"WHAT A NAME. STEPHEN HALIFAX":
ONOMASTIC MODES IN THREE NOVELS BY MARGARET DRABBLE

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Near the end of Margaret Drabble's first novel <u>A Summer Bird-Cage</u> (1963) there is a scene in which Louise, whose brief marriage to Stephen Halifax, the writer, has just come to a not unexpected but bizarre end, tries to persuade her younger sister Sarah, the first-person narrator of the novel, never to marry for love because "it does terrible things to people." In reply to Sarah's half curious, half facetious "Why? Why do you say that?", Louise offers an explanatory illustration which promises to be both sufficiently familiar and sufficiently distant (SBC 203-205):[1]

> "'Do you remember Stella?'
>
> 'Stella Conroy?'
>
> 'That's right.'
>
> I did remember Stella. She had been the same years as
>
> Louise, though at Cambridge, not Oxford: she was . . .
>
> [followed by further detailed information about her] . . .
>
> I doubt if anyone who knew her ever disliked her.
>
> 'Yes', I said, 'I remember Stella.'
>
> 'You know she married Bill?'
>
> 'Bill?'
>
> 'The phsics man she knew. They got married the year they

came down, a week after the end of term or something

dotty. And now they've got two babies.'

'How super,' I said, automatically, but Louise cried

almost with frenzy, 'No, it isn't super at all, it's

the worst catastrophe I've ever seen.'"

[Followed by a sneering, descriptive acount of a visit

to the young couple's house in Steatham].

This is the only occasion in the narrative on which any reference is

made to Stella and Bill, and even their singular appearance is second

hand, so to speak, through Louise's brief but poignant sketch of her never

to be repeated visit, as related to the reader through the filter of Sarah.

Their role as mutual acquaintances from the sisters' college days now to

be paraded as discouraging examples of what happens to young people when

love is straitjacketed by domesticity is distinctly minor and limited,

their existence so secondary and so tangential to the events and emotions

of the narrative that the sour bliss of their tamed love is at best a late

diversion not really required to bolster Louise's firm and long-standing

decision not to have any babies. Yet their belated introduction in an

amusing verbal interlude masquerading as motivation, or at least confirma-

tion, demands that they be given enough identity so that recognition is

possible both on the part of the inside listener, Sarah, and on the part

of the outside reader, us. Louise does not tell a parable or a fable

with anonymous actors, but the story of Stella and Bill, not just any of

the many Stellas and Bills who were undoubtedly married to each other in

the early sixties, but Stella Conroy and Bill, "the phsics man she knew"
at college. Sarah had forgotten about Stella and Bill; initially, she
is not even sure which Stella is alluded to -- 'Stella Conroy?' 'That's
right.' -- but once one Stella has been isolated from several possibilities,
a quick internal review jogs Sarah's memory and informs the reader: 'Yes,
I said, 'I remember Stella.' The reader also feels by now that he knows
which Stella she remembers, is aware of some of her characteristics and
especially of her particular virtues; he, too, is convinced that if he had
known her he could not have disliked her. Stella would indeed have been a
girl worth knowing, and one wonders what prompted Louise's question and
what she has to do with the narrator's sister's present predicament. But,
then, Stella is, after all, no longer the Cambridge student whose image
Sarah had preserved at the back of her mind; she is now married to Bill.
'Bill?' 'The physics man she knew.' Oh yes, Bill, of course, that Bill.
Sarah's memory of Bill is obviously not as clear as what she remembers
about Stella; maybe her acquaintance with him had been slight, and the
reader who has just concluded that he might indeed recognize Stella Conroy
were he to meet her, has no such hopes about Bill, not even when he is
permitted to overhear what Louise so disparagingly confides to Sarah, in
the course of her report of the, for her, nightmarish visit to Streatham:
His being out at work at the time, his being a teacher at the Polytechnic,
and his having quarreled with Stella "about whose turn it was to get up
for the early feed" of their baby. In contrast to Stella's, Bill's iden-
tity remains decidedly hazy, if he has any identity at all! We do not even
learn his surname; he is just Bill, nor more no less.

