The Satiric Use of Names in Irving's *History of New York*

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WASHINGTON IRVING, shocked to discover how few of his countrymen "were aware that New York had ever been called New Amsterdam, or had heard the names of its early Dutch governors," resolved late in 1807 to combat the widespread ignorance by writing an "amusing" yet substantially accurate history of the Dutch colony.[1] Accordingly, in his attempt to edify the readers of the *History of New York* (1809), Irving placed emphasis on the names of persons and places associated with New Netherlands, soberly speculating on their origins and tracing their gradual mutations in spelling and pronunciation.[2] But Irving's onomastic discussions extended beyond the passages of serious scholarship in the *History*, for names, and comments on names, were also prominent in what he described delicately as its "amusing" material: those portions satirizing the excesses and absurdities of irresponsible scholarship, the ill-advised and hapless deeds of the Dutch colonists, and the follies of contemporary Americans. By including in the *History* burlesque etymologies, insulting sobriquets, and fanciful interpretations of topographical, generic, and family names, Irving utilized his own interest in name study – an interest

[1] Washington Irving, "The Author's Apology," *A History of New York*, in the Standard Library Edition of his *Works* (New York, n.d.), pp. 2, 3–4. This edition, which contains Irving's final revision of the work and his account of the circumstances of its original composition, is cited hereinafter as *History* (1848).

[2] See, for example, *A History of New York*, ed. Edwin T. Bowden (New Haven, 1964), pp. 90, 102, 189, 265, 331. This modernized version of the second edition of 1812 contains essentially the same satiric passages using names as does the first edition of 1809. The first edition has been edited in this century by Stanley T. Williams and Tremaine McDowell (New York, 1927), but it is very scarce; I have elected to cite the Bowden edition because it retains Irving's original humorous use of names and is readily accessible. It is cited hereinafter as *History*.

which he continued to cultivate in desultory fashion throughout his life – in arranging a varied display of satiric humor.

In order to "burlesque the pedantic lore displayed in certain American works,"[3] Irving devoted the entire first book of the *History of New York* to a superfluous review of "divers ingenious theories and philosophic speculations"[4] concerning the creation and early history of the world. In this learned introductory section the supposed author, Diedrich Knickerbocker, provides a foretaste of the enormities which he continues to commit in the remaining six books. Knickerbocker, who is both a personification of rabid Dutch patriotism and an exemplar of pretentious, myopic, and megalomaniacal scholarship, immediately reveals himself to be untrustworthy in questions of historical interpretation and especially whimsical in discussions of names. Alluding in Book One to the story of the Flood, for example, he cites various analogues to the Biblical version and casually observes that the familiar name *Noah* is akin to other ancient names apparently unrelated to it:

> ... the good old patriarch [Noah] seems to have been a great traveler in his day and to have passed under a different name in every country he visited. The Chaldeans, for instance, give us his story, merely altering his name into Xisuthrus – a trivial alteration which, to an historian skilled in etymologies, will appear wholly unimportant.[5]

It would seem by implication that Knickerbocker numbers himself among the historians capable of accounting for such minor distortions in names as this; and in later passages he does allow his etymological talents to become more fully, if also somewhat painfully, evident.

The shoddiness of Knickerbocker's scholarship becomes readily apparent in Book Two, where, in a chapter subtitled "*Containing an attempt at etymology,*" he considers various conjectures as to the origin of a crucial name, *Manhattan*:

> The name most current at the present day ... is MANHATTAN; which is said to have originated in a custom among the squaws in the early settlement of wearing men's hats, as is still done among many tribes. "Hence," as we are told by an old governor ... "Hence arose the appellation of man-

[3] *History* (1848), p. 1.

[4] *History*, p. 47 [headnote].

[5] *History*, p. 59. According to Knickerbocker, other names by which Noah was known include Osiris, Menu, Ogyges, Deucalion, Saturn, and Fohi.

