

THE NAME IS MARLOWE

Paul F. Ferguson
State University of New York
College at Brockport

In the opening chapter of The Big Sleep, Philip Marlowe, Raymond Chandler's detective hero, is asked his name by Carmen Sternwood, daughter of the man who is about to hire him. Wary of her "sharp predatory teeth" and her unhealthy look, Marlowe tells her "Doghouse Reilly." Throughout the novel, he continually resists revealing his name to her, despite the fact that she already knows it.

Marlowe's reluctance to reveal his name to Carmen echoes a convention common to chivalric romance: the knight errant made himself vulnerable to all sorts of enchantment by allowing his enemy to know his real name. Among the many errors of Sir Gawain in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is his knack for allowing everyone in creation to know who he is without finding out their name in return. The convention is, of course, much older than the Middle Ages. The romance hero of classical literature, Odysseus, successfully managed to defeat the Cyclops by using a false name. Chandler's use of this convention thus

reveals his interest in both romance and names.

Reading Chandler, we are constantly confronted with names that are both odd and suggestive: Guy Sternwood, Arthur Gwynn Geiger, Eddie Mars, Canino, Helen Grayle, Jessie Florian, Linda Conquest, Lois Magic, Derace and Crystal Kingsley, Bill and Muriel Chess, and my own special favorite, Orfamay Quest. Many names are exclusively descriptive. Moose Molloy, for example, is a name well-suited to the giant of Farewell, My Lovely; and the name Canino suggests the sub-human qualities of the sadistic killer of The Big Sleep.

Other names, such as Helen Grayle, Orfamay Quest, and Lois Magic, seem out of place in the world of hard-boiled realism. Unlike the writers of classic detective fiction who had viewed murder and its detection as some kind of parlor game to amuse the upper and middle classes, the hard-boiled school of writers which flourished in the pages of Black Mask Magazine during the twenties and thirties, attempted to portray crime and detection realistically. They depicted a brutal world of unrelieved shabbiness, a landscape where violence was commonplace, and where crime, especially organized crime, was ubiquitous. But Chandler recognized, perhaps more than any other writer of detective fiction (with the possible exception of Dashiell Hammett), that the world of the hard-boiled detective

Ferguson 3

was no more realistic than the world of Hercule Poirot. He saw that it was a world in desperate need of the beauty, wonder, and magic of an age which may never have existed, and that the hero who lived in this world was the modern equivalent of the knight errant of romance. To portray this need, Chandler gave his characters names evocative of the chivalric world, and in doing so, managed to transcend the limitations of literary realism imposed by the conventions of the hard-boiled school.

Jessie Florian's surname, for example, in addition to suggesting fertility, evokes numerous romance heroines named after flowers. The medieval poem "Floris and Blanche-fleur" comes to mind, as does Spenser's character Florimel. Chandler's use of the name Florian, however, is ironic, for Jessie Florian is a withered flower, a dried up alcoholic who is accidentally murdered in Farewell, My Lovely. The names Linda Conquest and Lois Magic (The High Window) evoke both the romance world of conquest and magic, as well as the aspirations toward which the characters who possess the names move. The name Arthur Gwynn Geiger, by echoing the names Arthur and Guinevere, suggests a sexual confusion resulting from the perversion of romantic ideals, particularly appropriate since Geiger is a bi-sexual peddler of pornography. Marlowe's client in The Lady in the Lake (the novel's title suggests the Arthurian

Ferguson 4

legend), Derace Kingley, bears a name suggestive of royalty. In The Little Sister, Marlowe is sent on his quest by Orfamay Quest, whose given name, as George Grella has pointed out,¹ may be an anagram for Morgan Le Fay. Like Morgan Le Fay, Orfamay Quest, the little sister of the title, is deceptive and deadly. Finally, Helen Grayle (Farewell, My Lovely) has a name that is doubly significant. Like an earlier Helen, her beauty could launch a thousand ships, and she affects Marlowe in the same way that her namesake must have affected Paris and Faustus. Her surname evokes the Holy Grail, another appropriate allusion since she is, as Marlowe eventually discovers, the object of his quest. Her name, however, is as deceptive as she is. Apparently the distressed damsel, she is revealed to be the loathly lady who kills the giant who loved her, and comes perilously close to killing the Grail knight, Marlowe.

