *Fock* (*Foch*, *Focke*, *Fook*, *Fooke(s)*, *Fowke*, *Fewkes*, *Fuke*, *Fuchs*, etc.), *Rape*, *Hug*, *Kiss*, *Hoar*, *Loose*, *Pickup*, *Virgin*, etc.<sup>29</sup>

*Bowel(ls)* might be derived from *Bouelles*, the name of a town in the Seine-Inférieure which was brought to England by the Norman invaders and preserved as *Bowells* in Essex. It is also the Welsh patronymic form of *Howel(ls)* as *ap Howel(ls)* (much as *Pew* or *Pugh* formed from *ap Hugh*.)

*Schitt*, the English transliterative form of the German *Schütt*, refers to a heap or pile of anything (e.g. straw). Reaney suggests, as well, a derivation in Old English *scytta* (shooter or archer).

*Outhouse* is relatively modern as a name and derives from the German *althaus* (old house), but *Backhouse* was the 14th century English *bakehouse* and was given as a name to a person who worked in or for a bakery. *Leak(e)* may be the Old English *lēac*, referring to a plant similar to the onion; and a person with this name would have been a dealer in leeks.

*Fock* and its many variants, as names, may go back to the 12th and 13th centuries and were English derivatives of the Old German *Fulco* meaning people. More recent sources are the Germanic *Fuchs* (fox) and the Dutch *Fokker* (cattle or stock breeder). *Rape*, from *Raper*, is the north England form of *Roper* and is derived from *rāp* (Old English, meaning rope or rope maker).

*Hug* stems from the Old English *ugga*, a diminutive of *ūhtræd*, while *Kiss*, comparatively recent as surnames go, is from the Hungarian *kis* (or *kicsi*) meaning little. It is often found as a surname in Hungary.

*Hoar(e)* and *Hore* (though not *Whore*) can be traced to the Old English *hār* meaning grey-haired or to *ore*, a Sussex place name referring to a dweller by the bank. *Loose* is a Kentish place name.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88. Cf. Cecil L'Estrange Ewen, *A History of Surnames of the British Isles* (London, 1931), p. 323.

<sup>29</sup> The following paragraphs are derived from Reaney, *op. cit.*, pp. 41–2, 295, 18, 197, 123, 276, 171–172, 166, 204, 251, and 336, respectively.



*Pickup* was a Lancashire place name. *Virgin*, as a not infrequent surname in England, even to the present time, probably has nothing whatever to do with the sexual purity of its original bearers. Bardsley suggested that the name may have been bestowed on the man who played the Holy Mother in a Medieval miracle play. Ferguson, however, claimed a Scandinavian origin with a different meaning which was also manifested in the names *Virgo* and *Virgine*.

Although, as we have seen, most obscene-sounding names were not intended to signify what they seem to today, there were a few isolated examples in the Middle Ages of the witting bestowal of obscene names for the purpose of ridicule. These were given originally as nicknames with a few being passed on as surnames to succeeding generations. One such sobrenome which probably did not become hereditary was *Bastard*, having the same meaning it does today. However, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries it did not have the stigma it later came to have and was even proudly borne by some of the more influential Englishmen of the time, including William the Conqueror.

Some names of this variety were simply caricatures of their bearers; e.g. *Smallbyhynd*, which might have been a fitting indication of the size of the so-named's buttocks. Similarly, Alan *Swete-in-bedde* and John de *Halfnaked* may suggest some discernible characteristics of these persons.<sup>30</sup> *Rump(e)* was not uncommon as early as the eleventh century and derives from the Middle English, in which it denotes the hindquarters or buttocks of any animal. According to Reaney, it was used as a mark of contempt for the person so named.<sup>31</sup> *Butt*, a Middle English personal name as early as the twelfth century, was probably derived from a nickname referring to a heavyset individual; the word denoted the "thicker end" or stump of something.<sup>32</sup> *Belch(er)*, at least in some cases, may have testified to the bearer's habit of eructating after a heavy meal (from the Old English *baelc* or *baelce*, meaning a belch).<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Both of these names were listed in old Oxford registrars.