For a writer, like Margaret Drabble, who so carefully crafts her
characters through windblown tufts of information, through the cumulative
evidence of many incidental hints, this treatment of Stella and Bill is
not carelessness, is not accident, not even in her first novel. From the
very beginning of her career as a novelist, a career now spanning almost
twenty years, she has been highly conscious of the close links between
name and identity, and of the almost total semantic emptiness of names as
mere discrete labels, certainly of names like Stella and Bill, unless
made fit for effective communication, for the speech act of identifying
reference, through the provision of appropriate content and substance.
Since, in actual life, we do not possess or recall the same amount of
content for every name and since the content which we do possess or recall
for a name has been acquired at different times, the creator of fictional
reality has to be sensitive to the amount of content to be conveyed to the
reader, the occasions on which it is to be provided and the onomastic
strategies to be employed in the process.

Important as the selection of the right name for fictitious characters
may be, the felicitous choice of a name counts for very little, unless the
name is actualized through the right kind of content, judiciously summar-
ized (Maureen Kirby, TIA 53-59), freely offered (Louise, SBC 7-10), teas-
ingly implied (Nicholas, W 121; Evelyn Ashby, TIA 237), emphatically granted
(Simone, SBC 49, 70), casually infiltrated (Beatrice, SBC 89; Karen and
Mark, W 81; Enid, TIA 185), first stubbornly withheld then reluctantly
released (Francis, SBC 73), meted out in appropriate miserliness or gener-
osity. Naming, while isolating, provides potential connections; using

names turns that potential into reality.

There is, however, no necessary, and evidently no automatic, sequence which leads from the revelation of a name to its gradual or sudden accumulation of contents. While in <u>The Ice Age</u> (1977) the name of the protagonist, Anthony Keating, is made available in the very first sentence, we know a great deal about the narrator in <u>A Summer Bird-Cage</u> before a telephone call necessitates her using her own name for the first time: 'Hello, this is Sarah, who's that?' (SBC 12). Similarly, the narrator of <u>The Waterfall</u> (1969), tantalizingly vacillating between myopic first-person subjectivity and distancing third-person objectivity, remains nameless until after the birth of her baby and is only referred to by name in her new abandoned motherhood: 'Jane, sitting there in bed with the small new child tucked in beside her, . . .' (W 9). It is, however, perhaps, significant that in an age and in a society in which first names are deemed sufficient as a mode of address and identification, we never learn Jane's maiden name although she once or twice is designated by her married name, Mrs. Jane Grey, a combination whose literary and historical associations do not escape its bearer (W 226):

> Jane Grey.
>
> Head on the block.
>
> And all the whirring birds flew upwards.

Lucy, too, Jane's alter ego whose husband James she acquires as her lover; Lucy, "that other ghost, that other torturer"; Lucy who "was, if you like, my sister: more nearly my sister than my own sister was"; Lucy, whose marriage to James triggers Jane's own marriage to Malcolm;

Lucy because of whom Jane "wore unmemorable skirts and light jerseys" in the hope of looking like her; Lucy with whom she exchanges names and identities through "tricks of impersonation and misrepresentation", after James's accident; "Lucy. Lucy Goldsmith. Lucy Otford" -- Lucy, too, ultimately gains real substance and persuasiveness through her literary counterpart (W 153):

> "Perhaps I'll go mad with guilt, like Sue Bridehead,
> or doom myself in an effort to reclaim lost renunci-
> ations, like Maggie Tulliver. Those fictitious hero-
> ines, how they haunt me. Maggie Tulliver had a cousin
> called Lucy, as I have, and like me fell in love with
> her cousin's man."

Fiction informing fiction, literature made real through other liter-ature, our precious identities floating down the river to escape the fakings, borrowings, and substitutions (W 212):

> ". . . I had booked the room for Lucy in my own name. . ."

