

NAME-PLAY AND INTERNATIONALISM  
IN SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDY

Frederick M. Burelbach

State University of New York  
College at Brockport

A reader who leafs through substantial numbers of Elizabethan and Jacobean plays can observe that character names tend to follow setting. If the setting is France, the names are French, if Italy, Italian, and so on. Exceptions occur primarily in four ways: (1) characters in the plot who come from other countries are generally named appropriately to their homeland; (2) some names are Anglicized to an extent, presumably for the convenience of audiences; (3) some names are given a classical, Latin form, consistent with the practice of certain authors of learned books who published under Latinizations of their native names; (4) comic characters in serious plays are frequently given English names, like the Robin and Rafe who appear in Doctor Faustus imitating the magician's conjurations. The rule, however, in serious plays is consistency between the nationality of the character and the name accorded that character. Shakespeare seems to be unique in his deviation from this rule, particularly in his tragedies set in Italy and Denmark.

For instance, Romeo and Juliet is set in Verona, with a scene in Mantua, but of the characters who appear

in the play only three have undoubtedly Italian-sounding names: Romeo, Mercutio, and Benvolio, and even these three are less "real" names than Italianated charactonyms. Romeo is "Rome" with an "-o," Mercutio is "Mercury" made to sound Italian, and Benvolio is Italian for "Well-wisher." The names (drawn from the sources, not invented by Shakespeare) provide us significant clues to the characters. Another name, Angelica, the name of either the Nurse or Lady Capulet (the context at IV, iv, 5 makes it unclear) could well be Italian, but it could equally adorn a woman of any European country. Of the other characters' names, five are French (Capulet, Montague, Tybalt, Juliet, and Rosaline), two are classical (Escalus and Paris), and the remaining fourteen are English. Of the fourteen characters with English names, ten fit into the previously mentioned exception; they are names of comic servants: Peter, Sampson, Gregory, Susan Grindstone, Nell, Anthonie, Potpan, and the musicians Simon Catling, Hugh Rebick, and James Soundpost. Two others are also servants but not in comic roles: Abram and Balthasar (it could, of course, be objected that these are not really English names, but they have certainly been more thoroughly naturalized than, say, Benvolio). The remaining two are Friar Lawrence and Friar John, the Franciscan monks whose delayed message precipitates the tragic conclusion. Besides these names, several others appear in the play, mostly Italian and mostly in the list

of guests invited to the Capulets' party: Lucio, Tyberio, Petruchio, Utruvio, Placentio, Sr. Valentio, County Anselmo, Sr. Martino, Lucentio, Cozin Capulet, Helena, Livia, and Valentine; Juliet's Nurse refers twice to her daughter Susan.<sup>1</sup> Concerning these additional names I will say nothing except that they show Shakespeare's fecundity (they are not in the sources) and apparent desire to give an Italian flavoring to the play, which makes it all the more surprising that he would accept from his sources or invent on his own so many non-Italian names. It must also be said that, although the play is onomastically rich, most of the names are uttered very seldom. Escalus, for instance, is called only Prince in the text and stage directions; Sampson, Abram, and Balthasar are named only in a few speech-prefixes; and Lady Capulet is usually only "Lady" in speech-prefixes. On the other hand, the names of Romeo and Tybalt, particularly, are repeated so often as almost to form an incantation.

Of the names of characters who actually appear in the play, all but those of Benvolio and the servants are drawn from Arthur Brooke's Tragicall History of Romeus and Juliet, from William Painter's translation for his Palace of Pleasure of Pierre Boiastuau's additions to Belleforest's Histoires Tragiques extraites des Oeuvres italiens de Bandel, or from Bandello's Novelle.<sup>2</sup> Since names like Capulet and Friar Lawrence already appear in

Brooke (unlike the Cappelletti and Lorenzo of Luigi da Porto's earlier Istoria novellamente ritrovata di due Nobili Amanti), so that the mixture of nationalities pre-exists Shakespeare's play, we would be unwise to draw too many inferences from Shakespeare's medley of names, but some notes can be made. For instance, Shakespeare accepts Brooke's Peter (although he gives the name to the Nurse's servant, not Romeo's, possibly for the sake of the bawdy pun) and rejects Painter's Pietro for the same character. However, he rejects Brooke's Romeus in favor of Painter's (and Bandello's and da Porto's) Romeo. Shakespeare may have thought the name Romeo was more romantic or more Italian, and he may have wished to emphasize the social distance between Romeo and the noble class of Paris and Escalus (although the name Escalus appears only in the dramatis personae). If we take the added English names of the comic and not-so-comic servants as falling into an established dramatic convention, then Shakespeare's international naming in Romeo and Juliet may tell us only that in this early play he was following sources or conventions.

