

Names in René de Obaldia's *Du Vent dans les branches de sassafras*

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Names and characters in *Du Vent dans les branches de sassafras*, a Western melodrama set in Kentucky in the 1800s, are John-Emery Rockefeller, his wife Caroline, his daughter Pamela, his son Tom, William Butler, Carlos, Miriam, Œil-de-Perdrix, and Œil-de-Lynx. The authentic playbill of this melodrama, produced in Paris for the first time in 1965 and then in thirty foreign cities ranging from Tel Aviv to Montreal, Bucharest to Dallas, Ankara to Havana, was written by Obaldia for the November 1981 Paris production at the Théâtre de la Madeleine. The author opens his comments on the question, "Can the Western be put into a bottle?" and then proceeds:

Ai-je besoin de vous présenter les personnages de cette pièce? Je crois qu'ils vous sont aussi familiers que ceux de la Commedia dell'arte: Colombine, Pantalon, Arlequin, Scaramouche, etc. Ici, le Shérif, le Beau Ténébreux, la Sauvageonne, le Patriarche Vert, la Femme Forte (selon l'Evangile), le Médecin Ivrogne, la Respectueuse-au-Grand-Cœur, Œil de Lynx [sic], font également partie de notre répertoire mental, de notre petite mythologie portative. . . .

Mais, tout à coup, quel embarras pour l'auteur! Quelle entreprise! Cédant à leur nature, voici qu'ils veulent jouer sur-le-champ leurs rôles éternels; les mots hennissent dans leurs bouches; ils se prennent à faire de longues enjambées: manifestement, ils supportent mal d'être prisonniers de quelques mètres carrés. Les chevauchées dans la pampa, l'incendie des ranchs, le combat sans merci entre Mormons et Mohicans, l'attaque de la diligence, les chevaux engloutis avec leurs cavaliers dans les tourbillons du Rio Grande, tout cela s'avère difficile à huis clos. Déjà Paméla se répand en imprécations, Carlos joue de son revolver en me fixant du regard, dangereusement, John-Emery crache de mépris à mes pieds. . .

Do I need to present to you the characters of this play? I believe they are as familiar to you as those of the Commedia dell'arte: Columbine, Pantaloon, Harlequin, Scaramouche, etc. In my play, the Sheriff, the Good-Looking Sad Hero [The name which Obaldia uses is Le Beau Ténébreux,

the nickname of Amadís de Gaula.], Nature's Child, the Woman-Chasing Patriarch, the Strong Woman (according to the Bible), the Drunken Doctor, the Bighearted Prostitute, Lynx Eye, are all part of our mental repertoire, of our little portable mythology. . . .

But suddenly what a mess for the author! What an undertaking! Yielding to their nature, [the characters] immediately want to play their eternal roles: they neigh words; they begin to take long strides: obviously they can hardly stand being imprisoned in a few square feet. Mad galloping on the pampa, burning of ranch houses, merciless fights between Mormons and Mohicans, stagecoach attacks, horses swallowed up with their riders in the rapids of the Rio Grande—all this is authenticated with great difficulty in closed-up places. Pamela is already cussing, Carlos playing with his revolver threatens me, John-Emery spits angrily at my feet.¹

Obaldia's introduction offers on the one hand concrete details of the Western (pampas, ranch houses, stagecoaches, and so on) and on the other hand describes characters fretting and wanting to play "their eternal roles" as if they had significance beyond the Western, beyond the battle at Pancho City. They even echo Victor Hugo who, railing against the limitations of dramatic rules, proclaimed in the Preface to *Cromwell* that "everything which is in nature is in art." Expanding Hugo's idea, Obaldia's characters may well reason that every place, every person, and everything which exists, did exist, or will exist is in Kentucky at the time of Pancho City: cortisone, the flight into Egypt, Pastor Bing (Crosby?), Dakota, Yellowstone, Snow White, the Rockefellers, the Cadillacs, and Melchizedek. It's no wonder that the characters resent their author who tries to put them into a bottle and, most heinous of all, appears unsympathetic to their interest in "eternal roles" and "portable mythology."

