# "Poor Valentin" or "Monsieur le Comte": Variation in Character Designation as Matter for Critical Consideration

(in Henry James' *The American*)

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In the study of literature, consideration of character designations usually concerns the source and connotation of a character's name as reinforcement of certain traits. Less often, the structure and sound of names are also taken into account. The present article, however, attempts to show that the study of character designations should be carried further, to the possible significance of their variation within the literary work. Examples are drawn from Henry James' novel *The American*, where, as in most fiction, no character is known by any single designation.

Most often, of course, a character is referred to by pronoun, when it is not necessary to differentiate him from another character of the same sex. When such differentiation is necessary, he is usually designated by a variation of his name, for names seldom recur in their full form and the choice of variation is remarkably wide. A character can be called by surname alone, by surname with prefix, by first name, or by nickname. A part of the name may be coupled with an adjective, as in "poor Valentin." Or frequently, instead of by name, a character is designated by epithet, allowing for almost endless variation. In James' novel, for example, one character is represented by no fewer than 50 epithets, including "the younger man," "the generous young Frenchman," "that amiable nobleman," "the count," and "Monsieur le Comte."

When character designations are used by the characters themselves in talking to or about another character, the choice of designation naturally depends on their relation to each other: James' heroine calls her brother by his first name, "Valentin," while a family servant calls him "Mr. Valentin." But character designations are most often used by the author himself to describe his characters. In the hands of a skillful author they can be used to reflect his attitudes toward his characters and thus to direct the response of the reader.

*Full Names.* In *The American*, as in many works of fiction, characters are designated by epithet (for example, the novel's title) until they can be named by some realistic means.[1] Although the novel opens with its

[1] The ways in which James and other writers introduce the names of characters, as well as the use of pronouns as name-substitutes, are further discussed in my article, " 'He

main character at the center of the scene, his name is not made known until the sixth page, when he presents his card to a second character, who reads his full name as she sees it printed: "Christopher Newman."[2] Once a full name is introduced, James rarely repeats it, so that such repetitions are worthy of special attention. Usually they occur at the beginning of a new scene, after a lapse of time, as a means of re-introducing the characters; or similarly, when time and place remain the same, James sometimes repeats a full name to give an impression of pause and change, as in the following dialogue (p. 21):

> "What are you up to any way?" [Tristram] demanded.
> "Are you going to write a book?"
> Christopher Newman twisted one end of his mustache a while, in silence, and at last he made answer.

As a second example, "overcome with a sense of the novelty thus foreshadowed, Valentin de Bellegarde threw himself into a deep arm-chair before the fire, and, with a fixed, intense smile, seemed to read a vision of it in the flame of the logs" (p. 112). In both instances, the full name, by its very fullness, suggests deliberation and thus prepares the reader for some psychological change of scene.

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Came Into Her Line of Vision Walking Backward': Nonsequential Sequence-Signals in Short Story Openings," *Language Learning*, XV, 1 and 2 ⁹1965⁰, pp. 67—83. See also Joyce Tayloe Horrell, "A 'Shade of a Special Sense': Henry James and the Art of Naming," *American Literature*, 42 (May, 1970), pp. 203—220.

[2] All references are to the Rinehart Edition (New York, 1962), which follows the original edition of 1877. It does not include the preface to the New York edition, to which reference is also made.

As for the significance of the central character's name, Newman himself says he feels "a new man" inside his old skin (p. 23); and James' portrayal of him in effect extends St. Jean de Crèvecoeur's description of the typical American in the third of his *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782): "The American is a new man, who acts on new principles." This name also suggests the Adam-like innocence that James alludes to in his preface to the New York Edition (p. vi): *The American* was to be the story, "in another country and an aristocratic society, of some robust but insidiously beguiled and betrayed, some cruelly wronged, compatriot; the point being in especial that he should suffer at the hands of persons pretending to represent the highest possible civilization and to be of an order in every way superior to his own."