<sup>31</sup> Reaney, *op. cit.*, p. 278.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29. It may also have come from the French *but* denoting a target for shooting, the name referring to a person who resided "near the archery butts," or even signifying the archer himself. (Reaney, p. 29.)

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

## II

A *working typology* of what today might be considered "obscene"-sounding names in England and America would consist of four categories<sup>34</sup>:

(1) a type of *general obscenita* which would include such names as *Vulgar*, *Queer*, and *Sewer*, as well as *Hell* and *Damm*;

(2) names alluding to the more *intimate parts of the human body*, which may be subdivided into

(a) *general body names* like *Body* itself and *Bodily*, as well as *Bare* and *Wetebody*;

(b) names denoting or suggesting the *male sex organs* like *Prick(e)* and *Pricksmall*, *Balls*, *Dick*, *Badcock* and *Highcock* (or any other cock), and *Crotch*;

(c) names deriving from the *female sex organs* like *Teat(es)*, *Teet(es)*, *Ti(ts)*, and *Titter*, *Nipple*, *Bust*, *Papps*, *Utter*, *Bosom*, *Breast*, *Puss(e)y*, and *Maidenhead*; and

(d) names referring to the *rear end* such as *Ass*, *Rump(e)*, *Butt*, *Rear*, *Smallbyhynd*, *Sourbut(ts)*, *Sowerbutts*, and *Bottom*;

(3) names suggesting the *intimate bodily functions* like

(a) those of *urination* such as *urine* and its variants (including *Uren*, *Uran*, etc.), *Leak(e)* and *Leakey*, *Holdwater*, *Outwater*, and *Passwater*, *Peed*, *Pisse*, *Pistor*, *Piddle*, *Pesewips*, and *Pissant*, *Wiwi*, *Bladder*, and *Wetmore*.

(b) those of *defecation* such as *Bowel(ls)*, *Schitt* and its variants, *Krapp(e)*, as well as *Laxative* and *Constipation*;

(c) those having to do with the *outcome of bodily functions* such as *Decay* and *Dekay*, *Odor* and its variants, *Smelly* and *Smellie*, *Stink(er)* and *Stank(er, y, and o)*, *Reaks*, and *Filth(y)*;

(d) those relating to the *place* where such functions occur such as *Outhouse*, *Backhouse*, *Latrina*, *Commode*; and

(e) those having to do with *eructation* like *Belch(er)*, and *Spit-fathom*;

(4) names suggesting *erotic activities and their personnel* such as *Sex*, *Intercourse*, *Gotobed*, *Vice*, *Fock* and variants, *Rape* and *Wrape*, *Laid*, *Screw*, *Quicklove*, *Hug*, *Kis(s)*, *Kisswetter*, *Buss*, *Popkiss*, *Goose(y)*, *Suck* (and *Sucklick* and *Sucksmith*), *Virgin*, *Pickup*, *Bitch*, *Hoar(e)* and *Hore*, and *Loose(ly)*, and, finally, *Bastard*.

<sup>34</sup> These are actual names. Each has been authenticated by the writer who has, in his possession, particulars on their bearers.

## III

What follows is a sampling of obscene name lore in the English language, drawn from the unsolicited contributions of correspondents as well as gleanings from casual conversations and systematic ventures into the field. Informants, though for the most part matter-of-fact about their contributions, offering few apologies and manifesting little embarrassment over them, generally preferred to remain anonymous when asked if their names could be mentioned as sources of data. In identifying their own sources, they would limit their remarks to "a friend told me this" or "it's common knowledge hereabouts." Thus, few sources will be given for the items in this accumulation. In a few cases, however, variants in published literature will be referred to, and related items and issues will be presented as asides. No attempt will be made to deliberately structure the items in the sample around the conventional folklore genres, for most of them are simply anecdotal in form.

In view of the "indelicate nature" of the material in his collection, the writer feels that it might be discrete to begin with the less offensive references to *Hell* and *Damm*. Here punlore, in particular, is nonpareil as it recounts the name-changing predilections and efforts of those burdened with such names; like a Mr. *Damm* of Tennessee who was permitted to change his name after he'd complained to a local court that a publisher of souvenir postcards was selling his family's portrait under the title "the whole *Damm* family."