One of these uncontrollable characters is John-Emery Rockefeller who at first does not appear to have any universal role to play. He is a loudmouthed, seventy-year-old pioneer in Kentucky. Throughout the play, he is in his one-room cabin, a low-down unity of place, which he along with his wife, daughter, and Doc Butler defends against hordes of Indians in an action which is all-out, then and there. He never leaves his unity of place (safety of his cabin) and never questions the three unities which are above his head. Yet, his cantankerous coarseness and his piggish prayers may come from an obscure feeling that his universal nature is being denied and that, in truth, his life has an importance beyond

¹René de Obaldia, "Peut-on mettre le western dans une bouteille?," *Entracte du Mois*, No. 18 (1981), n. pag. Translation is mine.

the wilderness of Kentucky with a vacuous wind in the branches of the sassafras tree.

There can be an ancientry in the wind astir the sibilants of *sassafras*—“a great wind from the wilderness” (Job 1.19). Mixing whiskey, wind, time, and metaphor, John-Emery refers to “la fuite en Egypte” ‘the flight into Egypt,’² an allusion to the time “the Lord caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind . . .” (Exod. 14.21). Another allusion to ancient times is the sassafras tree which with its red and yellow colors and fragrance recalls the Tree of Life and with the wind as a voice has some similiarity to the burning bush. Most of all, the name John goes back to Hebrew times, to Hebrew *Johanán* ‘Jehovah has favored.’³ The name is associated particularly with St. John the Baptist and is used ironically in John-Emery Rockefeller, a comic prophet in the wilderness of Kentucky.

John the Baptist was unafraid, was not a “reed shaken with the wind,” while John-Emery is unafraid in appearance only. When the “going gets hard”—for example when his prophetess wife looks into her crystal ball and sees a red man with green eyes and a feathery diadem slipping down from the sassafras tree—he utters “cristi” and “cristi de cristi” (p. 78), an expression analogous to *sapristi* ‘oh hell’ and *sacristi* ‘oh hell,’ both words being related to *sacristie* (*sacristia*, a room in a church where sacred utensils and vestments are kept) and used pejoratively. But *cristi* is *christie* or *christy*, a term in skiing for altering a descent or stopping, and indicates that John-Emery, coward, wishes to avoid meeting his enemy, Œil-de-Lynx ‘Lynx Eye.’

Unlike John the Baptist, John-Emery would never say, “He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none; and he that hath meat, let him do likewise” (Luke 3.11); very selfishly, he prays, “Fais-nous plumer nos ennemis et triompher de nos amis” ‘let us pluck the feathers of our enemies and triumph over our friends’ (p. 60). In the same prayer, he confesses:

Seigneur, j’ai pas toujours été malpropre avec toi; je t’ai fait des tas d’enfants dont certains avec ma femme, Caroline, qu’est bien honnête sous ce rapport-là. . . Deux vivent encore sous mon toit: ma fille, Paméla, qui présente pas mal d’avantages corporels, et Tom, un sacré voyou qui t’honore aussi à sa façon. . .

²René de Obaldia, *Du Vent dans les branches de sassafras*, Vol. II of *Théâtre* (Paris: Grasset, 1966), p. 73. All translations from the play are mine. Page references to the play are hereafter given in the text.

³E. G. Withycombe, *The Oxford Dictionary of English Christian Names*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1950), pp. 170–71.

Lord, I ain't always been dirty with you; I've created for you a stack of kids—even some with my wife, Caroline, who is quite honest in these things. [Little did he know about his wife.] Two still live under my roof: my daughter, Pamela, physically pretty well-endowed, and Tom, a durn rascal, who has his way of honoring you. (p. 59)

John the Baptist preached that “There cometh one mightier than I after me” (Mark 1.7), and John-Emery is followed by one richer than he, that is by his son who discovers one oil well, two, three, 400, 500, 600, 3000, 6000, 9000, 12000, 15000 oil wells. The comic John of the wilderness likes to quote the Psalms—especially Psalm 222, a number far beyond the original 150 Psalms and one in which he wants his innocent flock of Rockefellers to nibble at the grass of paradise: “Que dans ton ciel immense / Nous soyons réunis, / Troupeau de l'innocence, / Broutant le Paradis!” (p. 151). Such a comic interest in the welfare of the family recalls the *senex* of Roman comedy. Moreover, John-Emery resembles the Venetian Pantaloon (*pianta leone* ‘he plants the lion’), an old man who wants money and chases girls.⁴

Associated with money and power is *Emery* which Obaldia connects to *John* by a hyphen. *Emery* is from Old German *Emmerich* and is built on the word *ric* ‘ruler.’⁵ A variation is *Aimery*, a wide-spread French name derived from the German *Haimric* (*haim* ‘house’ and *ric* ‘powerful’).⁶ Such a meaning would predict the powerful, wealthy Rockefeller family just as the Trojan race was destined to found Italy. Another aspect of *Emery* is its similarity to the common noun *émeri* which means an abrasive material and is descriptive of the voice of John-Emery which in the beginning of the play is said to be like a pumice stone. Throughout the play, his voice and character grate on most of the characters. For instance when Pamela accuses her brother of threatening her with his six-shooter and of trying to rape her, old John-Emery snorts, “. . . c'est pas des manières” ‘. . . ‘twar’nt very good manners’ (p. 63).