> hat-on, first given to the Indians and afterwards to the island" — a stupid joke! — but well enough for a governor....
>
> Another etymology still more ancient, and sanctioned by the countenance of our ever to be lamented Dutch ancestors, is that found in certain letters still extant ... wherein it is called indifferently Monhattoes, Munhatos and Manhattoes, which are evidently unimportant variations of the same name... This last name is said to be derived from the great Indian spirit Manetho; who was supposed to make this island his favorite abode on account of its uncommon delights....
>
> These, however, are fabulous legends to which very cautious credence must be given; and although I am willing to admit the last quoted orthography of the name as very suitable for prose, yet is there another one founded on still more ancient and indisputable authority which I particularly delight in, seeing that it is at once poetical, melodious, and significant.... MANNA-HATA — that is to say, the island of Manna, or in other words — "a land flowing with milk and honey!"[6]

Praise is due to the historian for his industry in research and his caution in evaluating the "fabulous legends" relating to the name of his native city; but it is only fair to notice that his blind affection for the place and his profound respect for its early worthies betray him into espousing a spelling for *Manhattan* which covertly relates it to the Holy Land! And this same radical tendency to envision a small, short-lived Dutch colony as occupying an implausibly pivotal position in world history leads Knickerbocker at other points into gross distortions of perspective and ludicrous excesses of rhetoric. To the inadvertent depreciation of such Dutch dignitaries as Wouter Van Twiller, William Kieft, and Peter Stuyvesant, he adopts a pseudo-epical manner which, by the mere use of its conventions, implies favorable comparison of these colonial governors with Aeneas, Lycurgus, Numa, Ulysses – the great warriors and statesmen of classical history and legend. Further, in describing a treaty adopted by several New England colonies for their mutual protection, he does not hesitate to compare the union with the powerful Amphyctionic League of Delphi.[7] He is even willing to speculate on the possibility that a hitherto unknown son of Noah, one named *Thuiscon*, begot "the Teutons or Teutonic, or in other words the Dutch nation."[8]

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[6] *History*, pp. 110–111. One of Irving's notebooks preparatory to writing the *History* contains the entry: "Find etymology of Manhattan" (MS, New York Public Library).

[7] A loose confederation of several Greek tribes formed in order to consolidate their political influence.

[8] *History*, p. 59.

Knickerbocker's weak sense of historical proportion coexists strangely, however, with such uncanny gifts as an ability to sense the imminence of shifts in the trends of history merely by observing such inconsequential data as the signatures on old state papers. When he relates that Rhode Island, an enemy to the colony of New Netherlands, had requested admission to the "Amphyctionic Council" of New England colonies, thus further threatening the precarious security of the Dutch settlements, he observes ruefully that one signature which appeared on the petition to the Council was that of "Alicxsander Partridg." Musing upon the name, he proceeds,

> There is certainly something in the very physiognomy of this document that might well inspire apprehension. The name of Alexander, however misspelt, has been warlike in every age, and though its fierceness is in some measure softened by being coupled with the gentle cognomen of Partridge, still, like the color of scarlet, it bears an exceeding great resemblance to the sound of a trumpet.[9]

Knickerbocker's virtuoso analysis of this secretly warlike name, albeit executed by an unorthodox technique, is a dazzling practical instance of his sharp historian's hindsight, and it goes far to confirm one's impression of him as an amiable quack. In short, through his own varied attentions to names Diedrich reveals his strong biases and his feeble judgment, and thereby furthers Irving's ends in mocking all incompetent, fatuous scholarship. One can hardly question the propriety of the historian's hypothesis about the derivation of his own ancestors' surname: "... from *Knicker*, to nod, and *Boeken*, books; plainly meaning that they were great nodders or dozers over books...."[10]

Knickerbocker's predilection for discoursing on the significance of names assists Irving in realizing a second satiric aim in the *History*, that of mocking the personalities and customs of the original Dutch settlers and their neighbors to the north and south. Often, for example, the historian is ironically oblivious to the humorous effect of his gravely presented yet unintentionally damning comments on the names of Dutch personages whose memory he reveres. Ordinarily these vignettes occur in discussions of topics for which Knickerbocker has sought diligently "to gather together all the

[9] *History*, p. 217.