Several classic cases of changes in the name *Hell*, which seems to be more likely than *Damm* to inspire such acts, are often recounted in lawyer circles. A German-born resident of Portland, Oregon named *Otto Hell* was permitted by a local judge to take the name *Hall* when he pointed out how his neighbors and associates took pleasure in calling him by his surname and the initial of his given name. Another *Otto Hell* was an optometrist who complained that persons in need of glasses were always being told to "go to *Hell* and see." This is analogous to the numerous punning references to *Helen Hunt*. As a folk type she seems to have had more than her share of allusions. She is, for example, nearly always in charge of lost-and-found departments, especially in department stores, and of pharmacies in hospitals, and supply closets in public schools; and new personnel, as part of their institutional "initiation," are al-

ways being sent to her. Similarly, it seems that nearly every hospital has (or used to have) its *Helen Highwater*, head nurse, and interns beginning their service are always advised to consult with her in learning their way around the wards. One also can't help mentioning in this context the nineteenth century American novelist who inspired irreverent punsters to announce that they were going to *Helen Hunt Jackson's grave*. Typical of the *Helen Hunt* anecdotes in oral circulation is the one about Mrs. Jackson who, while still Hunt, is said to have once found a money purse in a church pew after the morning's service. The preacher, when she informed him of it, advised her to hold on to it and that he'd announce it at the evening's service. That night, he addressed the congregation to the effect that a money purse had been found in the church and that the owner can go to *Helen Hunt* for it. The preacher, we are told, was met with a tittering response from his congregation.

Sometimes the humor in a name like *Hell* comes from an error in spelling. One of the several possible ways of responding to a person whose name one happens not to have caught on the first introduction is to ask if it's spelled with an "e" or an "i." Though this is often effective, there was at least one time when it didn't work. The narrator relates that "at a recent party I was introduced to a young woman whose name was rather hastily given. When asked whether she spelled it with an 'e' or an 'i' she got very angry and refused to speak to me for the rest of the evening. I later found out that her name was *Hill*."

A story once popular in Nashville, Tennessee is of the grammar school principal who was escorting the members of the local school board around to his various classrooms. In an effort to show his guests how effective the instruction had been under his administration, he asked the teacher in one classroom if she would question her pupils on what they had been learning. She started off with some fairly simple questions, and working up to the progressively harder ones, she began to focus her attention on the brighter pupils of her class. But one especially difficult question had even her best pupils stumped. Immediately, however, a hand shot up from the back of the room. It belonged to the class dunce whose name was *Dammit Jones*. "Why, *Dammit*," the teacher said, "you know you can't answer this question." "Oh, hell," said the principal, not knowing the boy's name, "he can try."

The use of initials may have humorous effects, especially with names like *Damm*. A popular nineteenth century anecdote, on both sides of the Atlantic, recounts the trials of a young lawyer (or doctor or tradesman) who is setting up his practice by performing the most obvious initial act of hanging a sign outside his office door with his name, "*A. Swindler*" (or any other derogatory name). His first client can't help remarking that his sign is bound to deter potential clients, and advises him to write out his first name in full. "Oh I couldn't do that," the lawyer answers; "as bad as this must seem to be, it would be infinitely worse if I added my full given name - Adam."

Still on initials, Elsdon Smith tells of an attorney named Daniel Ashton Martin whose secretary, Irene Thompson, in characteristic fashion, would type in the lower left hand corner of his dictated letters: "Dict. DAM/it."<sup>35</sup>

*Hell* is even the name of several places in the United States, and at least one is known to have successfully capitalized on it. A village in southeastern Michigan (population 45) has, for years, been enjoying a tourist boom. People would come from all over just to be able to mail a card postmarked *Hell* or to purchase bumper stickers for their cars stating "WE'VE BEEN THROUGH HELL!" In addition to this attraction, the village has lately acquired a reputation as a marriage mill. Seventy two couples were wed there in 1965 and 61 the following year, a large percentage of them having been divorced at least once. One couple is alleged to have told the local justice of the peace that since they'd already been through *Hell* twice, they might just as well *start* there. In October of 1967, the Michigan Seventh-Day Adventists conducted a Bible camp there for youngsters, calling it "Bible Study in *Hell*." Their theme was, of course, "How to Go to Heaven."