However, if we note that the usual dramatic practice was to keep names consistent with nationality and that Romeo and Juliet is unusual as an Elizabethan play in wedding comedy and tragedy, we might find it more interesting. Although many novelle existed on the subject of ill-starred

love, theatre convention held that love was a fit subject for comedy, but tragedy demanded sterner stuff, like ambition and revenge. A revenge motif is present in Romeo and Juliet, but the story turns basically on the boy-meets-girl situation standard for Terentian comedy and contains many other features of comedy: scenes of jesting and romantic love, the wrathful father and the trick to circumvent him, the pantaloons and comic nurse. As a stage vehicle, the play is clearly an experiment in its time, suggesting that Shakespeare had the confidence to do something unusual. Consequently, the unusual mixture of names in this play may have more significance than a mere adherence to sources.

Concerning the meanings of these names, much has already been said, especially by Murray J. Levith in What's in Shakespeare's Names (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1978). I would like to add just a few comments concerning the names of the servants Sampson, Gregory, Abram, and Balthasar. Levith and others have already noted that these names are ludicrously grandiose for servants, and further that they are associated with religious figures. But if we look at the names more carefully we can see other comic connotations. Sampson, for instance, had already been degraded from being a Biblical destroyer of Philistines to being a domestic killer of mice; the name Samson's post was given to a device used in a mousetrap, with a notched top from which a peg releases to drop a box over the

mouse (O. E. D.). Sampson also echoes samsodden, meaning half-cooked or half-baked (O.E.D.), a fitting association for this impetuous servant of the Capulets. Finally, according to Chaucer's Pardoner, "Samson" is the sound a drunken man makes through his nose.<sup>3</sup> A director might do well to heed this implication when the play is acted. As for Gregory, neither his position nor his manners (nor, probably in an Elizabethan production using apprentices, his stature) suit him to be the namesake of Pope (and Saint) Gregory the Great nor Pope Gregory XIII, after whom the Gregorian calendar is named. But other Gregories are more appropriate: the barber in the Strand who invented a wig called a gregorian (O.E.D. cites Florio, 1598) and (though probably too late for our purposes) Gregory Brandon, a common hangman of London in the reign of James I, after whom a hangman is called a gregory (O.E.D.). In Massinger's play The Old Law, a Gregory was a "gallant" (III, ii) and the O.E.D. also gives gregory as the name of an old game. But we need not stop there. "Gregary" and "gregal" are both words with pedigrees back to Shakespeare's time, meaning "pertaining to the common herd, undistinguished." One O.E.D. citation is particularly apt: "When once his flesh is tickled with lust, he groweth tame, gregal and loving," said Topsell in his Four-Footed Beasts (1607). In Ben Jonson's Volpone, the dramatis personae lists "Grege"=mob, and in Greene's Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay

the character Miles uses "gregis" to refer to crowd (II, iv) and "greges" to mean people (III, ii). In 1611 Cotgrave defined gregues as meaning galligaskins or breeches, and grig has many old meanings, all relevant: a diminutive person or dwarf, a short-legged hen, a small eel, a merry person (as in "merry grig" or "merry Greek"), and to irritate or annoy. So when casting this character, a director might look for a short, bandy-legged fellow, with a common, annoying manner and the pretensions of someone acting above his station. Can you imagine the comic effect of Shakespeare's company casting boy apprentices in these roles with talk of swashing blows and taking maidenheads? It seems to have been traditional to cast young boys in such roles; in Peele's Endymion, for instance, pages with the grandiose names of Samias, Dares, and Epiton are mocked for their diminutive stature (scène iii).

Under the names Abram (Montague's servant) and Balthasar (Romeo's servant) we can see more than allusions to the Old and New Testaments. An Abram-man or Abraham-man was a cant term for a madman or someone who pretended to be mad in order to beg money. The name originated from the Abraham wing of Bethlehem Hospital or Bedlam. In the play, Abram appears only briefly in the Act I skirmish with Sampson and Gregory, but the name may again give an acting clue. Balthasar is the one who brings to Romeo

the false news of Juliet's death but who brings to Escalus at the end of the play the true news of Romeo's suicide. The irony is not so much in naming a servant after one of the three Magi but in the ironic role that Balthasar plays. Named after a truth-seeker, he is unwittingly the bearer of falsehood until the truth comes too late to benefit his master.

