

SOME FUNCTIONS OF NAMES IN GALDOS'S NOVELS

Benito Pérez Galdós (1843-1920), the most important novelist in Spain after Cervantes, had a career that encompassed the last third of the 19th Century. Our purpose is to establish some basic aspects and functions of proper names used in his novels. It has been said that "It is a commonplace in Galdosian criticism that names and nicknames often carry the burden of symbolical, frequently ironical meaning,"¹ to which it may be added that some of the names (Christian names, surnames, nicknames, and even epithets) that serve to individualize a character are used by Galdós for other purposes, such as the establishment of social status, or, as in the case of some nicknames, to show the esteem or lack of it, in which some individuals are held by their peers.

Writing in the realistic mode, Galdós had much in common with Dickens and Balzac, although he was also influenced by the naturalism of Zola. At the end of his creative life he evolved toward a spiritual and transcendental concept of being. No matter in which mode he was writing, he always used the names to convey some extra meaning, to perform some allusive function. He shared with Dickens a peculiar sense of humor, a graphic humor bordering on the caricature, which is much in evidence in his choice of names, nicknames and diminutives. From Balzac, Galdós imitated the use of reappearing characters moving through a fictitious world that reflects mainly the middle class of

the Bourbon Restoration. The proper names of many secondary characters become part of a system of loosely interlocked novels. As with Balzac, his novels become a single contemporary novel. Some of these secondary characters—the moneylender Torquemada or the spendthrift Señora Bringas—outgrew their original roles, and became protagonists on their own. But for most of the other characters the proper name is a mnemonic device creating the impression of a vast crowd; there seem to be more people populating these novels than there really are.

Nowdays only the specialist reads the whole Galdosian novelistic output, but in his heyday the people of Spain and Latin America were following his novels with the passion reserved today for television serial programs: contemporary readers of Galdós would need just the mention of a character's name for a whole set of images to be recalled; in this way an entire fictional past was brought back. Sometimes, with a few remarks, the author would change the reader's outlook on a previous novel, as happens in Lo prohibido, 1884-1885 (The Forbidden), which contains a passing remark about an aristocratic lady, Pepa Fúcar, living in common-law marriage with León Roch, the protagonist of an earlier novel, La familia de León Roch, 1878 (The Family of León Roch).²

In Galdós's novels the story is the development of a life. That is why the titles are so often the proper names of the protagonists. Each title-name assumes a metonymic connotation that surpasses its original sole "naming" function and becomes a charactonym for the work as a whole. Thus the title name is linked, and is consistent

with other onomastic signs in the novel. As an example of this let us examine La de Bringas, 1884, (The Bringas Woman). The protagonist of the title is the wife of a minor bureaucrat in the court of Isabel II, in the late 1860's. The husband, out of insecurity and fear for the future, has become a miser, a penny-pincher who runs his household with iron discipline. He is a foil for his wife, who is the epitome of la cursilería. To be a cursei means to have bad taste combined with snobbery, to be narrow-minded and vulgar, to lack imagination, and above all, to lack awareness of all these faults.

Rosalía Bringas's attempts to mix with ladies of the upper class, and become, like them, an elegant woman, will lead inexorably to her moral ruin. Her fall will coincide with the fall of the Monarchy and her husband's unemployment, and at the end it is suggested that she is to be the family bread-winner as a sort of free-lance call-girl.

She usually appears in the novel as Rosalía, but in the narrator's comments she is alluded to as la Bringas (the Bringas Woman), even dropping the preposition de that in most cases signals a married woman (as in the title La de Bringas); sometimes the narrator changes the allusion to la Pipaón, referring to her low-class maiden name, or to la Pipaón de la Barca. The addition de la Barca was used in a previous novel to achieve an obviously aristocratic resonance. In all these variations, the important element is the definite article la (the) that shows the lack of respect that the narrator feels toward the protagonist. The name Bringas is not exactly euphonic and the definite article gives

it a pejorative ring.

Even in one instance where the narrator refers to her as la ingeniosa señora (the ingenious lady) the context belies the apparent flattery.