The name "Christopher" complements Newman's catholicism: "He liked everything, he accepted everything, he found amusement in everything," says James in the novel (p. 63); "he was not discriminating, he had not a high tone." In spite of Newman's own statement that he was named for Christopher Columbus (p. 6), his possible relation to St. Christopher should be noted, too. Like Newman, St. Christopher is reputed to be of heroic stature, and both are ambitious in the extreme: Newman to marry the best woman in the world, and St. Christopher to serve the most powerful prince. At first he sought Satan, seeing that other men feared him; but then, when he saw Satan trembling before the cross, he turned to Christ, changed his name to Christopher, did good and fell a martyr.

The nearest this novel comes to frequent repetition of a full name is in its use of "Noémie Nioche."[3] Most often the character bearing this name is designated by alternating modifications of her first and last names — "Mademoiselle Noémie" and "Mademoiselle Nioche" — a shifting back and forth that reflects the shiftiness of the young woman's character. Her shiftiness is also suggested by James' use of a wide variety of epithets for her, which become increasingly explicit: "that girl," "the little baggage," "a vulgar little wretch." Thus James begins to indicate his attitude toward her by the way he treats her name but later depends upon epithet to make his intention clear.

*Surnames Alone.* The most common form of name for male characters in literature, as in life, is the surname used alone, a kind of designation that strikes a balance between formality and sentimentality to place a character in an objective middle distance. In *The American*, James' frequent reference to his protagonist as "Newman" helps maintain an interested but detached regard for this character in both author and reader while reinforcing certain elements of the novel's theme. In contrast to the names of titled Europeans, the unadorned "Newman" seems especially democratic. The repeated use of this particular surname keeps its connotations pure and clear; and in the regularity of its repetition there is a suggestion of Newman's stability and sense of purpose.

The novel's other male Americans — the moral Babcock and the renegade Tristram — are also most often designated by surname. These three surnames are appropriately alike in their trochaic accent, which echoes the bluffness that James identifies with the American character and helps to reinforce the idea of manly camaraderie between each secondary character and Newman. But here their similarity stops. Since Newman's association with Babcock is strongly to influence Newman, James makes them alike in certain respects: while Tristram is clearly held up as an object of scorn, both Newman and Babcock are said to be "good fellows" in their own ways; and similarity of character is reflected in similarity of designation.

Both "Newman" and "Babcock" are Anglo-Saxon surnames made up of a noun with preceding modifier, which makes them more nearly phrases of ordinary speech and thus more down-to-earth than the high-flown "Tristram" with its continental and literary associations. Both

[3] The source of "Noémie Nioche" is briefly discussed by Robert L. Gale in "Names in James," *Names* 14:2 (June, 1966), 98. Mr. Gale cites Oscar Cargill's *The Novels of James* (New York, 1961), as identifying this name with Noémie Clarkson in *L'Étrangère* (1876) by Alexandre Dumas *fils*; but its Biblical associations are also fitting. The name in Hebrew ("Naomi" in the King James version and "Noemi" in the Douay) means "my pleasantness," a phrase consistent with the attitude of Noémi Nioche's lonely and dependent father toward his daughter. Since "Naomi" is well known as an Old Testament figure, James' use of the name helps to emphasize the contrast between Christopher Newman (with the New Testament associations of his name) and the Old World of which Noémie Nioche is a part. Alliterative names in James, observes Mr. Gale, often suggest superficiality or ineffectuality; and here, where alliteration reinforces an impression of feminine flightiness, it may have guided James toward "Nioche," a name not far removed from the French noun *mioche* ("brat" or "urchin"), or *nitouche* ("demure hypocrite"). The dictionary meaning of the latter word is suitable for both daughter and father (whose almost invariable designation is "M. Nioche").

have about the same degree of commonness of usage (the first edition of *Webster's Biographical Dictionary* lists seven Babcocks and six Newmans but only one Tristram). And when James puts the two names together in a scene, he further emphasizes equality by the similarity of their placement, particularly in the attribution of utterance, which creates an impression of even give and take (p. 64):

> Newman stared and laughed. "There are a great many words to express that idea," he said; "you can take your choice!"
>
> "Oh, I mean," said Babcock, "was she possibly not to be considered in a different light? Don't you think she *really* expected him to marry her?"
>
> "I am sure I don't know," said Newman. "Very likely she did; I have no doubt she is a grand woman." And he began to laugh again.
>
> "I didn't mean that either," said Babcock; "I was only afraid that I might have seemed yesterday not to remember – not to consider...."