Drawing conclusions about Shakespeare's mixture of nationality-names in Romeo and Juliet is hindered because so many of the names are in the sources, but the source of Othello provides only one name, that of Desdemona. In the Hecatommithi of Giraldi Cinthio, the other main characters are called simply the Moor, the Captain, and the Corporal. Various attempts have been made to derive Othello's name from Othoman, Emperor Otho, the line of Germanic kings named Otho or Otto, and (by metathesis) John Leo, author of Leo Africanus.<sup>4</sup> Presumably, Shakespeare was seeking to suggest barbarian associations for his protagonist, but the interesting point for us is that this non-Italian character is given a quasi-Italian name in this play set in Venice and Cyprus, but the name has Germanic or Turkish roots. Cassio is also given an Italian-sounding name, but the name clearly recalls the noble Roman Cassius. Moreover, Cassio's origin is unclear: Iago in I, i calls him a Florentine, a gentleman in II, i calls him a Veronese, and Othello in IV, i calls him a Roman. Desdemona's name comes from the source, but, with

its origin in daimon, it is more Greek than Italian. Iago's name is not Italian but Spanish, recalling Santiago. As Samuel L. Macey has pointed out ("The Naming of the Protagonists in Shakespeare's Othello," N & Q, n.s. 25 (1978), 143-145), Iago is appropriate for many reasons: (1) The Spanish were, for Elizabethan Englishmen, the devils, with "Don Diego" roughly corresponding to Old Nick; (2) Iago recalls Latin Jacobus or Jacob, the supplanter; (3) Santiago Matamoros, St. James the Moor-Slayer, was credited with routing 70,000 Moors in a battle at Clavigo in A.D. 843. Levith reminds us also of the Iago-Jacques-Jakes linkage, with Jakes being Elizabethan slang for an outhouse.

Another important character, Brabantio, also has an Italian-sounding name which, if analyzed, is not really Italian. The Brabant was one of the most important duchies in the Low Countries. It is still the central province of Belgium, location of the capital city Brussels. Belgium is linguistically split between the Walloons, speakers of French in the south, and the Flemings, speakers of a Dutch dialect in the north. Brabant is itself split between these two linguistic groups, and Brussels is now (following World War II) officially bilingual. Brabant had a long, proud history. From 1365 on, as a result of a charter called the Joyeuse Entrée, it claimed independence from all foreign princes. However, in the sixteenth century, the Low Countries were a political and religious battleground. Having been annexed by Spain, with Roman

Catholicism as the official religion, the Low Countries were struggling to regain their independence, and a strong Calvinist party was arising. During the 1570's, William, Prince of Orange, allied with Protestant France, succeeded in driving the Spanish out of most of the Low Countries and in 1582 crowned the Duc d'Anjou as Duke of Brabant. In 1584, however, William was shot by a fanatical Catholic, Balthazar Gérard, and Johan van Oldenbarnevelt attempted to preserve what William had won. Van Oldenbarnevelt supported moderate Protestantism (especially the Arminian faction) and independence of the separate Netherlands provinces under a loose confederation. Although his English supporters, represented by the Earl of Leicester, would have preferred a more centralized government, their mutual antagonism to Catholic Spain resulted in a triple alliance between England, France, and the Low Countries in 1596. However, Spain overcame, and in 1598 Philip II of Spain installed the Archduke Albert, husband of Philip's daughter Isabella, as Duke of Brabant.<sup>5</sup>

English sympathies toward Brabant would have been transferred to its namesake Brabantio, even though this character is set in opposition to Othello and made to look a little foolish. We must remember that Brabantio had been Othello's friend before his daughter's elopement and had often invited Othello to his home. Brabantio's mixed emotions between his friendship for Othello and

his protectiveness of Desdemona echo the linguistic, political, and religious divisions within Brabant. Moreover, Brabantio is losing his daughter, his daimon or vital spirit, to a Moor, and the Moors were associated with Spain. He is aroused to this loss by Iago, a man with a Spanish name. When called before the Duke, Desdemona says that she perceives "a divided duty" (I, iii, 181) between her father and her husband, possibly another echo of the divisions within Brabant. Despite the excessiveness of his charges against Othello, Brabantio is not a ridiculous pantaloon, but an influential Senator and a loving father in real anguish. Analysis of his name helps us to see some of these complexities, while it reminds us that once again we have a Shakespearean play with an Italian setting and a cast whose names relate to a variety of nationalities.