[10] *History*, p. 267.

fragments of our infant history which still existed"[11] but has apparently searched in vain. In one such instance he admits the paucity of extant biographical material relating to four noteworthy Dutchmen, but he proceeds to announce with pride that he has been able to "gather some particulars concerning the adventurers in question"[12] merely by examining their names. One might legitimately question the soundness of this method for the manufacture of precise biographical data, but the point at hand is rather that the details garnered by Knickerbocker fail to recommend the individuals they describe. Of the first, Oloffe Van Cortlandt, he writes, "Like your nobility of Europe, he took his name of *Kortlandt* (or *lack land*) from his landed estate which lay somewhere in terra incognita." Of another, he affirms that "from being usually equipped with an old pair of buskins he was familiarly dubbed *Harden Broeck,* or *Tough Breeches.*" For a third he derives "an equally illustrious pedigree with the proudest hero of antiquity," Adam:

> His name was Van Zandt, which being freely translated signifies *from the dirt,* meaning, beyond a doubt, that like Triptolemus, Themis, the Cyclops and the Titans, he sprung from dame Terra, or the earth!

And of the fourth, with a becoming display of learning, he observes,

> The name of *Ten Broeck,* or *Tin Broeck,* is indifferently translated into Ten Breeches and Tin Breeches — the High Dutch commentators incline to the former opinion, and ascribe it to his being the first who introduced into the settlement the ancient Dutch fashion of wearing ten pair of breeches. But the most elegant and ingenious writers on the subject declare in favor of Tin, or rather *Thin* Breeches; from whence they infer that he was a poor but merry rogue whose galligaskins were none of the soundest....[13]

Thus Knickerbocker is able, even though deprived of documentary evidence, to attribute distinguishing personal characteristics to historical figures who would otherwise be almost lost in oblivion. Still, his specious etymological researches do credit neither to him nor to his subjects whom he represents as being unheroically impecunious unwashed, and fat.

It is well known that the *History of New York* gave offense to some readers: one lady from Albany, for example, is said to have set

[11] *History,* p. 41.

[12] *History,* p. 96.

[13] *History,* pp. 97–98.

out in pursuit of its impertinent author, horsewhip in hand.[14] Certainly such irreverent essays on names as these, in which Irving spared none of the prominent citizens of New Netherlands, may have provoked the hostility of their descendants.[15] Even three of the first governors of the colony had their names subjected to the scrutiny of Diedrich Knickerbocker and emerged somewhat the worse for the encounter. Of the earliest governor discussed in the *History*, Wouter Van Twiller, we read,

> His surname of Twiller is said to be a corruption of the original *Twijfler*, which in English means *doubter*; a name admirably descriptive of his deliberative habits. For though he was a man shut up within himself like an oyster, and of such a profoundly reflective turn that he scarcely ever spoke except in monosyllables, yet did he never make up his mind on any doubtful point.[16]

At the close of Van Twiller's tranquil administration, a fiery, argumentative new governor, William Kieft, assumed power: "His name according to the most ingenious etymologists was a corruption of *Kyver*, that is to say, a *wrangler* or *scolder*. . . ."[17] And after the death of Kieft, Peter Stuyvesant, a warlike, self-reliant man, became governor and struggled to allay the inevitable decline and fall of the colony into English domination:

> Nor did his magnanimous virtue escape the discernment of the good people of Nieuw Nederlandts; on the contrary, so high an opinion had they of the independent mind and vigorous intellects of their new governor that they universally called him *Hard-Koppig Piet*, or PETER THE HEADSTRONG — a great compliment to his understanding![18]

In similar panegyrical fashion Knickerbocker adduces the names of many lesser figures in testimony to their excellent personal qualities. Irving is so indefatigable in tampering with or attributing undignified origins to the names of Dutch families that virtually no name mentioned more than once in the book escapes the indiscreet attentions of its imaginary author.[19] (Footnote 19, see page 386

[14] Stanley T. Williams, *The Life of Washington Irving* (New York, 1935), II, 275.