Thus in both the choice and presentation of these names, James uses them to complement the relationship between the characters they designate.

But while it is necessary for James to establish equality between these two characters if Babcock's moral influence on Newman is to be convincing, there is also need to keep Babcock in a secondary position; and James does this in part by varying his usual designations for both characters. In the five pages describing their association, he uses their surnames with about the same frequency: "Newman" 26 times and "Babcock" 22. But he prefaces seven of these "Babcocks" with "Mr.," two with "poor," and one with "poor" and "Mr." together — all of which increase Babcock's distance from the reader. In addition, James designates Newman three times by epithet — "our hero" (twice) and "his immeasurable friend" — which may be satiric but which nevertheless serve to remind the reader of Newman's heroic position. Moreover, the four epithets for Babcock all emphasize his comparative youth and inexperience: "The young man from Dorchester," "the young man," "the young minister," "the pestered young divine." What James called the difference in cast between these two characters is also suggested by the sound of their names. With its sharp double consonance and flat vowel sounds, "Babcock" probably strikes most ears as being less euphonious than the predominantly nasal "Newman." Thus, to emphasize both similarities and differences between these two characters, James makes extensive and varied use of character designation.

In contrast to the novel's Anglo-Saxon names (which reach their ultimate in healthy simplicity with "Mrs. Bread"), James' surnames for Europeans are generally suggestive of age and decadence; and this kind of significance is sometimes emphasized by their presentation. For example, "Bellegarde," with the rococo elegance of its unpronounced "e's," is at one point so often associated with uselessness that its intended connotation cannot be missed or forgotten (pp. 93–94):

> I couldn't go into business, I couldn't make money, because I was a Bellegarde. I couldn't go into politics, because I was a Bellegarde – the Bellegardes don't recognize the Bonapartes. I couldn't go into literature, because I was a dunce. I couldn't marry a rich girl, because no Bellegarde had ever married a *roturière*, and it was not proper that I should begin. We shall have to come to it, yet. Marriageable heiresses, *de notre bord*, are not to be had for nothing; it must be name for name, and fortune for fortune. The only thing I could do was to go and fight for the Pope.[4]

Especially after the connotations of this name are established, its contrast with the simple and straightforward and promising "Newman," with which it often appears in close juxtaposition, heightens the effect of both names to strengthen the contrast between Americans and Europeans generally – one of the main concerns of the book.[5]

*Surnames with Prefix.* The idea of age-old encrustation and corruption is often intensified in this novel by the embellishment of a European surname with a title, as in "Comte de Bellegarde." The meaning of such designations is sometimes made more emphatic by combining title with meaningful surname, as in "Lord Deepmere," which suggests an order of misrule too well entrenched to be easily overthrown.[6] And among the principal titled characters James' variation of designation can be seen to form certain patterns. His desigantions for the novel's heroine, for example, are made to reflect the state of her relationship with Newman.

Mrs. Tristram introduces her to Newman (and the reader) by calling her "the loveliest woman in the world." As she warms to the idea of making a match, she refers to her friend more intimately as "Claire"; then, still more knowingly, by her full maiden name, "Claire de Bellegarde." Finally, after warning Newman that her friend's *monde* is made up of "terrible people," Mrs. Tristram uses her most formal designation, "Madame de Cintré,"

[4] James alludes to the significance of this name when he mentions "the stoutly guarded Hôtel de Bellegarde" (p. 78). The ruling members of this family are stout guardians of not only the institution of aristocracy but also the pale beauty and refinement it has produced in their daughter Claire: "*chère belle*," as she is once called (p. 207).

[5] The significant juxtaposition of names also occurs in James' later work. In the introduction to *Henry James Selected Fiction* (Everyman's Library, 1953), p. xvii, Leon Edel comments on those in "The Beast in the Jungle" (1903) as follows: "By use of symbols and names — symbols of unashamed simplicity — [James] gives to his story a series of muted overtones that act as a kind of musical score, *pianissimo*, for the tale. In using the months to name his characters — March and May — in having the two meet in a country home named Weatherend, suggesting temporal change and the seasons, James establishes at once the 'tone of time' that is so important for his tale."