Emery is not part of the Rockefeller name in the United States. In history, the name of the first Rockefeller in the United States was Johann Peter Rockefeller who arrived in New York from Germany in 1723.⁷ *Rockefeller* comes from German ‘dweller in, or near, the rye [*Roggen*]

⁴Pierre Louis Duchartre, *The Italian Comedy*, trans. Randolph T. Weaver (New York: Dover, 1966), p. 180.

⁵Withycombe, p. 97.

⁶Albert Dauzat, *Dictionnaire étymologique des noms de famille et prénoms de France*, 3rd ed. (Paris: Larousse, 1951), p. 4.

⁷Peter Collier and David Horowitz, *The Rockefellers: An American Dynasty* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976), p. 7.

field [*Feld*, plural *Felder*].⁸ This rural name coincides with John-Emery of the wilderness who dates from ages past and looks toward the capitalism of the future. He snaps at his wife when she refers to “ces gangsters qui réduisent leurs semblables en esclavage, et qui édifient les futures structures du capitalisme en se prévalent des droits sacrés de l’individu . . .” ‘those gangsters who reduce their brothers to slavery [This could refer also to the bondage of the Children of Israel.], and who build future structures of capitalism by taking advantage of the sacred rights of the individual . . .’ (pp. 68–69).

He defends the privileges and power of the Rockefellers when Œil-de-Lynx curses the Whites saying, “Blancs pas propres, pas blancs. Blancs, pas catholiques. Blancs, malblancs!” ‘Whites not clean, not white. Whites, not catholic [universal]. Whites, dirty whites!’ (p. 142). In answer, John-Emery says that Œil-de-Lynx may be right about ninety-eight percent of the Whites but not about the powerful two percent, the Rockefellers: “Mais moi, John-Emery Rockefeller, je suis dans les deux pour cent qui restent. Et, crois-moi, un Rockefeller, même à deux pour cent . . .” ‘I, John-Emery Rockefeller, I am in the two percent who remain. And, believe me, a Rockefeller, even at two percent, (p. 143). To be in the two percent, John-Emery takes all advantages of being the one “Jehovah has favored,” succeeds in building where he has found only the wind, and saves himself by slippery retreats.

In John’s cabin are the womenfolk of his family whose activities go farther back in history than their names. His wife Caroline, most unlike the famous Caroline of Goethe’s *Werther*, does not cause her husband very much worry because of her marital unfaithfulness or make him think of suicide. However, like many wives of Roman and other comedy (“My wife tortures me by being alive,” says Lysidamus in *Casina* by Plautus), she makes life uncomfortable for her husband who, however, depends upon her gift of divining from a crystal ball and yet denounces her magic as if he is quoting Deuteronomy 18.9-15 to condemn witches and wizards. Daughter Pamela ‘all sweet’⁹ by name could step out of Sidney’s *Arcadia* with its “sweet flowers,” “pleasant shade of a broad leaved Sycamor,” and “fine posies of all coulored flowers.” But she is a wicked wench of the frontier who yearns to eat ice cream with the girls, or chicks, and dance with the Preacher in Pancho City: “Manger des glaces à la vanille,

⁸Elsdon C. Smith, *New Dictionary of American Family Names* (New York: Harper and Row, 1956), p. 429.