Chandler's use of names not only evokes the world of romance and the romantic aspirations of his characters; it also reveals the perversion of romantic ideals, for the violence and corruption of Marlowe's world belie the romantic pretensions the names suggest. The name Guy Sternwood, for example, suggests leadership, virility, and strength. The man who bears the name is, in fact, a dried up spider of a man who, confined to a wheelchair, can only

Ferguson 5

survive in an artificially heated atmosphere surrounded by orchids which remind Marlowe of the flesh of dead men. Romantic ideals and aspirations are reduced to a petty scramble for money and power. The men and women who inhabit Chandler's Los Angeles are T.S. Eliot's wastelanders, more caught up in the trappings of chivalry than with the ideals which inspired it. The search for the Holy Grail was, after all, a search for an object which had moral and spiritual significance. The enchanted objects which Chandler's men and women seek are more like the Brasher doubloon, a counterfeit coin valuable only because it can be endlessly reproduced to con the greedy. It has no moral, spiritual, or regenerative value. The entire world is a counterfeit and a delusion which only loosely disguises the corruption at its core.

Through this world of sham walks Philip Marlowe, the last of the true chevaliers. In Chandler's words, he is a man "neither tarnished nor afraid..., a man of honor, by instinct, by inevitability . . . , the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world." In short, "He is the hero, he is everything."² A character in The High Window calls him a "shop-soiled Galahad," and throughout his adventures Marlowe does his best to live up to this sobriquet, although he realizes as early as The Big Sleep that what he does is not a game for knights.

Ferguson 6

Chandler gives his Galahad, the most important name of all. The given name Philip, derived from the Greek *Philippos*, suggests the knight errant, the "horse-lover." Addressed occasionally by the diminutive "Phil," he is a friend to his clients as well as to other innocent victims of circumstance. I also suspect that Chandler may have selected this given name as a slap at S.S. Van Dine's epigone detective, Philo Vance, for whom he had the greatest scorn. Marlowe himself makes frequent disparaging remarks about Vance.

Marlowe's surname is even more interesting. Before he became Marlowe he was known as Mallory, evidently after Sir Thomas Malory of the Morte D'Arthur, Carmady, DeRuse, Dalmás, English, and Delaguerra. Chandler claimed that the name Marlowe was suggested by his wife, Cissy. But I suspect Chandler of terminal modesty, for it strikes me as more than a happy accident that he named his detective-narrator after another famous narrator, and some would say "detective" in his own right, Joseph Conrad's Charlie Marlow.

Initially, the differences between the two Marlowes seem greater than the similarities. Whereas Philip Marlowe is an extremely active character, crisscrossing the California landscape, battling the avatars of evil whether they be cops, crooks, or the spoiled sons and daughters of wealthy businessmen and politicians, Charlie Marlow remains

Ferguson 7

the relatively passive observer. His characteristic pose is that of the meditating Buddha, sitting apart, indistinct and silent, telling his stories to a small audience which barely pays attention. His conflicts with evil remain internal and psychological. There is no physical struggle in Heart of Darkness; the real struggle takes place in Marlow's soul.

Moreover, Conrad's brooding narrator lacks Philip Marlowe's sense of humor. Chandler's hero has a capacity for self-mockery which serves as a kind of moral armor:

I was wearing my powder blue suit, with dark blue shirt, tie and display handkerchief, black brogues, black wool socks with dark blue clocks on them. I was neat, clean, shaved and sober, and I didn't care who knew it. I was everything the well-dressed private detective ought to be. I was calling on four million dollars.

(The Big Sleep, p.1)

Chandler's emphasis on the black socks with the blue clocks on them renders Marlowe an almost clownish figure, a bumpkin similar to young Percival or to Spenser's Red Cross, and his use of the black and blue motif provides a comic anticipation of the bruises Marlowe is to

Ferguson 8

suffer later in the novel. Marlowe wisecracks his way through seven novels, and the wisecracks provide a comic counterpoint to the dark and onimous forces which dominate his world.