[6] James' thinking behind these designations is indicated when he has the conservative old Comte de la Rochfidèle say: "By birth I am vieille roche; a good little bit of the history of France is the history of my family" (p. 157). And similar in its emphasis on ancient nobility is the titled maiden name of the old English marquise, Lady Emmeline Atheling (p. 127).

which, in spite of a good deal of further variation ("my sister," "your daughter," "the countess," "Countess de Cintré," "Claire de Cintré") becomes the rule. By most forcefully recalling her early marriage to an aristocratic nobleman, the repeated use of "Madame de Cintré" best reflects her inbred and enduring aloofness and thus best serves to point up the unbridgeable gap between her and the democratic Newman.[7]

Similarly but less aristocratically, Mrs. Tristram is almost always known as "Mrs. Tristram." While the formality of both these designations is in keeping with the genteel tradition to which James and his characters subscribe, it is also consistent with Newman's personal response to women, who set him "simply swimming in a sort of rapture of respect" (p. 27). And these indications of formality are constant reminders of the fateful barriers between him and the women in whom he seeks to confide.

*First Names.* In this novel, first names are used so rarely as to be quite noticeable when they do occur, as in the following exchange between Newman and Mrs. Tristram (p. 32):

> "I believe in you, Mr. Newman. You flatter my patriotism."
> "Your patriotism ?" Christopher demanded.

The first of these exceptional designations for Newman reflects the conventional formality of the occasion and possibly reminds the reader of Newman's social discomfort. But the second is more striking, particularly as it contrasts with the first, perhaps to remind us of Newman's habitual boyishness and thus to evoke our sympathy for him. Yet while this use of Newman's first name brings him closer to the reader than he has been, it does so only for a moment, for James shifts immediately back to the surname and his usual tone of objectivity. He never becomes so familiar with his character as to call him anything like "Chris."

The constancy with which James uses "Newman" – and the constancy of character that such use implies – is especially remarkable when this surname appears among his many designations for the members of the disintegrating house of Bellegarde. In the case of the younger son, for

[7] In reference to the significance of "Claire de Cintré," Mr. Gale notes (p. 107) that she is "dominated and smothered by her oppressive family (*cintré*, 'arched'; *ceintré*, 'encircled')." These French words are appropriate, too, because she is the center of most of the other characters' interests. In addition, her "old feudal countess of a mother ... allows her to ... visit only in a certain sacred circle" (p. 38), and the circle as a symbol of perfection is consistent with James' description of her as "the promised perfection, the proposed ideal" (p. 39). Also appropriate is the reminiscence in her name of the Convention of Cintra of 1808, at which the French yielded to the English; for Madame de Cintré, though of equally mixed parentage, is said to be more English than French (p. 37). And since her marriage was forced on her against her will, a moral outrage to the American, it is fitting that her married name should contain a suggestion of "sin." At the same time, her first name, "Claire," is an apt reflection of her beauty and purity; and significant too is the name of her patroness, which she finally adopts: St. Veronica, popularly identified as the daughter of the murderous Salome, so moved by the suffering of Christ on his way to Calvary that she wiped his brow with her veil, which retained his image. She then became a convert and died a martyr, just as her namesake enters a nunnery after her family's denial of Christopher Newman.

example, a wide variety of designations reinforces the idea of not only disintegration but also his great volatility. And yet they too are made to form a significant pattern, which runs counter to that for Claire de Bellegarde, from formality to first name.[8]