It would not do to leave this discussion without that classic of punlore alluding to "his Satanic Majesty." Popular in nineteenth century England was the story of the mother who lisped so badly in pronouncing the name of her baby at its baptism that instead of coming out "Lucy, Sir," as she intended, it sounded like "Lucifer." The clergyman, of course, would have none of this and christened the child "John."

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<sup>35</sup> *The Story of Our Names* (New York, 1950), p. 241.

Let us proceed now to a consideration of the “more flagrant violations of onomastic propriety” (as one of my informants recently put it) – the name-lore relative to and suggested by the bodily functions and erotic behavior of human beings. A good starting point for such consideration could be an examination of the reactions of persons to the embarrassment and discomfort felt by bearing some of the names we listed before, whatever their origins and inherent meanings may have been. We may begin with some of the anecdotes associated with efforts at name-changing.

A story once current around Monroe, Louisiana, was of an immigrant named *Schitt* who settled in that town, prospered, and finally had a bill enacted in the state legislature to change his name to *Sugar*. Whereupon some local wit was inspired to compose the following couplet, which tormented the changer’s children throughout their school days:

“Shit by name, shit by nature  
Changed to Sugar by the Legislature.”<sup>36</sup>

In June of 1964, the Roger Gordon *Smellie* family of London, England went to court and secured a change-of-name to the less odious one of *Hurst* because, as they put it, “we got tired of hearing our children referred to as ‘little stinkers.’”

*Sobratsky*, a Russian, came to America and settled in Michigan. Soon he shortened his name to *Subar* and apparently got along quite well with it. In the meantime, a kinsman had gone to Israel; but instead of taking the name *Subar*, he chose a similar sounding but more impressive name, *Sover* (meaning “thinker”). Besides, it is said, *Subar* in Arabic refers to the “male organ.”

The *Elishevitz* family of a certain Midwestern city became *Ellis* so that their son would no longer have to suffer being called “*ishy-tits*” (or “*itchytits*”) by his schoolmates.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, in nineteenth century England, we know that a Josiah *Badcock* took the name *Elliot* and Samuel *Highcock* assumed the name *Condon* to avoid the playful references to copulation which their names inspired. So did James *Balls*, who preferred to be known as *Woolsey*. Edward

<sup>36</sup> The same thing is said to have happened in North Carolina to a Mr. *Hogg* who had also petitioned that state’s legislature to allow him to bear the name *Hoge*.

<sup>37</sup> H. Allen Smith tells of the school girl who had to suffer her classmates’ snickers whenever the teacher called her name in class — *Helen Zahss*. See *People Named Smith* (Garden City, New York, 1950), p. 48.

Sagarin tells us of a Mr. *Balze* who effected an accent on the "e" to insure that both syllables would always be pronounced.<sup>38</sup>

On occasion, an extremely hypersensitive person will react to the suggestiveness of his name by performing some rash and uncalled for act. Some years ago in a small Wisconsin village there lived a family of six boys named *Luberschitz*. The kids in town called them "Shits" and were always making fun of them. The older boys finally prevailed upon their parents to change their name, and the new family name, *Mueller*, was proudly borne to the local school, particularly to the seventh grade classroom where young Fritz informed his teacher of the official change. "I am now Fritz Mueller," he said, and he spelled it out for her very carefully, "M-U-E-L-L-E-R." Then he sat down, feeling very proud of himself. But the teacher could not contain her anger and blurted out "You can't just change your name whenever you wish..." Fritz jumped up from his seat - "I can too," he said. "My father had to pay a judge, and the court said that now our last name is M-U-E..." "Sit down!" the teacher snapped. "I don't care what the court said. Your school records are in the name of Fritz *Luberschitz* and *Luberschitz* they will stay until you pass from my class. Sit down, I said!" Fritz glared at her. Then, grabbing his books out of his desk, he shouted, "Then you don't have even a Fritz *Luberschitz* in your class, *no more!*" He marched to the door of the classroom; then, turning to his teacher, he hissed, "You old bag!", and out he went. He never returned to the school, my informant tells me, and years later his classmates discovered that this dropout had made a very successful career for himself as a high rank officer in the United States Army.<sup>39</sup>

The sensitivity of persons to uncomplimentary names often extends to other persons who bear them. Jewish trial lawyers in New York City have a favorite story about a once noted jurist named Peter *Schmuck* who possessed, to Yiddish-speaking persons, a name roughly referable in that language to the copulative organ.<sup>40</sup> Jewish attorneys were rather hesitant about appearing before the Dutch-American (though Gentile) magistrate, or else they sought

<sup>38</sup> *The Anatomy of Dirty Words* (New York, 1962), p. 87.

