

**ONOMASTICS AND THEMATICS IN BALÚN-CANÁN****Sandra Messinger Cypess****State University of New York at Binghamton**

In Balún-Canán, a novel by Rosario Castellanos first published in Mexico in 1957, names are used as signifiers with polysemous functions. On one level, to use the terminology proposed by Grace Alvarez-Altman, the names function as diactinics, in particular as charactonyms, or else have historical associative values.<sup>1</sup> On another level, the names indicate the relationship of the characters to the patriarchal society which is being scrutinized by Castellanos. The names of the characters are therefore signifiers which function in relation to theme and plot. A consideration of the literary onomastic devices of the text will bring into sharper focus the thematic statements of the text.

My interest in the techniques of nominology found in Balún-Canán began in earlier studies in which I analyzed the importance of the narrative situation of the novel and the relationship between the narrative method and thematics.<sup>2</sup> The first person narrator is not only characterized as a young girl of seven, but equally important, and most provocatively for a conference on Literary Onomastics, the young girl is never named in the text. While all other major characters are clearly and purposefully named, only the narrator and her Indian nursemaid are left nameless, referred to only by their generic titles

as la niña and la nana. As I have stated elsewhere, the nameless state of the narrator requires analysis;<sup>3</sup> so, too, is it essential that the names of the other characters be studied as a key element in the characteristics of Castellanos' stylistics. In this present study I shall focus on the names of two married couples since their names share several common features. All four not only belong to the historical family of names, but in their coupling, show the meaningful relationship between onomastics and thematics. By studying the names of the ladino couple César and Zoraida Argüello and the Indians Felipe and Juana, I shall show that Balún-Canán is no mere novela indigenista, but an insightful attack on the relationships between the class in power and the forces of opposition in Mexican Society.

Perhaps the insight of our colleague Bill Nicolaisen bears repeating, that the names of literary characters are also like "a text within a text, an onomastic web, a subtly displayed pattern in the artfulness of textured verbal tapestry."<sup>4</sup> Since a name serves as a text within a text, it should not be surprising that the signs César and Felipe serve as texts with historical associative significance. As the two major male protagonists, César and Felipe each represent different positions in the struggle for power; César is the white landowner whose forename echoes that of the imperial Julius Caesar. Felipe, the Indian leader, bears a royal forename in Spanish history, and in his conflict with César carries a name which signifies imperial adventures. The common critical approach has been to concentrate on the interactions of these two male characters as the central conflict

of the novel, and to interpret the main theme as the clash between the Mexicans of Spanish decent and the indigenous population, as their names seem to suggest. However, by broadening our onomastic inquiry to include the names of their respective spouses, we discover that the thematic concerns of the novel are also broader and reach beyond the white-Indian conflict to speak to the more pervasive struggle between the oppressor and the oppressed.

Let us first consider the ladino couple, César and Zoraida Argüello. As a name, César Argüello clearly fits within the Roman tradition. The surname Argüello has Castilian roots and signifies "one who came from Arquello."<sup>5</sup> The forename "César" is an obvious charactonym and calls to mind the subtext of the imperial Roman Caesar and aspects of the cultural inheritance related to the patrimonial system. Its meaning in Mexico is implied in Octavio Paz's warning against "Caesarism." In describing the problems of Mexico and Latin America, Paz warns: "Many dangers lie in wait for us. Many temptations, from the 'government of bankers' to Caesarism." ("Muchos peligros nos acechan. Muchas tentaciones, desde el 'gobierno de los banqueros'... hasta el cesarismo.")<sup>6</sup>

At first, César Argüello acts in accordance with the imperious character his name suggests. He is the omnipotent master to his Indian workers, the dominant husband to his subservient wife Zoraida, the all-powerful father to his two children. This behavior reflects the ancient "patria potestas" which "granted to the father of the Roman family the right to 'dispose' of the life of his children and his

slaves; just as he had given them life, so he could take it away.”<sup>7</sup> César not only represents the “*patria potestas*,” but his actions also recall the patrimonial system of primogeniture, a concept which can also be considered as part of the associative level of the name “César.” By means of primogeniture, a monolithic tradition based on the notion of the indivisibility of power, the father would bequeath all his property to his son. In true patriarchal fashion, César identifies himself with his land and expects to leave his property as an inheritance for his male child Marco. When he is forced to fight for that property and for his rights as a patrón, he does so with the consciousness of defending the patrimony: “César does not fight just for himself, but for Mario as well.” (“César no pelea únicamente para él, sino para Mario.”)<sup>8</sup> As the first male child of the family, Mario inherits not only the right to carry on the family surname, but the family’s wealth as well. That Mario subsequently dies at the age of religious confirmation underscores the powerlessness of César to protect his family and his inheritance. As the novel progresses, César is seen to have less and less power over his family, his Indians, and ultimately his future. True to the thematic thrust of the novel, César Argüello and the patriarchy which he represents are shown to form “an institution that is no longer in fashion” (“una institución que ya no está de moda,” 223). Although César begins with a name of imperial resonance, he, too, like the Rome it recalls, is destined to fall.