Philip Marlowe and Charlie Marlow are nevertheless kindred spirits. Each provides a lens through which we may view the world. Conrad's narrator both recreates and attempts to understand the morally ambiguous world he perceives. Chandler's narrator perceives his world, not as morally ambiguous, but as morally confused. Furthermore, both are loners, outsiders, and exiles in a world which has grown strange to them. Charlie Marlow's only home is the mysterious and inscrutable sea on which he remains, paradoxically, a wanderer over the face of the earth. Philip Marlowe's only home is a sparsely furnished apartment in which he works out chess problems. Yet even this sanctuary can be invaded and defiled by the likes of a Carmen Sternwood who, hissing like a snake, attempts to seduce him.

Charlie Marlow and Philip Marlowe are also seekers after truth. Charlie Marlow's journey down the Congo and his various meanderings in Lord Jim are designed to explore and discover the truth of human motivation, the inner landscape. Initially attracted by Kurtz' idealism and efficiency, he is later both repulsed and fascinated

Ferguson 9

by what Kurtz has become. More importantly, he discovers that those forces which have driven Kurtz to perform certain unspeakable rites also operate within Marlow's own soul. The Marlow who earlier claimed to detest the lie, ends his tale with a lie to protect Kurtz's beloved from a horrible truth.

The truth Philip Marlowe seeks has less to do with individual motivation than it does with the motivation of an entire society. Rarely does Chandler focus on a single character long enough for us to discern such fully rounded figures as Kurtz or Jim. Even more rarely does Marlowe indulge in the kind of detailed speculative analysis we get from Conrad's narrator. Chandler is less interested in what makes his characters tick than in the fact and consequences of their ticking. His characters are types, occasionally stereotypes, designed to reflect a single aspect of the collective motivation that Chandler sees operating in modern American society. Each is motivated by a desire for wealth or social status, or for the appearance of wealth and social status. Murder proceeds from the individual's attempt to conceal the darkness of his or her own past in order to maintain the illusion of the present. Helen Grayle's attempt to hide, by means of two murders, the fact that she is a former dance-hall girl and mobster's moll named Velma Valento is of a piece with many of Chandler's characters. General Sternwood's wealth and the

Ferguson 10

corruption it engenders in his two daughters make possible the success of such gangsters as Eddie Mars and the sadistic gunman Canino. Although Marlowe remains the only honorable man in his world, he, too, shares in the guilt. Having discovered that General Sternwood's daughter was responsible for the death of her brother-in-law, Marlowe, like Conrad's narrator, tells the big lie to protect the old general from the nastiness which has tainted everyone and of which the old man has, inadvertently, been the source.

Finally, both Marlowes are disillusioned romantics aware of and concerned with the dissolution of the modern world. Both recognize that the trappings of contemporary civilization merely mask the barbarity at the core of the human heart. The major difference is that Charlie Marlow's world ranges from London to the Congo to the South Seas, thus encompassing almost an entire planet, while Philip Marlowe's world is located in and confined to Southern California, a landscape which must stand for at least American civilization if not Western civilization. Nevertheless, Philip Marlowe is very much concerned with exploring this landscape to find out what has transformed it into a gaudy dump of neon lights, shabby hotels, and greasy clip joints. He discovers that the source of corruption is wealth pursued and accumulated at the expense of

Ferguson 11

others, an ideal which taints all whom it touches, and an ideal which is part of the fabric of American society. As one character in The Long Goodbye tells him, "There ain't no clean way to make a hundred million bucks." And Marlowe himself observes, "We're a big rough rich wild people and crime is the price we pay for it, and organized crime is the price we pay for organization."

Thus Chandler's use of names is an integral part of his fictional technique. Names evocative of chivalric romance illuminate the gap between America's romantic pretensions and its shabby reality. Marlowe's name, by alluding to Conrad's famous brooding narrator, reveals that Chandler's intent is not merely to entertain, but to explore our own uniquely American heart of darkness.

Paul F. Ferguson

S.U.C. at Brockport.

Ferguson 12

NOTES

¹ George Grella, "Murder and the Mean Streets," Detective Fiction: Crime and Compromise, éd. Dick Allan and David Chacko (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), p. 421.

² Raymond Chandler; "The Simple Art of Murder," from The Simple Art of Murder by Raymond Chandler (New York: Ballantine Books, 1977; p. 20.