Until Valentin and Newman become fairly well acquainted, Valentin is known by various formal designations, such as "Count Valentin" and "young M. de Bellegarde." But then: "During the next three weeks Newman saw Bellegarde several times, and without formally swearing an eternal friendship the two men established a sort of comradeship" (p. 96). With comradeship comes the consistent use of Valentin's surname without prefix, a practice that continues during their manly exchange of confidences about themselves and women. Later, though, when Bellegarde presents Newman to the other members of his family (p. 125), James begins to call him "Valentin." This may be a necessary means of differentiating him from his older brother, but it also reflects the unique warmth of his feeling for Newman, as well as their growing intimacy. He is most consistently called "Valentin" from this point until his death (p. 268), when Newman's epithet for him has developed from "a good fellow" to "the best fellow in the world." During his fatal troubles and afterward, the occurrences of "Valentin" are interspersed with an increasing number of designations intended to evoke pity for him: "our poor friend," "poor Bellegarde," "our dear friend," "poor foolish, generous, delightful Bellegarde," "the poor fellow," "the dying man," "the poor count," "poor Valentin," "my poor brother." And toward the end of the novel he is referred to most often by Mrs. Bread, his old nurse, who fondly remembers him as "Mr. Valentin" — a modification of his first name without title or surname, which helps to mark his moral separation from the evil house of Bellegarde. Again, variation of designation points up the meaning of the story.

*Nicknames.* The only two characters in the book designated by nickname are the Tristrams. At the beginning, after Newman and Tristram have renewed their old acquaintance and James has been calling them by their surnames, he shows a further development in their relationship by writing: "Tom Tristram complained of his wife's avidity, and declared

[8] Valentin de Bellegarde is said to have a character in which "impudence and urbanity seemed perplexedly commingled" — a combination of traits often attributed to other characters bearing this name, perhaps because of the fortuitous association between St. Valentine and Cupid. James' choice of this name might owe something to the spirited Valentine in Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona,* to the light-hearted spendthrift in Beaumont and Fletcher's *Wit Without Money,* and to the principal character in Congreve's *Love for Love.* Mr. Gale notes the possible influence of George Sand's *Valentine* and of Goethe's *Faust,* where Margaret's brother Valentine, like James' character, is killed in a duel. Though the intention of Valentin's remarks is often baffling to Newman, Newman usually thinks of him as "a good fellow" (pp. 78, 87), a contemporary epithet consistent with Valentin's puckish nature.

It is interesting to note that the older Bellegarde's infrequently used first name emerges from his manner: a fitting source for a character so bloodlessly concerned about preserving form for the sake of form. At his first appearance, he is said to speak "urbanely" (p. 42). Later he speaks "with sustained urbanity" (p. 131) and "with vague urbanity" (p. 134), and still later he is "apparently determined to be even more urbane than usual" (p. 243). As a first name, then, "Urbain" seems less a proper noun than an adjective, as is appropriate for the unquestioning agent of the fierce old marquise — according to Newman, Urbain is little more than "the old woman at second-hand" (p. 130).

that he could never have a clear five minutes with his friend" (p. 28). This abrupt introduction of the nickname with no previous indication of a first name reflects a sudden rush of comradely feeling on Tristram's part, which he hopes will be returned. But the avid Mrs. Tristram prevails and Newman becomes more her friend than Tristram's. His heartiness remains one-sided and short-lived, and "Tom" recurs only when the same kind of situation is repeated: "This gave Tom Tristram a much-coveted opportunity to offer his condolences. . . . 'It was not your doing, I know – it was all my wife'" (p. 340). Here again he is trying to get close to Newman, and again the effort is futile; nor is he ever close enough to anyone for James to call him by his nickname alone.[9]

Mrs. Tristram's nickname occurs with about the same infrequency as her husband's but to create an entirely different effect. When "Lizzie" first appears, it appears eight times in a single paragraph (pp. 206–207), taking on an especially tinny sound through such close repetition and through its contrast with the more reverberant "Madame de Cintré," which appears three times in the same paragraph. This is Tristram's account to Newman of his wife's confrontation with Madame de Bellegarde, and of how she got the better of the old aristocrat by anything but aristocratic means. "My husband," she has said, "belongs to that unfortunate class of persons who have no profession and no business, and do very little good in the world." Outraged but impotent, Tristram seems best able to avenge himself by harping on the least aristocratic form of his wife's name. In this paragraph, her usual designation appears but once ("'Oh, 'tis you I have to thank for my American son-in-law,' the old lady said to Mrs. Tristram"); and there is a good deal of sting in Tristram's reference to his socially pretentious wife as "Mrs. Tristram," for the highest title she can claim is only the slightest modification of his own worthless name. Later, when Tristram blames his wife for Newman's loss of Madame de Cintré, he again uses her name vindictively (p. 340): "I was not at all deceived in Lizzie, for instance; I always had my doubts about her."