The author, by using a couple of nicknames for the husband and a satiric, symbolical surname for the first lover of the Bringas woman, reinforces the negative portrayal of these characters. S. Don Francisco Bringas is often called "our good Thiers" because of his extraordinary resemblance to the French politician and historian; thus Galdós achieves a double irony because of Bringas's mediocrity and also because Thiers' political and economical ideas are the opposite of Don Francisco's. On the other hand, those who despise Bringas call him, behind his back, ratón Pérez or ratoncito Pérez (the Pérez, or little Pérez, mouse); the surname Pérez stands here for mediocrity, and also alludes to a well-known cartoon figure portraying decided vulgarity. The seducer of Señora Bringas is a colleague of her husband, D. Manuel María Pez, a well-placed bureaucrat, whose surname means "fish," and he is an obvious symbol of the shoal of middle-class, good-for-nothing parasites [sic] that swim upwards among the strong currents of politically and economically troubled Spain. In a previous novel, La desheredada, 1881 (The Disinherited Lady), Galdós dedicated a whole chapter to this man and his species. After these examples, we can conclude that the onomastic structure of The Bringas Woman shows clearly the satirical point of view of the author and supports his attack on these various specimens

of shoddiness in human behavior.

Rafael Boch, applying to Galdós's Georg Lukács's theory of the novel, states that the world is conceived by novelists as contingent, lacking harmony; and each detail is related to the others by its value as a referent to the vital problems of the hero struggling with society and/or himself: "This dialectical process includes such elements as struggle and resignation, melancholy and learning to face life, adventure and irony."³ Irony is very important in Galdós, and one of his devices to achieve it will be the manipulation of names until they represent the opposite of their literal meaning: thus proper names formed from adjectives or common nouns, such as *Doña Perfecta* (perfect), the priest Don Inocencio (innocence), his niece Remedios (remedies—all characters in the novel *Doña Perfecta*—show an "antithetical onomastic technique." *Doña Perfecta* is a religious fanatic and the leader of the reactionary conservatives in the region. The lady considered by everyone "perfect" is in fact a blind self-righteous fiend. In showing her thus, Galdós emphasized what Shoemaker calls "the most abstract thematic idea, that of the dichotomy between being and seeming."⁴

Irony is achieved by Galdós in some cases by the use of diminutives that, instead of showing affection for a character, reveal that the other characters, consciously or unconsciously, view that character in a negative light. So in *Doña Perfecta*, we find the docile "Jacintito," a young lawyer, and grand-nephew of the priest Don Inocencio, a mama's boy. The

name "Hyacinth," being also the name of a flower, especially in its diminutive form Jacintito (little Hyacinth), does not sound very masculine in Spanish.

However, the most prominent example of the ironical use of the diminutive in Galdós's novels is in the case of Juanito Santa Cruz, from Fortunata y Jacinta, Galdós's masterpiece, subtitled "Story of two married women". Juanito is the lover of Fortunata and the husband of Jacinta. Here we have again a diminutive that will become increasingly pejorative as our knowledge of the character grows.

This double aspect of being and seeming-to-be goes to the heart of the problem and reveals the flaw in his character that will cause havoc in the lives of two women and many other people. Juanito or Johnny, almost the affectionate equivalent of "John-John," is a typical "señorito", the only child of a couple of wealthy middle-class merchants. His love-life will have a pendular movement between his wife and his mistress. It is only at the beginning that Galdós deals with Juanito to a certain extent. Sometimes Juanito is called "el adorado nene" (the adorable baby), or "el delfín" (the dauphin), and speaking about him Galdós says:

Why did everybody call him then, and does even today, almost unanimously Juanito Santa Cruz? This I do not know. There are in Madrid many cases of this use of the diminutive even with people not so young... even if they have achieved celebrity they still are named with that democratic familiarity, that authentic simplicity of the Spanish character. Its origin may reside in the domestic tenderness of childhood that passes over into social life. In some people the diminutive can be related to fate.

.....Be that as it may, the son of Baldomero Santa Cruz was called Juanito, is called Juanito even today; and will be called Juanito until old age and the death of those who knew him as a child, will little by little alter this easygoing habit.⁵

Juanito is one of those in whom the diminutive can be related to fate: his nickname underlines his lack of maturity, and in a broader sense makes him a modern version of the archetype, Don Juan; Juanito is his bourgeois counterpart. As an aristocrat of the past he does not work or have a profession; he is a useless, frivolous young man. After many peripecias, after the death of his mistress and the loss of his wife's respect for him, Juanito experiences an anagnorisis, perceiving the emptiness of his life; he realizes that he is no longer the wonder boy whose pranks are celebrated and forgiven.