⁹Donald Altwater, *Names and Name-Days* (1939; rpt. Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1968), p. 77.

avec les copines, ou aux framboises. Danser avec. . . avec le Pasteur” (p. 70). She and her twin brother Thomas (a name from Aramaic, ‘twin’ and associated with Thomas, one of the apostles, and by tradition the twin brother of Jesus)¹⁰ represent the eternal battle of youth, the *adulescens* of Plautus and Terence, the present-day generation gap, or as Doc Butler says, “l’éternel conflit des générations!” (p. 64). Like Pamela, Tom throws his father into a rage by expressing his idea of the Promised Land where he will own a gambling house, copper mines, banana plantations, and a southern mansion filled with pin-up girls of all colors (p. 65). Other twins—not by birth but by appearance (those who look alike are illustrations of repetition or the “mechanical encrusted upon the living” according to Bergson in *Le Rire*)—are the Indian chiefs, Œil-de-Lynx ‘Eye of Lynx’ and Œil-de-Perdrix ‘Eye of Partridge,’ “preyer” and “preyed upon” and representative of the question of guilt and innocence answered by Jean Giraudoux who wrote that “innocence is the absolute adaptation to the universe” and that “the wolf is as innocent as the dove.”

Tom, Pamela, Caroline, and John-Emery are pioneers threatened by domestic quarrels and by an Indian attack which is foreseen in the crystal ball as the famous battle of four Whites against six hundred and eight Red Skins (p. 78), odds such as found in the *Chanson de Roland* and later parodied frequently—especially by Rabelais. Coming to save the endangered cabin is Miriam, the heroine of the melodrama. Her name, the Hebrew equivalent of Mary ‘bitter,’¹¹ goes back to Miriam, the older sister of Aaron and Moses (Num. 26.59; I Chron. 6.3), leader of the ceremonial dance and song of the Hebrew women after the crossing of the Sea of Reeds (Exod. 15.20–21), and sufferer of a temporary leprous condition (Num. 12.2–15). The Kentucky Miriam arrives at the Rockefellers as the only survivor of the Indian raid against Pancho City (*pancho* suggestive of the nickname of Francisco ‘free’ and meaning liberty in Pancho City for sex and gambling or perhaps just *pancho* ‘spawn of sea bream’).

She is bitter because she has lost everything: her work as a singer at Sexy (songs and recitations are part of the *melos* required for a melodrama) and her position as the favorite of Herr Jacob Schmidt, the correct gentleman who has promised to take her around the world in eighty days. But the Indian destruction of Pancho City brings her career to a halt. In a

¹⁰James Hastings, ed., *A Dictionary of the Bible Dealing with Its Language, Literature and Contents*, IV (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1909), 75.

¹¹Flora Haines Loughead, *Dictionary of Given Names*, 2nd ed. rev. (Glendale, California: Arthur H. Clark, 1966), pp. 193–94.

lament, a soliloquy, or a *stance* written in the alexandrine line of Car-
neille, Racine, and Hugo, she bemoans her fate. Four lines of the original
follow and then some lines of a rather free translation:

O terreur inconnue, O remuantes Alpes!
Horloges dans la nuit dont le tic-toc vous scalpe,
Un calme délirant et qui tombait des cieux
Voulait me faire croire à l'absence des Dieux!

Oh, oh, unknown terror, oh, oh, impassioned Alps!
Clocks tick while Indians tiptoe and come to scalp.
A delirious calm which fell upon the clods
Tempted me to believe in the absence of gods!
Sleep, sleep, splendrous ship, had hoisted its full sails;
I heard quivering stars, beauteous in the vales.
However, I, sleepless, tossed in the deep azur
And was closer to fear than in deepest pleasure.
The man who honored me, dead asleep on my couch,
With fingers in his mouth, could not even say ouch.
Then my door stood open, and I, frightened Christian,
Stiff and frozen in fear, saw a dreadful Indian.

.....
The marvelous city was like a flaming bed.
Pancho, Pancho City! With all your noble dead,
What crimes have you committed that have brought tomahawks
To scalp hapless children mid their mothers' fond squawks.

(pp. 96–98)

Seconds after her arrival, she joins the defense of the cabin and uses her
dead aim to knock off quite a few of the enemy. Whenever the enemy is
repulsed, she, like her biblical relative, sings joyfully: “C’est dans l’ad-
versité / Et dans la peine extrême, / Qu’avec ténacité, téna-cité / Renaît
l’espoir suprême” ‘It’s in adversity / And in extreme pain, / And from
tenacity, tena-city [here Obaldia refers to Pancho City and gives the word
ténacité a false etymology as if the word were formed from Latin *tenere*
and *civitas* and not from Latin *tenacitas*] / That supreme hope is reborn’
(p. 122). Her greatest joy comes from John-Emery’s recognition (anag-
norsis which goes back to Homer and which in Greek and Roman tragedy
and comedy often brings slaves and foundlings back to their parents) that
she is his illegitimate daughter, the child of Snow White, a gorgeous
prostitute. Now that she is a Rockefeller, she rises to great heights and
does a striptease which stops the Apaches, the Comanches, the Mohicans,
the Hurons, and the Sioux dead in their tracks (p. 108). But demands
of peripety turn joy to sorrow, and Miriam falls so gravely ill from

having been grazed by a poisoned arrow that Doc Butler believes there is no hope for her recovery. Before she “dies,” she and Doc Butler are married by John-Emery who soon has the tragic task of preaching the bride’s “funeral.”