Shakespeare carried this tendency to an even greater extreme in Hamlet, set in Denmark. Once again, most of the names are original with Shakespeare (unless they were in the lost Ur-Hamlet), since he took only Hamlet (Amletha) and Gertrude (Gerutha) from his sources in Saxo Grammaticus and Belleforest. Even these names have been slightly Anglicized. Of the other names only four are undoubtedly Danish: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (there were courtiers by these names at the Danish court in 1588),<sup>6</sup> Osric (there was a Danish King Osrick, ca. 870 A.D.),<sup>7</sup> and Yorick (derived by Bullough, without further explanation, from the Danish Jorg).<sup>8</sup> The names Voltemand (a Danish courtier)

and Yaughan (apparently an inn-keeper, mentioned by the First Gravedigger) are possibly Germanic but not truly Danish; in fact, Voltemand (voler=steal + main=hand) sounds French. The name Fortinbras (fort=strong + bras=arm) is obviously French, although its owner is Norwegian, and a French fencer named Lamound is mentioned in the play. The two largest groups of names in the play are Italian and Latin: Bernardo and Francisco are soldiers, Reynaldo is Polonius' servant, Claudio is Claudius' servant, and Horatio is Hamlet's friend; Claudius is the usurping king, Polonius his Prime Minister, Cornelius a courtier, and Marcellus a soldier. Completing the list are the Greek names of Laertes and Ophelia, and the Gravedigger's English name, Goodman Delver.

One could talk at length about the meanings and significance of these various names--in fact, several scholars have previously done so, and even I am guilty--but I would like to comment simply on the variety. How do we account for a play, entirely set in Denmark, peopled by characters with Italian, French, and classical Latin and Greek names? It is unlikely to be mere laziness or carelessness on Shakespeare's part. After all, he rejected the onomastically appropriate name Feng, given in the sources for Hamlet's uncle, and substituted Claudius, together with allusions to Nero so that the reason for his choice could be detected. And he may

have transposed the sound of Horwendil (Amletha's father's name) into the punning Fortinbras, while conflating into Gertrude the names of Amletha's mother Gerutha and second wife Hermutrude. If he rejected Gerwendil (Amletha's grandfather) and Rorik (King of Denmark) as names because they might be confused with Gertrude and Yorick, he could still have selected Koll, King of Norway in the source. And if he went as far afield as Bullough says to find names for Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Polonius,<sup>9</sup> why didn't Shakespeare try for greater consistency in naming his characters? Perhaps he felt that giving his soldiers Italian names would make them seem a distinct group, remote from both his English audience and the courtiers at Elsinore. But Italians were not considered particularly military in Shakespeare's time, and besides, he isn't consistent. One soldier, Marcellus, is given a name that puts him in the social class of Claudius, Polonius, and Cornelius, whereas non-soldiers such as Reynaldo and Claudio have Italianate names, and Hamlet's friend Horatio sits uncomfortably between Italy and Rome in his naming. If the Danish courtiers bear Latin names in accordance with the Renaissance custom of Latinizing scholars' names, how do we account for Laertes and Voltemand, let alone Hamlet? No pattern seems to emerge from this onomastic chaos.

In the absence of a pattern, one hesitates to assign any meaning at all to Shakespeare's mixture of nationality-

names in these tragedies. Although it might be possible to see particular significance in one or another of the names in the context of the plays, that does not answer the question of why Shakespeare deviates from dramatic convention in not keeping character names consistent with the setting. For names like Potpan and Soundpost he was clearly following convention in assigning comic Redendenamen; for other names he may have been simplifying for the sake of actors' tongues and audiences' ears. Possibly he just did not care whether or not the names gave a consistent sense of place. As the choral commentary in Henry V tells us, he was interested not in realism but in imaginative truth. Ben Jonson said that Shakespeare was "not of an age, but for all time," and we could possibly add he was for all people. The truth he presented was not limited to one nation but was equally true for everyone. Possibly this is the conclusion to be drawn from Shakespeare's mixture of nationality-names, that nationality is ultimately irrelevant to human interaction at the deepest level.

Frederick M. Burelbach  
State University of New York  
College at Brockport

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> All references to Shakespeare's plays will be to The Complete Works of Shakespeare, ed. Irving Ribner and George Lyman Kittredge (Waltham, MA: Xerox College Publishing, 1971).

<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Bullough, Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), vol. I, pp. 270-275.

<sup>3</sup> F. N. Robinson, ed., The Poetical Works of Chaucer (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1933), p. 182.

<sup>4</sup> Robert F. Fleissner, "The Moor's Nomenclature," Notes & Queries, n.s. 25 (1978), 143.

<sup>5</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1981 ed., and Edward H. Sugden, A Topographical Dictionary to the Works of Shakespeare and his Fellow Dramatists (Manchester: University Press, 1925), p. 72.

<sup>6</sup> Bullough, vol. VII (1973), p. 184.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Fabyan, The New Chronicles of England and France (London: F. C. and J. Rivington et al., 1811, repr. of Pynson's edition of 1516), p. 165.

<sup>8</sup> Bullough, VII, p. 27 n. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Bullough, VII, pp. 42-44, 184.



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