Galdós's sense of humor shows in numerous nicknames in his novels: as in the inappropriate title of "doctor" for the protagonist of La sombra (The Shadow), or for Felipe Centeno in El doctor Centeno, neither of whom is a doctor. Felipe Centeno is a poor country boy who goes to Madrid hoping to get an education and to become a medical doctor, but he does not have the capacity to achieve these ambitions. The irony of the cruelty of one of his teachers is another nickname: Aristotle.

In his first novel, La Fontana de Oro (The Golden Fountain), 1868, the antagonist is an old reactionary henchman of the tyrant Ferdinand VII. He organizes provocations to create unrest or spies among the liberals that meet in the tavern that gives the name to the book.

This character is called Elias Orejón (big ears); the surname is consistent with his physical appearance. As his activities are well known, his enemies call him Coletilla (little tail, or pigtail). Galdós tells us that the king made a famous speech to the Cortes, or Spanish Parliament, and at the end made an addition ("coletilla") asking for strong measures for establishing law and order in the country. This was the origin of the nickname, which symbolizes the corrupt, absolute power of the king.

Examples of the use of nicknames abound but it is most illuminating to see the onomastic device permeating a whole novel. Miau is such a novel. "Miau" is the onomatopoeic word for a cat's cry. On the surface the nickname-title seems unrelated to the main plot, which is the story of a man trying to recover his job for a couple of months in order to receive a pension from the state; Don Ramon Villaamil has already appeared in Fortunata y Jacinta, where he is known as Rameses II because of his countenance. This man is the symbol of the plight of many bureaucrats. His name literally means "a thousand in town." On the other hand, Miau is the nickname for the women in his family: his wife, his sister in law, and one daughter. They all look like cats. His grandson Luisito (little Luis) is tortured with the sobriquet Miau by his schoolmates. These women are also of the cursi type mentioned in comments above on La de Bringas.

The lives of these women are dull, for they are limited by their poverty, in spite of their illusions of belonging to the upper mid-

dle class. They are unaware of the attention they attract. The old man and his family are the victims of the widower son-in-law, Víctor Cadalso (scaffold). The failure of Villaamil's attempt to recover his job drives him crazy and he writes a memorial spelling out the solutions that Spain needs to manage her economic problems; the basic points of the plan are Morality, Income tax reform, Aduana (customs), and Unification of the national debt. We have here an acrostic that reads M-I-A-U. Coincidence? On the contrary, it is an allusion to the fact that the Miaus, with their spendthrift habits and upstart ambitions, are to be seen as parallels to the disorganized country--the nickname assumes a metaphorical connotation.

Galdós wrote thirty-one novels, without taking into account his historical novels and his plays; it would be impossible to cover in this short space all that might be said of the role of onomastics in his works. There is much more to be done; literary names are not arbitrary, and as the linguist Jespersen says: "Show me the context, and I will tell you the meaning."⁶

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FOOTNOTES

1. William H. Shoemaker, "Galdós's Literary Creativity: D. José Ido del Sagrario" in Estudios sobre Galdós (Madrid, 1970), p. 116. One is hard put, however, to find criticism of Galdosian onomastics in the vast amount of scholarship devoted to this novelist. In Pérez Galdós: An Annotated Bibliography by Theodore A. Sackett, we find only one item related to our subject: "The Significance of the name Almudena in Galdós's Misericordia," Hispania, vol. XLVII (1964), pp. 491-96, by Vernon A. Chamberlin. There are, of course, many references and isolated comments scattered in articles and books on Galdós dealing with the meaning of names in his novels.
2. Cf. Lo prohibido (The Forbidden) chapter XI, section iv, last paragraph. These remarks show a fundamental change in the attitude of León Roch who at the end of La familia de León Roch assumes a self-righteous position toward the woman who loves him.
3. Rafael Boch, "Galdós and the Theory of the Novel of Geory Lukács" in Anales Galdosianos, vol. II. (1967) p. 174.
4. William H. Shoemaker, "Cara y Curz de la novelística Galdosiana," in Estudios sobre Galdós (Madrid, 1970), p. 248. My translation.
5. Benito Pérez Galdós, Fortunata y Jacinta. Obras Completas, vol. V. (Madrid, 1961), p. 15. My translation.
6. Otto Jespersen, The Philosophy of Grammar (New York, 1965), p. 66.