<sup>39</sup> Letter from Miss Ellen M. Woicsek of Manteno, Illinois.

<sup>40</sup> *Smuk*, in Dutch, refers to finery. In German, *Schmuck* denotes an ornament or decoration, or jewelry, adornment or embellishment.

to avoid direct reference to his name by subjecting it to mispronunciations of various kinds – *Schmook*, *Schmack*, *Schmaak*, etc. but never pronouncing it the correct way, simply *Schmuck*; for *Schmuck*, to a Jew, is an epithet directed at a damn fool or a sex pervert. The use of the word, even as a name, was just too painful to the Jewish lawyer's ears. The judge, apparently in complete ignorance of this significance of his name, was, however, quite proud of it and at the end of at least one particularly trying day is known to have indignantly slammed his fist on the bench and shouted: "My name is Schmuck! I am a Schmuck! And I want to be referred to as a Schmuck!"

The above accounts are all alleged to be true. Some are more than alleged, as I can vouch for their genuineness; however, a number of stories frequently told of persons who seek to minimize or avoid the effects of an uncomplimentary name are told with no attempt to justify their authenticity. Jewish joke tellers, for instance, are fond of recalling the businessman who progressively alters his name as he travels from country to country. For humorous effect, however, the chronological order of the story is usually reversed: "As a successful textile merchant in New York, he went by the name *Mortimer Brooks*; in London, he had been *Morris Fountain*; in Paris he was *Maurice La Fountain*; in the Rhineland, *Moritz Wasserspritzer*; but back in Warsaw he was just good old *Moisher Pisher*."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Variants of this tale with different settings come to my attention every so often. I recently received this account of the Jewish family named *Pischer* who, as they became more affluent, changed their name to *Fountain*. When they got really affluent, they moved to Chicago's North Shore but only after they had changed their name again – to *De la Fontaine*. Mrs. Harry Golter of Chicago tells me that this same story circulated among the refugees from the Nazi tyranny and was descriptive of the hopes which accompanied their change of environment and of their upward mobility: "*Moshe Pish*," the peddler, left Warsaw after the First World War and settled in Britain where he became a salesman and called himself *Moritz Wasserstrahl*. During the thirties, he made his way to France, got a job in Paris as a hotel manager and called himself "*Maurice de la Fountain*." Jews, Mrs. Golter informs me, have the habit of laughing at their own misery. Many jokes circulated among the refugee community. They often arose out of the need to express frustration, the way many folk-songs are born. Many of these jokes have been collected and published, but Mrs. Golter could not tell me by whom.

At least once to my knowledge has the *Pisher* joke been in print. A variant of it appears in Richard Dorson's "Jewish-American Dialect Stories on Tape" in *Studies*



By far the most frequently told of all onomastic jokes and the one with the greatest number of variations is that involving a person named *Stink* who goes to court to change his name. The judge, of course, being quite sympathetic, asks what name he would like instead, and invariably the request is for a change in his given name. All county clerks who read change-of-name petitions can swear that they've at least once come across a version of this, "in fact." If not *Stink*, perhaps the name is *Stank*, or *Stanko*, or *Stinkewich* . . . And even *Schmuck* (Joe *Schmuck*, in at least one version known to the writer, prefers the name *Cecil*). *Herbert Hoover Stinks* seeks a change to *Joe Stinks*. *Franklin Stinks* wants to become simply *Frank*, while *Frank Stinko* has always wanted to be known as *George*. A Mr. *Stanko* changes his Italian name to the more euphonious one of *Stanks*. A popular variant of this is the account of a Joe *Stinks* (or any other uncomplimentary name) who seeks some other given name because he's tired of people saying, "Hello, Joe, what do you know?"