[15] As Stanley T. Williams observes, "The bitterness of some families was enduring"; yet on the other hand, "the identification of well-known places with the deeds of Manhattan's ancient heroes was a factor in the success of the book" (*Life*, I, 410; II, 275).

[16] *History*, p. 122.

[17] *History*, p. 167.

[18] *History*, pp. 212–213.

Yet, however unfortunate Knickerbocker's comments on Dutch names may be, they are (according to the fiction) intended by him to be laudatory; and only in discussing the enemies of the Dutch does he use the analysis of names as a weapon. Quite naturally the bustling, officious, talkative men of New England, who had usurped what was claimed to be Dutch territory in the Connecticut Valley and on Long Island, receive stern retribution from the outraged historian. Not only does he dwell with relish upon their unusual personal names – some examples from the *History* being *Preserved Fish, Habukkuk Nutter, Return Strong,* and *Determined Cock,* but he bestows upon their generic name – *Yankees* – a ridiculous etymology. After making an inaccurate claim that the primary motive of the Yankees for fleeing England had been a desire to obtain liberty of speech, Knickerbocker avows that, when they arrived in New England, they so amazed the Indian tribes with their proclivity to talk that the savages named them in a facetiously inappropriate way:

> The simple aborigines of the land ... gave them the name of *Yanokies,* which in the Mais-Tschusaeg (or Massachusett) language signifies *silent men* — a waggish appellation since shortened into the familiar epithet of *Yankees,* which they retain unto the present day.[20]

According to this partisan historian, the Yankees may finally have triumphed over the phlegmatic Dutch, but for all their strength and sagacity they were still the butts even of the Indians' jokes!

In contrast to his display of virulent contempt for the Yankees, however, Knickerbocker's attitude toward the Swedish colonists who settled to the south of New Amsterdam, in what the Dutch again thought to be their own rightful territory, is almost amiable. He merely indulges his consistent bias against all "foreigners" when he notes that the "redoubtable redoubt" of the Swedes was "named

[19] See especially *History,* pp. 83, 102, and 181. See also pp. 266–267, where in conventional epic fashion Knickerbocker provides a catalogue of the Dutch families comprising the army which, commanded by Peter Stuyvesant, stormed the Swedish stronghold on the Delaware River, Fort Casimir. This list, a triumph of sustained mocking ingenuity, is the most elaborate single instance in the work of Irving's humorous use of names.

[20] *History,* p. 151. H. L. Mencken came perilously close to accepting this passage as a sober essay on *Yankee.* In his summary of theories as to the origin of the name, he observed with gravity that Knickerbocker's sly explanation was "probably only humorously" intended (*The American Language,* 4th ed. [New York, 1937], p. 110).

FORT CASIMIR, in honor of a favorite pair of brimstone-colored trunk-breeches of the [Swedish] governor."[21] And in a similar off-handed deprecation of a "foreign" colony, he simply suggests for the name *Maryland* an origin much less pious than that attributed to it by most commentators:

> ... Maryland, or Merryland, as it was anciently called, [was so named] because that the inhabitants, not having the fear of the Lord before their eyes, were notoriously prone to get fuddled and make merry with mint julep and apple toddy.[22]

Thus Knickerbocker discourses on the personal names of Dutchmen with unconscious humor and on names associated with their enemies with deliberate malice of varying corrosiveness. It remains clear, however, that Irving's own satire is directed as fully against the vituperative historian as against the persons or groups he praises or derides.