In all three novels -- and there is no reason to assume that it is otherwise in her other works of fiction -- the power of names, naming and using names is ever present, finding verbal expression at crucial, onomastic junctures. The most elaborately developed scene in this respect, and perhaps also the most memorable, is concerned with the naming of Jane's second baby, in response to her own recent fate, to the prodding presence of the midwife, to the wintery weather outside the window, and to a bizarre capriciousness, that goes for humor, in the maternal mind of someone so

obviously alone and separated from the world out there in the isolated
bed of her confinement (W 16):

> "The midwife said that she had already visited one
> baby that morning, another newborn, and that the mother,
> in view of the weather, had resolved to christen the
> baby Snowwhite. It was a black baby. The midwife, her-
> self black, thought this was amusing, and roared with
> laughter. . . . What will you call yours, asked the
> midwife, and Jane said, I don't know, perhaps I'll call
> her Viola. Violet, said the midwife, nodding, delighted,
> yes, Violet. No, Viola, said Jane, abandoning the name,
> which had risen to her from the notion of violation: and
> then she said, no, I'll call her Bianca."

It is inevitable that so spontaneous, so personal, so flagrant a
naming should conflict with family expectations and societal constraints.
It is just as inevitable that what is ultimately offered as the true expla-
nation to family and society can only be the kind of truth that compromises
in order to avoid further friction. After all, what is a woman to do who
has to keep alive the fiction of an unviolated marriage while having to
deal with waiting, the pain, the ritual of childbirth alone (W 41):

> "'Why did you call the baby Bianca?' pursued her mother. . . .
> 'Why not?' said Jane. 'Because of the snow, I suppose.
> It was snowing, when she was born. And it's a good pun.
> Bianca Grey. After all, with my name, I was fated, wasn't

I? So why not make a pun at a child's expense?'

'It's rather an odd name,' said her mother. 'Your

father didn't much care for it. He wanted you to call

her Julia.'

'Well, truly, to tell you the truth,' said Jane, pour-

ing out anxiously the watery tea, 'to tell you the

honest truth, Malcolm chose it.'"

How easily mothers are satisfied by the confirmation of predictability!
Even an absent husband who does not yet know that he is the father of a
second child can be used to cloak tongue-in-cheek capriciousness in accept-
able paternal authority; life-shaping anthroponymic puns are deprived of
their lingering cruelty through integration into the structures of respect-
ability.

In other instances, one's consciousness of, indeed one's conscience
about, names produces less direct and less articulate associations. There
is Simone, for example, "nationless, sexless, hopelessly eclectic, hope-
lessly unrooted" (SBC 49), "sad, eclectic, gaunt Simone with her dark face
and her muddled heritage, her sexless passions and her ancient clothes,
gathered from all the attics of Europe" (SBC 70), of whom Sarah says that
"she is the window through which I first glimpsed the past" (SBC 70);
Simone, with her French opera-singer mother and her Italian-general father,
whose "very name puts things out of perspective" (SBC 49). Yet, despite
the unfocused muddledness which it foregrounds, her name is obviously as
incantatory as those Italian names of places, persons and things which "put
Sarah under" and the sounds of which remind her that she is "not all dry

grit and deserted hollows" -- Florence, Arno, Siena, Venice,
Tintoretto, Cimabue, Orvieto, Lachrimae Christi, permesso, limonata"
(SBC 24). Names as evocations and temptations.

And, how can one forget, there is Stephen Halifax, Louise's
novelist husband, married for his money and constantly cuckolded by
one sister and passionately despised by the other: "What a name.
Stephen Halifax. At least I would find out at this wedding whether
it was a pseudonym or not. Louise said it wasn't but it didn't
sound at all real to me" (SBS 10). Although Stephen's lack of
pseudonymity is later confirmed by his parents, he remains the object
of Sarah's ridicule and hatred, emotions, as it turns out, a little
unexpectedly shared by Louise. For Sarah, he is thus rarely Stephen,
almost always Stephen Halifax, and the purported reality of the name
(in a work of fiction!) does not remove from it the initial suspicion
of pseudonymity, of a name as pompous front for human qualities
despicable in their fascination: "What a name. Stephen Halifax."