The *Stink* joke is one of a class of onomastic anecdotes involving the surprise ending effect, where the punch line is not what the listener expects. Another example of this was told some years ago in Virginia: A preacher asked the parents by what name they wished their son baptized. They said, "Odious D." When asked why, they replied that the "D" really didn't stand for anything. They merely "thought it would be distinguished to give him a letter in the middle of his name."

"Obscene" name-giving to children has certainly produced its share of folk anecdotes. Representative of these is the story of the colored lady with lots of babies who is given a book on birth control by the local public health nurse. A year later, the nurse returns to see if the book has been of any help to her. "It sure has," says the lady. "I had twins since I read your book, and it gave me such nice names for them - *Phyllis* and *Gonorrhoea*." There are variants of this tale in nearly every collection of southern Negro name lore. A. P. Hudson, for instance, mentions the twins *Si* and *Phyllis*.<sup>42</sup>

in *Biblical and Jewish Folklore*, edited by Raphael Patai, Francis Lee Uitley, and Dov Noy, Indiana University Folklore Series 13 (Bloomington, Indiana, 1960), p. 139.

<sup>42</sup> A. P. Hudson, "Some Curious Negro Names" *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, II (1938), 179-193.

Many of the names allegedly given to Negro babies are of "obscene" significance. Hudson's collection includes a *Commodius* (who was a premature baby named for the receptacle in which he was placed at birth); as well as *Stink* and *Stunk*, the twins sons of a Rocky Mount, North Carolina, shovel man on the local sanitary wagon which, in "pre-sewer" times, would drive through the streets of the town.<sup>43</sup> *Laxative Jones* and *Strawberry Commode* have been reported from the records of the Alabama Board of Health. Alleged, but probably fictitious, is little *Fertilizer* who was named for her parents – Ferdinand and Eliza. Then there are the inevitable *Lotta Crappe*, *Tiny* and *Rosie Bottom*, *Tiny* and *Rosy Butt*, and *Ophelia Dick* that many communities in this country claim to have among their citizenry. And some of them actually do. *Tiny* and *Rosy* are the daughters of a Mr. and Mrs. *Butt* of Rochdale, Indiana. Robert St. John, in *This Was My World* (Garden City, New York, 1953, pp. 235–36) tells of the *Bottom* family of Rutland, Vermont whose oldest daughter was named *Rosie*; not *Rose* but *Rosie*, and woe to any who thought otherwise. An active socialite, "Rosie Bottom [often] flitted through the pages of the *Rutland Herald*" on which paper St. John was for a time employed. *Ophelia Dick* is a middle-aged woman living on Main Street in Richwood, West Virginia.

It is often said that the situation in which parents find themselves at the time of the pregnancy or events leading up to the birth of the child often suggests a name for it. A Marietta, Ohio mother is said to have named her child *Morphie* which is short for Morphine. As everyone knows, morphine is a product of a wild poppy; and, according to her mother, if ever a child had a wild poppy, this one had.

A popular theme in naming-tales reflects the fear of a new father that his child will be given an obscene name by a thoughtless or even intolerant clergyman. Told especially of new arrivals to this country to illustrate this fear and their distrust of American functionaries, or possibly their lack of facility with the English language, is the story of the father who brings his new baby to the local priest to be baptized. "Now, see that you baptize heem right," he cautions. "Last time I here I tell you call my boy Tom, but you name heem Thomas. Thees time I want heem be call Jack. So you better no call heem *Jackass*!"

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

As implied above, school teachers have often had their share of difficulties with "obscene-sounding" names. A fictional case in point involves a teacher's disbelief in such a name as borne by one of her pupils. Asked his first name by a new teacher at the beginning of the school year, the little boy answered, "*Snotnose McGee*." "Oh come now," said the teacher. "That's not your real name. What are you really called?" "*Snotnose McGee*," the child repeated. "Now look here," said the teacher angrily, "I'm in no mood for games. I want you to tell me your real name; and if you don't, I'll send you right down to the principal's office. Now, what is your name?" "*Snotnose McGee*." "Okay, I've had it with you," said the teacher, and she sent the child downstairs to have it out with the principal. On his way to the office, he passed his brother, saying, "You'd better come along, too, *Shithead*; they won't believe you either."<sup>44</sup>

The schoolroom, as we have seen, is a popular setting for "obscene" namelore. In one story, a teacher is taking attendance at the beginning of the semester — *Teacher*: Brown. *Brown*: Here. *Teacher*: Johnson. *Johnson*: Here. *Teacher*: McDonald. *McDonald*: Here. *Teacher*: Rosenberg. *Rosenberg*: Here. *Teacher*: Sally Jones. *Sally Jones*: Here. *Teacher*: Wannamaker. *Everybody*: Yes.