Irving sharpens his satiric attack in a third area of comment – the shortcomings of the young United States of America – by permitting Diedrich Knickerbocker to touch upon the lively topic of an appropriate name for the new nation. It has been shown elsewhere that in Knickerbocker's reverent portrayal of Governor William Kieft, "William the Testy," Irving probably intended abusive criticism of Thomas Jefferson; and it is likely that other such specific personal targets might be identified from indirect hints given in the book. It has not been observed, however, that the historian proposes a national name which carries with it a double pun, both of whose additional meanings suggest adverse criticism of the United States, and one of which is scurrilous. This ingenious jibe appears quite early in the work, when, after detailing various theories as to the identity of the discoverer of America, Knickerbocker admits his willingness to "take for granted the vulgar opinion that [it] was discovered on the 12th of October 1492, by Christovallo Colon, a Genoese who has been clumsily nicknamed Columbus, but for what reason [he] cannot discern." He continues:

> Of the voyages and adventures of this Colon, I shall say nothing, seeing that they are already sufficiently known. Nor shall I undertake to prove that this country should have been called Colonia, after his name, that being notoriously self-evident.[23]

(Footnote 23, see page 388

[21] *History*, p. 242 (*cassimere*. A medium-weight cloth of soft texture – NID_2).

[22] *History*, p. 307.

But it is only slightly less evident that the proposed name – *Colonia* – closely resembles the word *colonial*, a term which Irving would consider apt to describe the bumptiously impotent, economically and culturally dependent United States whose residual colonialism he finds numerous other opportunities to ridicule in the work. And it is also quite evident that the second half of the pun – a physiological quibble on *Colon*, the heavily emphasized surname of the Italian navigator – vividly expresses Irving's opinion of that reluctantly acknowledged dependency. Taken together, in fact, the two elements of this barely-concealed play on words almost epitomize the general criticisms of the nation in the *History*. Of course the present ironic passage contains no positive clue to Irving's own opinion about a satisfactory name for the nation, if in 1809 he even held one at all. But it is interesting to note that in later years he did form definite ideas on this subject, and that in an essay entitled "National Nomenclature,"[24] published in 1839, he proposed place names expressing the nation's uniqueness, beauty, and cultural independence – and containing no irreverent puns.

Irving's interest in names and their derivations, which is thus readily apparent in each of the three major satiric themes of the *History of New York*, continued throughout his writing career. In his Spanish histories (1828–1831), his Western writings (1835–1837),[25] and even his final literary work, *The Life of George Washington* (1855–1859), his curiosity about names – particularly about the origins of place names – is continually in evidence. But in none of his writings after the *History* does he move beyond straightforward discussions of these scholarly details to utilize names, and comments

[23] *History*, p. 62. Dr. Samuel Latham Mitchill, a Quaker physician whose slim volume, *The Picture of New-York* ... (New York, 1807) was a primary target for Irving's burlesque of pompous pedantry, had in 1800 proposed *Fredonia* as a national name. As George R. Stewart has observed, *Fredonia* was simply "a gross coupling of the English *freedom* with a Latin ending" (*Names on the Land*, rev. ed. [Cambridge, Mass., 1958], p. 173). Clearly Irving followed the identical pattern in joining *Colon* and a Latin ending to make *Colonia*. Is it possible that Irving's coinage was in direct mockery of Dr. Mitchill's ingenious but ill-fated suggestion? For other instances of Irving's use of names to satirize the United States, see *History*, pp. 97, 112–113, and 242.

[24] *Knickerbocker*, XIV (August 1839), 158–162.

[25] *The Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus* (1828); *A Chronicle of the Conquest of Granada* (1829); *The Companions of Columbus* (1831); *A Tour on the Prairies* (1835); *Astoria* (1836); and *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville* (1837).

on them, either as primary modes of humor or as devices in achieving effects organically related to the work as a whole. Some may still deplore the deficiency of "high seriousness" in Irving's treatment of the "reverend Dutch burghers" of the colony, but it is certain that his satire in the *History of New York* would lose much of its piquancy if it lacked Diedrich Knickerbocker's numerous characterizations and comments on the basis of names.

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