

THE MASCULINE IMPERATIVE: NAMING BY  
GAEL GREENE AND ERICA JONG

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"The men," Kate Fletcher Armstrong said, "had behaved like caricatures out of a male chauvinist pin-up box, destroying her naively held faith that men were human."<sup>1</sup> Margaret Drabble allows her character, Kate, who is going through the agony of post-lover promiscuity and mid-life crisis (The Middle Ground is the novel's title), to make this frightening observation before accounting for the nastiness of a catenation of male sex partners she had experienced recently. Here is not the place to be concerned with the sexual chain, although the binding that such implies should not go unnoticed in a critique of Drabble's novel and of the central character, but with the attitude, which masks a change in habits, a recognition that differences do exist between men and women, between their speech habits, and methods of communicating, and I do not mean vive la difference.

Since differences in speech do exist, and since many have been identified and interpreted, differences in naming habits should be easily noticed and analyzed.

Such is not so easily the case. I have noted in a different context the "slotting" of names by authors, that is, the use of such common names as "Mary, Jake, Jenny, Jim, Kate, Bill, Matt, or Karen."<sup>2</sup> Sexless names, they are bland enough to avoid particularization or, sorry to say, even sense. A conservative critic would say that such naming derives from the levelling that has come from the rise of the mass to controlling positions. A Marxist, whatever that may connote, would claim that such names normalize a text, bring to the fore a communality that would strip class away from the participants. Both would probably be correct, only from different views. Still, the majority of writers now dose up their otherwise strange plots with names that have the highest incidence and with the least amount of connotations attached. It is as though the authors are naming babies, not characters.

Traditional naming patterns have included mostly the connotative, more recently pinpointed as charactonymic.<sup>3</sup> A note of caution is in order. Traditional is a biased term, in that it implies that all authors used the allegorical--sometimes made concrete in a symbol--character names only, probably a kind of abstraction from the old character sketch and developed into

characters in drama and later the novel.<sup>4</sup>

To speak of traditional authors is to refer generally to male writers, since great women writers are very few until the nineteenth century, with not many of them then, other than Austen, the Brontë sisters, and George Eliot. Along with two poets, Christina Rossetti and Emily Dickinson, these few names cover the traditional women writers. The names of characters invented by them reflected current fashions and were connotative textually, same as the names used by the male authors. We are familiar with their naming characteristics.<sup>5</sup>

Dangerous as it is to generalize, it is possible to believe after only a cursory search that twentieth-century female writers tend to use the typical name, the one that has the widest popular use with the least amount of intrusive connotation on plot and imagery.<sup>6</sup> For instance, W. F. H. Nicolaisen has listed the given names from one novel by Margaret Drabble: Among them are such typical names as Martin, Kay, Sarah, James, Rose, Stephanie, Heather, Stella, Bill, Charles, John, and many others with similar popularity.<sup>7</sup> But Nicolaisen also lists the surnames, which are a different matter. Drabble never uses the same surname twice; that is, "not a single surname in any one novel overlaps with a surname in another."<sup>8</sup>

Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Margaret Atwood are other female writers who are beginning to use names that move beyond the communality found in early twentieth-century fiction by both women and men. Some of the later work has been documented and is worth some attention, if only to counter certain critical pronouncements that names must somehow stay in the closet, not appear in the "art work," be silent. This arty approach has had its effect, but Charles Fishman places the matter in a much more favorable context:

An author's intention in naming a place or character may be seen, in part, as a desire to make clear distinctions, to suggest connections or motifs within the text, or larger patterns that attend between texts, and to erect borders--a will toward accuracy and richness.<sup>9</sup>

Walker, Morrison, and Atwood shamelessly use charactonyms just as though the silent proscription had never happened.<sup>10</sup> Yet, their names and labellings of places do not inartistically meddle with plot and action. Their names integrate. In this, they stand somewhere between Dickens and those who fall completely within the critics' tastes--Virginia Woolf and Ernest Hemingway, the names of

whose characters intrude by never overtly intruding.

Two other women writers, Erica Jong and Gael Greene, follow directly in the older tradition of naming by using names and labels that type a character or a place immediately. Both are somewhat out of favor with critics and mass media reviewers. They also plot dollops of sex into their works, enough so that their novels border on pornography, perhaps sliding in all the way, depending on our definitions.