A former Yale University student (circa the turn of the century) recently recalled a professor by the name of *Glasscock*. "A very likeable chap was he and quite undeserving of the alias which we twenty-year-olds bestowed upon his dignified being. I am almost ashamed to tell it, but it seemed real funny then . . . we called him 'Professor Crystal Pecker.'"

Similarly reflecting on his own college days the writer recalls that the students would attempt to enroll fictitious persons in their classes and other activities under "phony" names, the most popular of which was *Lena Genster* who was pledged by at least half a dozen sororities before someone got wise. [The editor of this issue recently informed me that "dirty names" (not this one but ones like it) would be given as library pranks at Michigan State and Indiana universities. "You turn in a call-card with a fictitious name on it, and the circulation desk people will yell it out loud and clear."]

<sup>44</sup> H. Allen Smith gives a version of this in *People Named Smith* (Garden City, New York, 1950), p. 52, in which the child's last name is, of course, *Smith*, and her brother is *Fartface*.

In spite of the popularity of this anecdote, another colleague swears that this actually occurred at his institution. A girl named *Linda Sexauer* was being sought by one of the administrative offices. A call was made to the Music Department in which she was thought to be enrolled to see if they had a *Sexauer* there. "Why no," answered the secretary, "we don't even have a coffee break."<sup>45</sup>

Folk humor relating to obscene names often appears in the form of the pun. In addition to the several examples already given we can cite these, from oral tradition.

A variation of the popular traveling salesman and farmer's daughter joke is the one about the drummer who is told by the innkeeper, affectionately known as "Father Inn" by his employees, that he will have to sleep with one of the kitchen help as all the guest rooms in the place are occupied. The usual love-making preliminaries are carried out, but when the matter begins to get serious, the girl loses her aplomb and calls out, "Father Inn." Misinterpreting her outcry, the drummer replies, "Damn it, it's going in as far as it can!"

This is kin to the joke about the hired hand named Fuckerfaster who, instead of performing his required chores around the farm, is seen taking his employer's daughter behind the barn. The farmer, missing him, calls to him by name, only to be acknowledged with, "Keep your shirt on, I'm fucking her as fast as I can!"

Another farmer sends his daughter off to college, and on her first visit home during the semester break he notices that she has been putting on a little weight. "Ain't you gotten a lot fatter than you was when you went away?" he asks. "Yes, Papa," she answers. "I guess I have. I now weigh a hundred and thirty pounds stripped for gym." After studying on this for a minute, her father angrily shouts, "And who the hell is Jim!"

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<sup>45</sup> The writer is unable to resist, at least in the form of a footnote, this classic, though published, piece of onomastic punlore: "Peters was the college's star full-back. But a few days before the big game he injured his leg in scrimmage, and he was told he wouldn't play in *the* game of the year. The college paper announced the sad news with this headline — 'Team Will Play Without Peters.' The dean, however, spotted this bit of college headline writing before it went to press and gave orders to change it or get kicked off the paper. The editor changed it, and Saturday morning the paper hit the campus with this headline — 'Team Will Play With Peters Out.'" (J. M. Elgart, editor, *Over Sixteen* (New York, 1951), p. 25.)

Mr. *Brown* and Mr. *Huggs* were partners in the operation of a school many years ago, and in their promotional literature they would inform the parents of prospective pupils how they divided their teaching responsibilities – “*Brown* trains the boys and *Huggs* the girls!”

Sportscasters in the early nineteen fifties are said to have had a field day with North Carolina State basketball player *Bernie Yurin*, finding it the height of wit to announce, “And there goes *Yurin* dribbling down the court.”

Cincinnati University medical students are proud to have on their faculty a Professor *Robert S. Leake* in no other capacity than as a urologist. He’s for real. Questionable, however, is the Wyoming physician named *Dekay* who, according to local accounts, named his daughter *Diane*.