While on her “deathbed,” she at times addresses the doctor as Herr Jacob Schmidt and confuses him with one of her clients at Sexy in Pancho City (pp. 125, 168). A different identity is offered by Carlos ‘man,’ a sort of Carlo Magno of romance and sheriff (descendant of the *gendarme* of the Guignol theatre), who associates William Butler with a Doctor Butler wanted by the law. *Butler* is more than a name transferred from *Gone with the Wind* and shadier than it appears to be in the beginning of the play. At that time, Butler is quite drunk and discovers that the only rime for *sec* ‘dry’ (he is always “dry” and in need of whiskey) is *Melchissédec*, an allusion to Melchizedek, the King of Salem (Jerusalem) and priest of the Most High God who offered bread and wine to Abram (Gen. 14.17–20). Butler whose name means “a person in charge of butts or casks of wine”¹² never follows the profession so suited to his taste but has to depend upon John-Emery to be his Melchizedek. Since John-Emery is not a generous man, William Butler has to beg him constantly for whiskey and show fixity of purpose indicated by *William*, a Teutonic name calling for “helmut of resolution.” Another Teutonic connection occurs when William Butler holds his empty glass and asks John-Emery not to forget him, “Vergessen Sie mich nicht” (p. 72). This is the only expression he utters in German—probably the only one he knows and probably said to Miriam in its same formal form when he poses as Herr Jacob Schmidt. (At least, she never forgets him or, more accurately, she never forgets the riches he promises her.) Jacob is described in Gen. 25.21–26 as trying at birth to hold his brother back and to get the first place for himself. Thus his name is *Jacob* ‘supplanter,’ ‘one who takes by the heel’ and ‘endeavors to trip up or supplant’ from ‘a heel.’¹³ The story about Jacob and his twin Esau suggests that William Butler (Jacob Schmidt ‘worker in metals’) is a twin of the doctor mentioned by Carlos and called a ‘vague cousin’ (p. 118). If that is so, there are three sets of twins in the play and a tripling of rather common people who have connections with the lowly Rockefellers ‘dwellers in, or near, the rye field.’

All these “good” people have their “virtues” rewarded just as they should in a melodrama. Even Miriam comes back to life not because of

¹²P. H. Reaney, *A Dictionary of British Surnames* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), p. 55. Smith, p. 69.

¹³Hastings, II (1906), 526.

the skill of her comic doctor husband (The doctor’s ignorance is always laughable as is illustrated in the *Menaechmi* of Plautus, the Doctor of the commedia dell’arte, the doctors of Molière, and Dr. Knock of Jules Romains.) but because of the skill of the Indians who make the arrow to “kill” a victim only for a limited time. She too will have what she wants most of all, a white horse with a tilbury and black coachman.

One by one, the characters triumph in Obaldia’s melodrama where realistic details about people and places are no greater than in Brecht’s American-set play *Mahagonny*, but they are not guilty of Mahagonny’s greatest crime which is to be penniless, a crime which demands death in the electric chair: “For the penniless man / Is the worst kind of criminal / Beyond both pity and pardon.”¹⁴ In the crude, frontier world of *Du Vent dans les branches de sassafras*, Obaldia comically scatters throughout man’s history the observation of Tocqueville who in 1831 described the American as “devoured by the longing to make his fortune; it is his unique passion of life.”¹⁵ Obaldia’s Rockefellers, Indians, and Butlers are not limited to America. Their names are rooted in ancient times and point to the conclusion made by Didi in *Waiting for Godot* that “all mankind is us.” For good reason, they fume at being shut up in the bottle of the Western, for they must play their eternal roles which go beyond the Western to Western civilization and on to man.

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¹⁴Bertolt Brecht, *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, trans. W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman (Boston:Daivid R. Godine, 1976), p. 95.

¹⁵Alexis de Tocqueville, *Jorney to America*, trans. George Lawrence, ed. J. P. Mayer (New York: Doubleday, 1971), p. 185.