Jong has achieved greater recognition than has Greene, whose earlier work before Blue Skies, No Candy (1976) was publications about food--no pun intended. Jong began as a poet, but her Fear of Flying (1973), How to Save Your Own Life (1977), and Fanny (1980) have placed her among novelists with whom to be reckoned, whether critics like her or not. Greene, on the other hand, seems to have written herself out of the novelists' field with her own novel. Blue Skies owes much to Fear of Flying, as reviewers and blurb writers have noted and exploited, and not without reason, for Greene's work is drenched in raw sex from beginning to end, with hardly any plot in between.

Fear of Flying and Blue Skies have as central characters women novelists. Both novels are filled with the

freedom of language usage that resulted from the revolution in the 1960s and take advantage of the right to describe sexual encounters as hardly more than light sparring matches. Of the two, Fear of Flying can stand critical attention, for Jong brought together material ordinarily expected in a novel. She also adds realistic (clinical) sex, glasshouse adultery, unabashed bed-hopping, and almost (but not quite) uncommitted exchange of partners. Jong falls just short of amorality, but she allows her characters to get hurt by sex, to expect some of the traditional emoluments and consequences for "giving the man what he wants" and then feeling guilty and sorry afterwards. In Fear, the man takes his sex and leaves the poor woman to clean up best as she can.

Blue Skies departs completely from the committed world and drifts easily and happily from encounter to encounter. The central character is satisfactorily married and tells her sex head of the moment that it is none of his business how good in bed her husband is. She moves from man to man or woman to woman as the desire prods her, and the encounters are not so much lovemaking as accidental jostlings, replete with the right noises, gluings, ungluings, etc. She is Katherine Wallis Alexander, "the expert on the etiquette of adultery."<sup>11</sup>

Katherine, the name, alludes to all the Kates in history, but mostly to "Greate Kate," "Gentle Kate," "Sweet Kate," from Katherina of The Taming of the Shrew. She is also "Kate the Bitch," "Kate, the doomed lady of the camelias," "Kate, the masochist." And she also kicks, bites, scratches, and otherwise acts the part of Shakespeare's Kate, with the exception that she does the taming of her Benedick cowboy, Jason, the materialistic tax shelter expert. She tames all, male and female, at convenient times, that is, whenever available and often by appointment.

The middle name (family name, this time) is Wallis, an erotic allusion to the woman for whom a king gave up his throne. Alexander (Kate's husband's name) may have some kind of connection with the writer, Shana Alexander, but maybe not, for Alexander, being the husband's surname, illustrates Kate's freedom from sexual chattelship, for she can be an "adulteress" and still be a trusting wife. Sex is a matter of physicality; love has commitments, and although her husband Jamie (the only character with a pet name) finally decides to leave her--and she wants him back--, it is his childishness that causes the marital break, not her adultery. And it is precisely because he is a child that causes her to

want him back. Maternity is an instinct; adultery is a right.

Greene mixes characters with real personalities, a trick used also by Erica Jong. Jason's mistress, Diana, allows Richard Burton to "pinch her ass twice at a hemophilia benefit in London."<sup>12</sup> During one erotic encounter, Kate thinks, "Nobody does that in movies. Nobody does that to Faye Dunaway. Not even Dyan Cannon."<sup>13</sup> Other personalities among many who became involved, usually as metaphors, are Gary Cooper, Somerset Maugham, Carol Burnett, Raquel Welch, Clint Eastwood, Joan Crawford, Cary Grant, John Lindsay, Robert Redford, JFK ("I dreamed I went down on him."), and Ann-Margret.

These move with ease among the other names, such as Harry Henkenstadt, Billy Hutch, and Ernie Tidyman ("rewrite man"). Typecasting herself, she is The Adulteress, not Jezebel, not a back-street Susan Hayward, not a Hemingway Catherine, not a Tuesday Weld catatonic nut, not a whining Sandy Dennis, not the woman who loves and dies Hemingway-style. She is "the afternoon whore in the Algonquin (with her fast-track cocksman Michael)," Catherine Deneuve in Belle de Jour ("Can't Stop. Can't get enough. I love it"),<sup>14</sup> the Scarlett O'Hara of our time, Catherine of Russia reborn, the whore empress of

all the Byzantines, the late-blooming adventuress, the generic Woman. In B. C. (Before Cockmania), she kept count of her sexual bouts, with names, dates, and how many times, but she kicked the habit and became a free spirit, remembering only Kevin Deems-Millar, the teaching fellow from Oxford, "the Don Juan of Byron," and Max Chernecki, the football-player poet who learned oral sex from a Marxist siren in Europe at a Communist Youth rally and brought the learned talent home to Kate. He was the inspiration for her first novel, Standing on My Head, rewritten as Sequential Suicides after Max ran off with a rich, pudgy little dance major from Bennington. The novel is the only recognition that sequential sexual collisions are just so many suicides--but nice little deaths anyway.