While individual names function in each novel as identifying
markers with varying content, they would be less than successful in
that role were it not for the presence of other names with the same
function.[2] Ultimately only the network of names within the covers of
a book, with its criss-crossing relationships, will ensure the proper
onomastic functioning of each item. The acid test in this respect
will always have to be whether the sum of names as an onomastic text
within a text has been appropriately and convincingly structured to
avoid misunderstandings or puzzlement on the part both of the external

reader and of internal characters. There is no validity to that

total structure or to any individual onomastic reference outside

each text. The key is always within. When considering names in

this way as interdependent items, it is natural that an author avoid

deliberate confusion by giving the same name to different places or

the same fictitious surname to two unrelated characters. In all three

novels under discussion the use of surnames bears out this axiom:[3]

Halifax, McCabe, Bennett, Howell, Webster, Smee, Connell, Slater,

Vesey, Bates, Rathbone, Hinchcliffe, Almond, Lovell, Conroy (SBC);

Gray, Otford, Goldsmith, Garret (W); Keating, Friedmann, Murray,

Wincobank, Peters, Clegg, Barstow, Cockburn, Vickers, Wade, Jones,

Leggett, Kirby, Gobian, Lynn, Smith, Nicklin, Weightman, Hargreaves,

Flood, Boxer, Hampton, Harris, Hancox, Collins, Channing, Harwood,

Newsome, Bowlatos, Nicholson, Ashby, Erikson, Callendar, Bentley,

Morrice, Appleyard, Lightfoot, Kinarth, Blakely, Buckton, Bunney,

Jackson, Eaves, Eyaim, Boot, Sinclair-Davies, Hyams, Seifert, Morgan,

Chalfont, Baines, Vignoli, Gifford (TIA). What is, however, even

more remarkable, and surely not without significance, is the fact

that, contrary to, let us say, our own circles of friends, not a single

surname in any one novel overlaps with a surname in another. Surely

this cannot simply be intended to be a device to help even the most

avid Drabble reader to keep these novels and their characters apart,

but is rather an aid invoked, consciously or subconsciously, by the

author herself to assist her in her own onomastic and genealogical

housekeeping. A study of all the novels will, of course, be necessary

in order to establish whether this is a general principle under-
lying her anthroponymic strategies, i.e. "Since the name is Kirby,
the novel must be The Ice Age." The number of surnames displayed
in each work is obviously an indicator of the range and degree of
intimacy of the social setting. The surnames mentioned in The
Waterfall, for example, are limited to four -- one of them an
occasional reference to a racing driver -- not only because the num-
ber of characters involved is comparatively small but also as the re-
sult of expected patterns of reference in a family circle with few
extensions into the outside world. The large number of surnames
paraded in The Ice Age, on the other hand, points in every respect
in the opposite direction -- a larger world, more characters, more
formal modes of reference. A Summer Bird-Cage lies somewhere be-
tween these two.

First names (or font names) are largely handled according to the
same principle of lack of duplication, whenever possible. Such a
policy is completely adhered to in The Waterfall for which the
names mentioned are, respectively: Jane, Lucy, James, Malcolm, Louise,
Viola, Bianca, Julia, Charlotte, Mike, Karen, Mark, Catherine,
Bridget, Nicholas, Denise, Brenda, Bert, Richard ("unidentifiable,
one of many Richards"). In The Ice Age certain names on the fringe
of the narrative are allowed to occur twice, almost only in reference
to characters who never make an appearance: Anthony, Kitty, Max,
Alison, Giles, Barbara (Babs), Molly, Jane, Humphrey, Clyde, Mary,
Peter, Stephen, Ruth, Chloe, Bill, Austin, Rory, Len, Maureen,