In both passages, the sudden leap from the usual "Mrs. Tristram" to "Lizzie" (with never a mention of the more regal "Elizabeth") emphasizes this character's fundamental rusticity. James' introduction of her nickname late in the novel thus helps to explain her ultimate failure at intrigue in aristocratic circles, where she may win battles but not revolutions. When she is identified by her nickname, it begins to become apparent that Newman has been ineptly guided.

*Epithets.* The epithets mentioned thus far can be divided into three groups, according to varying degrees of editorial intensity: those that are more or less neutral ("the young man"); the mildly ironic, which usually help to maintain objectivity ("our hero"); and the frankly descriptive ("the pestered young divine"). But whatever tone they set, one of the main uses of epithet is to point to some specific or temporary condition that the name itself does not suggest, as in "the dying man" or "a vulgar

[9] Thus James preserves the alliteration of "Tom Tristram," possibly to reinforce the idea of futility, or of ineffectuality, as suggested in footnote 3.

little wretch." As substitutes for names, they can be used once and cast aside; or the same epithet can be used for more than one character.

At one point in this novel, for example, James designates Valentin as "the young man at the chimney-piece" (p. 81, twice); and during Newman's early acquaintance with the Bellegardes, Valentin, as master of ceremonies, continues to be known in this way (pp. 107, 112). The designation then shifts briefly to Newman when he is proposing marriage to Madame de Cintré (p. 117), then to the obdurate Urbain (pp. 130, 131, 147, 151), his wife (p. 130) and mother (p. 126, twice; p. 155) before finally shifting back to the rejected but morally triumphant Newman (p. 359). In each instance, the character by the fire holds the place of authority in the scene. Thus epithets used to identify a character by reference to this position ("the old lady by the fire," "the stilted little lady by the fire") become symbols of authority whose transfer from one character to another can be recognized as the transfer of authority.

Often a character is identified by a more general reference to place, as in "the American," "the young man from Dorchester," "the inconsistent little lady of the Avenue d'Iéna." And this kind of epithet can be varied still further, so that the place-name itself becomes a character designation. For example, we are told that Newman addresses Babcock simply as "Dorchester," a way for James to emphasize Babcock's provincialism; and when James has established the Avenue d'Iéna as the address of Mrs. Tristram, he can say that Newman dined there (p. 29, for example) without having to identify the hostess in any other way.[10]

Generally speaking, a name is the most distinctive and therefore the most satisfying of character designations, especially when it distills key traits of character into their poetic essence.[11] But since repetition of a name each time a character is mentioned would be unnatural and distracting, it is usually varied through modification and substitution. In the work of an artist as careful as James, variation of designation can be an important indication of intention; and because these variations often represent the author's revised and final view of his characters, they can be even more deserving of consideration than the names themselves.

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[10] Apart from epithet, place-names can modify character, or a character's fate, in a more literal way. Valentin, for example, is said to be a devotee of "the beautiful though somewhat superannuated image of *honor*" (p. 96, James' italics), and as his private residence James assigns him an old house in the Rue d'Anjou St. Honoré. Similarly, the home of his tradition-minded family is in the Rue de l'Université; and the name of their country place, Fleurières, is evidently intended as an ironic reinforcement of Bellegarde duplicity, for it causes Newman to wonder what crime has been committed in this "dark old house, with its flowery name" (p. 283). Significant, too, is its location near Poitiers where, says James as Newman comes to challenge the Bellegarde's violation of their promise to him, "the old English princes fought for their right and held it" (p. 280). And the convent to which Claire is finally consigned is in the Rue d'Enfer — "That's a terrible name," says Mrs. Bread (p. 315), "I suppose you know what it means." Through the imposition of unnatural "conventions and proprieties," Claire de Bellegarde is thus sent down to eternal damnation.

[11] As, for example, in "Urbain de Bellegarde" (see footnotes 8 and 5).