The constant parade of personalities and fictionalized names gives the novel a surrealistic glow, a kind of unreality that is almost overpowering and relegates the erotic, but humorous, narrative to the background. Instead of description of actions, a name is substituted, a real one, "Van Johnson never did these animal things to June Allyson, you knew damn well;" "By the way did Clark actually make it with Claudette?" Or, "She recognized their faces. Joe Namath. Burt Reynolds. Hugh Hefner. Warren Beatty. Mick Jagger. They are going to rape her."

But Greene can also trip into fake etymologies that seem indecent enough out of context but rather appropriate during a session of "Society for the Advancement of Prolonged Foreplay":<sup>16</sup>

Jason and Kate are lying awake and telling everything.

Kate asks, "Who first discovered the clitoris and figured out what to do with it?"

She answers her own question, "His name was Arnold Clitoris. In fact, it was named after him. Before that it was known as the granted, because it was taken for granted."<sup>17</sup>

Gael Greene then is one of the women novelists who are finding the earlier language and onomastic methods congenial to their needs.

Erica Jong, however, is more subtle but still uses 18th- and 19th-century naming characteristics that allow her to gain greater breadth without sacrificing artistic sensibility. Since both Fear of Flying and How to Save Your Own Life have been noted in another context,<sup>18</sup> I will center on her blatantly 18th-century historical novel of adventure, Fanny, being The True History of the Adventures of Fanny Hackabout-Jones.<sup>19</sup> It is set in the first half of the 18th century, amid the stews of London, the

brothels habituated by great artists and authors (Hogarth, Pope, Swift, Cleland, Cibber), and streets and homes peopled by an assortment of characters seemingly right out of the works of the period: Ned Tunewell, Lawyer Slocock, Beau Monde, Francis Bacon, Sotwit, Mother Coxtart, and similar ones. Jong helpfully lists the "Dramatis Personae" in order of appearance.

Something about the period is attractive to some modern novelists, possibly as a return to novelistic basics, an exercise in recognition of the novel as a method of commenting upon life through the act of the author's creating a life upon which to comment. The 18th-century novel is less complex than are some of the modern novels that have become psychiatrically informed. The 18th-century novelists take deformed persons and make them normal, while a modern novelist takes normal persons and deforms them.

Jong pushes her novel across the masculine line and into the women's quarters, where men merely and merrily intrude. Fanny is, of course, Fanny Hill changed into Fanny Hackabout-Jones. Jong has set out to correct Cleland's mistakes, to give Fanny her rights too, even though she is only a Hackabout-Jones, a female Tom Jones. If Tom can tomcat around, so can Fanny hack about. The

name alludes to a complexity of literary works and to characters in them. It also is given a reason for being. Lancelot Robinson, leader of a merry band of highway robbers, christens Fanny, after telling her that Fanny means "Fanny-Fair, the Divine Monosyllable, the Precious Pudendum." Fanny was, naturally, an orphan, having been left on a doorstep in the traditional manner and then placed in the home of the handsome Lord Bellars, who took her virginity when she was 17. She grew up as Fanny Bellars. Lancelot gave her the name of Hackabout (because she has been "cruelly hackt about by Fate") and the surname of Jones ("because 'tis a plain Name and 'twill teach ye Modesty").<sup>20</sup>

Jong forces consciousness of names on the reader from the beginning of the novel, where Fanny reflects on the names she has been called, the litany of classical clichés that were so popular in lyric poetry: Lindamira, Indamora, Zephalinda, Lesbia, Flavia, Sappho, and Candida. And her dog's name is Chloe. Fanny is Fanny to her friends, Francis on official documents, and Fannikins to lovers. She also has half a page of names that "a woman of lively parts is as liked to be slandered with as she is to be praised": tart, bawd, wanton, gay-girl, jill, judy, jug, moon-lighter, lift-skirts, merry legs, moll, pinch-prick,

pole-climber, quail, gobbly-prick, and the rest of the entry under whore in a thesaurus of slang. Jong is addicted to naming both proper and common--the prose epic simile. Just as Salinger spies into bathroom cabinets or women's purses and lists every item, Jong ransacks out-of-the-way dictionaries and wordlists, in alphabetical order, to list all the terms she could find for pudendum ("What a String of Wond'rous Words. The Poet in me was charm'd e'en whilst the Woman was sorely insulted").<sup>21</sup> The same kind of listing and naming occurs when Fanny is carried into the "Cottage that resembl'd a vast Warehouse of Goods,"<sup>22</sup> or the foods prepared for the visit of Alexander Pope,<sup>23</sup> or the names men use to call their penes as well as a listing of the types of men based on the names they use,<sup>24</sup> or a list of freaks, "oddities," in a sideshow,<sup>25</sup> or methods of contraception.<sup>26</sup>