Donnell, Janey, Erick, Stanley (Stan), Mavis, Jonathan, Daniel, Miriam, Evie, Rachel, Christopher, Zelda, Linton, Harriet, Pamela, Alfred, Jim, Dave, Lizzie, Marlene, Helen, Rosemary, Judy, Diane, Grace, Derek, Darren, George, Tom, Kev, Arthur, Tim, Eloise, Margrit, Laura, Ned, Sally, Sadie, Jim, Michael, Enick, Dave, Sid, Daren, Sharon, Paul, Matthew, Harry, Richard, Bill, Stuart, Mike, Hattie, Gino, Evelyn, Bert, Sylvia. Some of these names are handled almost generically, in such phrases as "our David and our Sid and our Mavis" and "their Darens and Sharons and Marlenes" (TIA 185). In A Summer Bird-Cage, actual life with its onomastic ambiguities finds a somewhat more adequate imitation, in so far as Sarah and Louise's cousin Michael has a namesake whom Sarah meets briefly at a party, and there are two Simons (and a Simone!). Otherwise this novel offers Louise, Stephen, Martin, Kay, Sarah, Daphne, Betty, Kristin, Peter, Sebastian, Tony, John, Gill, Jessica, James, Rose, Jeremy, Wilfred, Yves, Linda, Francis, David, Ildiko, Beata, Stephanie, Sappho, Beatrice, Jackie, Charles, Zoe, Harold, Bert, Heather, Stella, Bill. As in the case of the surnames used in these three novels, first names rarely occur in more than one work, certainly never in reference to major characters. The kaleidoscopic treatment of personal names and the casual naming of several persons about whom we otherwise learn nothing or very little creates the impression of an inexhaustible number of human be-ings whom the author might have conjured up or introduced if she had chosen to do so. The appropriateness of the names actually presented, with regard to age, social background and educational level, is never

in doubt, and future scholars may well use them as reliable indicators
of the anthroponymic registers of the sixties and seventies.[4]

Margaret Drabble's fiction, at least when judged on the basis of
these three novels, thus reveals a pleasing onomastic sensitivity in
the choice of individual names, a skillful orchestration in the name
structure of each work, and felicitous, though ever-varying, strate-
gies for introducing new names and their contents. Unquestionably,
the selection, use and symbolism of her nomenclatures add much to
the believability of her social landscapes and the cultural cohesion
of her created worlds.

Such an approach, of course, presupposes the successful handling
of the problems and opportunities inevitably arising from the act of
naming and being named, especially the almost automatic vulnerability
and exposure which accessibility through one's names brings about:

> "His use of my christian name shut me up. I
>
> felt suspicious, as though he were about to make a
>
> pass at me, though I realized a moment later that
>
> perhaps it only meant that he didn't think of me
>
> generically, as a little sister, as Louise and
>
> John and Stephen surely did. It was conceivable
>
> that he did think of me as a human being. . . ."
>
> (SBC 125).

If having a name is being human, the use of that name may turn one
into an individual who, through being, matters and delights:

"'How's it going, Mr. Otford?' and she knew that he

had foreseen that she would take pleasure in the

mere sound of his name in a stranger's voice: sub-

stantiation it gave him, subtance and a shadow"

(W 69).

Substance and a shadow -- to have a name is to be. Margaret
Drabble knows this and, fortunately, has the commonsense, the skills
and the imaginative knack to apply this essential knowledge to her
creative work.

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NOTES

[1] Since the three novels in this study were all used in the Penguin editions, they will be only identified by the following abbreviations: SBC (_A Summer Bird-Cage_, 1963); W (_The Waterfall_, 1969); TIA (_The Ice Age_, 1977). The works in question were solely selected in order to achieve an acceptable chronological coverage.

[2] Barbara Dixson comments similarly on the function of names in _The Needle's Eye_ (1972): "Most of the novel's rich figurative language, it seems, radiates as symbol, metaphor, allusion, or image from the given names of the two protagonists, Rose Vertue and Simon, while minor characters generate subordinate strands. As a consequence of this pattern, the novel achieves a complexity, an economy, and a coherence that a more random use of figurative language would not allow." ("Patterned Figurative Language in _The Needle's Eye_," in: Dorey Schmidt (editor), _Margaret Drabble: Golden Realms_, Living Author Series No. 4, Pan American University, Edinburg, Texas, 1982, pp. 136-137).

[3] Names are listed in the order in which they occur in each work.

[4] Drabble's use of names thus reflects well what has been called her "realistic presentation of distinctly contemporary people and predicaments" (Nora F. Stovel, "Margaret Drabble's Golden Vision," in Dorey Schmidt, _Margaret Drabble: Golden Realms_, p. 3.