In the eighteenth century a Russian admiral named *Puke* is said to have asserted when resigning his commission in the Russian Navy:

“I’m sick of the service – so tell the Grand Duke.

I’ve thrown up my commission – your servant, John Puke.”<sup>46</sup>

A motel owner in Comfort, Texas, which is located somewhere between the towns of Alice and Louise is said to have advertised his place of business by erecting a large sign reading “Sleep in Comfort between Alice and Louise.”

The matter of *euphemism* should not be ignored in any consideration of obscenity in namelore. There are known to the writer a number of examples of place names which have been changed or at least modified in sound ostensibly to “protect the sensibilities of the innocent.” Here are some of these examples from the folklore of Nevada and California:

On a secondary road leading from Beatty, Nevada down into Death Valley, there is a very narrow passage through rock formations which appears on some maps now as *Titus Canyon*. However, the early prospectors in the area had named it *Tight Ass Canyon* and some still call it that and are

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<sup>46</sup> The rhyme has been traced to Edward Nares’ *Heraldic Anomalies* (London, 1823), Vol. I, p. 186. According to Nares, though apparently to nobody else, the Grand Duke was Constantine who presided over the Admiralty.

indignant that civilization has chosen to modify it. In the Goshute Mountains of Eastern Nevada there are some natural mineral springs discovered and named by the Indians of the area many years ago. Whatever their Indian names may have been, they translated out as *Hard Cock*, due to the extremely aphrodisiac nature of the water. While the springs were so designated on early maps of the area, the modern maps merely show *H-C Springs*. In Yolo County there is a stream named in pioneer days *Putah Creek*. It is said to have been so-named because a group of Mexican prostitutes had their place of business located on its banks. Later residents apparently were offended at the name and compromised by calling it *Putah Creek*, thus making it appear to be an Indian name, which it is not.<sup>47</sup>

Neither should a consideration of obscene nomenclature omit the so-called "bawdy book titles" which grace the repertoires of college students and summer campers. Representative of these are such gems as "The Man Who Put Salt in the Ocean" by I. P. Freely (and its more popular variant, "The Yellow Stream" by I. P. Daily); "The Spots on the Wall" by Who Flung Shit (or Hu Flung Dung); "The Fatal Accident, or the Tiger's Revenge" by Claude Balls; "The Anxious Lady" by Mister Period; "The Glorious Sight" by Eileen Dover (or "The Easiest Way" by Eileen Back); "The Open Kimono" by Seymore Hare; and "The Chinese Pervert" by Peiping Tom.<sup>48</sup>

Any conclusion to a discussion and presentation of obscene nomenclature in folk tradition should reflect if not reiterate the closing remarks of the participants of the Obscenity Symposium whose enterprise was mentioned at the outset. That is, that the anecdotes just given are but a sample of the relevant folklore of obscenity in names; that they await further collecting efforts; and that such lore should be considerably easier to come by in the present genera-

<sup>47</sup> F. W. Nance of Elk Grove, California in a letter to the writer, November 8, 1967.

<sup>48</sup> According to Louis Feipel, former staff member of the Brooklyn Public Library, this type of name combination that tells a story is often borne by real persons; for example, the American bankers *Russell P. Knightly* and *I. P. Moore*, as well as *Joe P. Little*, *Isora P. Moore*, *Mary Peed*, etc. of New York City.

tion than the more conventional types of lore (i.e. ballads and tales) *if only* people would no longer feel shocked or embarrassed by them to the point of withholding them from collectors or showing their aversion by restricting their availability in printed form to the public. Of course, as we have implied, if this occurred, they would no longer be "obscene."

DePauw University

#### NOTICE OF AWARD

Erwin G. Gudde, a founder and the first editor of *Names*, and his wife and collaborator, Elisabeth, were honored recently by the University of California with a Centennial Award, given "... for distinguished achievements and notable service to the University." The award was also conferred upon Jacob Bowman, for many years the historian of the state archives in Sacramento, to Thos. Kuchel, U.S. Senator from California, and to Leslie Simpson, author of *Many Mexicos* and Professor of Spanish and Portuguese at the University.