What I have called the masculine imperative is only the movement back (or toward) more meaningful use of character naming on the scale used by the novelists noted earlier. Greene and Jong represent the extremes of the modern writers who definitely model their methods directly upon the beginners of the novel, who, by virtue of history, were male. Their language and names (the same) were based on what they thought was the way males normally

used language. Green and Jong have done no more than move their own methods to parallel theme and usage of Defoe, Richardson, Fielding, Smollett, and Sterne. Because of a change in language custom in the 19th century, Dickens, Scott, Melville, Thackeray, Hawthorne, Austen, the Brontës, Kingsley, Meredith, Eliot, and Hardy refrained from usages that came to be called "dirty," but they generally retained the method of character naming. Greene and Jong have recovered the language of the 18th-century novelists while also keeping intact the naming methods of the later group. In so doing, they have placed their work in the mainstream of novel writing in English. Whether their work will fill other criteria of written art is yet to be determined.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Margaret Drabble, The Middle Ground (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1982, copyright, 1980), p. 67.

<sup>2</sup>"Onomastic Centrality," Literary Onomastics Studies, VII (1980) (Brockport, NY: State University College, 1980), 33-54.

<sup>3</sup>John Algeo, "Magic names: Onomastics in the Fantasies of Ursula Le Guin," Names, 30 (1982), 59.

<sup>4</sup>The first character sketches, as such, appear in Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics. His pupil, Theophrastus (372-287 B. C.), brought together a collection of sketches, Ethical Characters, to illustrate good qualities.

<sup>5</sup>Those readers who wish to consult articles on these writers, see Elizabeth M. Rajec, The Study of Names in Literature (New York: K. G. Saur Publishing Co., 1978), and later editions.

<sup>6</sup>A counter argument can be substantiated. Ernest Hemingway seems never to use names that take on characteristics of their own.

<sup>7</sup>"What a Name. Stephen Halifax': Onomastic Modes in Three Novels by Margaret Drabble," Literary Onomastics Studies, X (1983), p. 280.

<sup>8</sup>"What a Name," p. 278.

<sup>9</sup>"Three Recent Novels by Women Writers," Names, 32 (1984),  
in press.

<sup>10</sup>Besides being rooted in ideology, such beliefs also  
came from another direction, the New Critics' distrust of  
Victorian sentimentality and the obvious use of names to  
exhibit the authors' biases, especially as seen in the  
novels by Dickens.

<sup>11</sup>Blue Skies, No Candy (New York: Warner Books, 1976), p.  
114. In the front matter appears the statement, "The  
title... was suggested by Walasse Ting's poem, 'Blue,'  
in Hot & Sour Soup, published by the San Francis Founda-  
tion, California."

<sup>12</sup>Blue Skies, p. 264.

<sup>13</sup>Blue Skies, p. 274.

<sup>14</sup>Blue Skies, p. 51.

<sup>15</sup>Blue Skies, pp. 136, 167.

<sup>16</sup>Blue Skies, p. 200.

<sup>17</sup>Blue Skies, pp. 262-3.

<sup>18</sup>"Onomastic Centrality," pp. 41-45.

<sup>19</sup>(New York: The New American Library, 1980).

<sup>20</sup>Fanny, p. 121.

<sup>21</sup>Fanny, pp. 120-1. A few illustrations: Duck-Pond, Gold-Finch's Nest, Jacob's Ladder, Maryjane, Rufus, Pen Wiper (if you scribble verses), Bull's Eye (attributed to the Earl of Rochester), Nether Eye (attributed to Chaucer), Temple of Venus, etc.

<sup>22</sup>Fanny, pp. 122-3.

<sup>23</sup>Fanny, pp. 24-5.

<sup>24</sup>Fanny, pp. 39-40.

<sup>25</sup>Fanny, pp. 66-7.

<sup>26</sup>Fanny, pp. 196 ff.