César’s wife is called Zoraida, a name which does not come from the dominant Latin tradition, but rather is reminiscent of the Arabic

presence in early Spain, from 711 to 1492. As a name it recalls the past and tradition, accurate characteristics, too, of her role in the thematic statement of the novel. As an embodiment of a Hispanic world linked to its Moslem past, Zoraida enacts in her conduct the inherited, predetermined cultural pattern described by Octavio Paz:

Latin American women live in hierarchic, authoritarian societies, in which the traditional Catholic family is still a potent reality. Woman is the repository of traditional values, and so, as guardian of the home, her archetype is the Mother. But this traditional Catholic concept of mother has another superimposed on it: the Moorish. . . . There two ideas, woman as Mother and woman as Man's possession, as object of pleasure—determine the passivity of Latin American women and their servile position.<sup>9</sup>

The servile position of Zoraida as mother and object is reflected in her comments about her name. Zoraida appears to exult in her own incorporation into the patriarchy, as indicated by her newly acquired name: "Zoraida de Argüello. I like that name, it suits me well" ("El nombre me gusta, me queda bien" (90). In repeating her name, she does not bother to add her maiden name, as would be traditional among Hispanic groups, because her family is of humble origin. She refers to herself using the possession of her husband. In addition, Zoraida shows by her actions that she agrees unquestioningly with the ideas of

the patriarchy which define her as woman in terms of her childbearing capacities, as can be noted in her following comment: "Thank God I have my two children and that one is a male child" ("Gracias a Dios que tengo mis dos hijos. Y uno es varón." 90). Her words and deeds also reflect the supremacy of the male and the primacy of the male child. Her daughter has learned this aspect of her mother's beliefs, for when the daughter wonders aloud, "Who would defend me? (¿Quién iba defenderme?"), she already knows the answer, "Not my mother, she defends only Mario because he is the male child. ("Mi madre, no. Ella solo defiende a Mario porque es el hijo varón," 278).

The seriousness of this attitude of male supremacy and its damaging effects on the female psyche is examined by Castellanos in the interactions among Zoraida and her daughter and son. Zoraida as signifier of the past and patriarchal tradition not only wants her daughter to follow in these footsteps, but, if necessary, she is willing to sacrifice her daughter's future, her very life, in favor of the patriarchy of the male child. Though that statement may sound melodramatic, in the course of novelistic action Zoraida is forced into a situation of choosing life or death for her children. She is told by the Indians of her household that misfortune is about to engulf her family, Faithful to her role as mother, she first offers herself as victim rather than her children, and preferably the daughter to save the son. "If someone has to die, let it be me. But not him, he is innocent. Not my son." ("Si es necesario que alguno muera, sea yo. Pero no él, que es inocente. No el varón," 250).

Zoraida, then, acts very much as would her husband César, as a supporter of the patriarchy, and the coupling of their names is an onomastic device which strengthens their similar thematic function in the text. However, the fact that she is a woman who acts as a supporter of the patriarchy shows all the more clearly the overwhelming impact of the patriarchy on the lives of the people. Zoraida's willingness to sacrifice her daughter, too, is another patent example of the patriarchy's inequalities in regard to women. Furthermore, the fact that César is not the only representative of patriarchal values in the text points to the fact that the César-Felipe dialectic is not the only clash of textual action.

Critical attention has been focused on Felipe as the leader of the Indians and their struggle during the Cárdenas presidency (1934-40) to achieve basic human rights. Felipe tells his fellow Indians, "We are equals of the white man" ("Nosotros somos iguales a los blancos," 101), and acts accordingly. It is Felipe who uses the word "camarada" to refer to César, placing himself on the same social level just as his use of Spanish had marked him as an intellectual equal. Felipe's dedication to his cause related him to the figure of Felipe II, for that Spanish monarch, who ruled from 1556 until 1598, was known to subordinate "all personal considerations to the public welfare."<sup>10</sup> Both men are known for an iron sense of duty which led them to disregard the needs of family members. Felipe's drive for egalitarian status with César Argüello and other members of the white

male class did not extend, however, to a consideration of the rights of women. The female members of minority groups were not included in the struggle for equality, as we learn from the analysis of Felipe's relationship with his mate Juana.

If Felipe had been presented as a single, unattached person, then we might well consider him only as a figure whose name associates him with the solitary labors, self-abnegation, and dedication of Felipe II. But Felipe is married to Juana, and the significance of the coupling of those two specific names has been generally overlooked. Indeed, the figure of Juana has been generally overlooked in any critical discussion of the novel, just as she is ignored as a person within the fictive world of the Indians and ladinos of Balún-Canán. One may infer that the name Juana refers to the commonality of her status with other female Indians, almost an invisible group except for their domestic and childbearing labors. Yet if we read her name in association with her husband's, we can appreciate her place in the fictive world and in relation to the central theme. Also, we are forced to re-evaluate the role of Felipe as Indian leader and fighter for equality.

It should be remembered that Felipe and Juana are the names of an historic couple in Hispanic culture. Juana was the daughter of Fernando and Isabel, through whose union Spain was united and made ready for the Conquest of the New World. Called "the Catholic Monarchs," their marriage is considered to have resulted in the union of the various kingdoms on the Iberian peninsula, creating a united

Spanish crown; their daughter Juana, however, has been remembered in a more infamous war as "Juana la loca," Juana the Mad, in part as a result of her experiences married to Felipe el Hermoso, Felipe the Handsome. The historical relationship of a frustrated woman driven to insanity as a result of her marriage and jealousy of her active, dynamic husband Felipe is repeated in Balún-Canán.

Like Juana la loca, Juana the Indian wife of Felipe is also exploited in socio-economic terms, since her work and her subordination to Felipe allow him to carry on the life style of his choice. Her passivity in accepting their distinct roles and her self-effacement before the interests of her husband define her as an "object" in the socio-cultural context supported by her husband. A review of Juana's activities will substantiate those observations.

It is Juana who takes care of their home and provides food and shelter for them while Felipe ignores her and his family responsibilities:

Felipe has washed his hands of house expenses. He came and went among the farms and villages and never thought to bring something home for his wife. She'd had to give him the little money she'd saved, to cover the cost of traveling. (Felipe se había desobligado de los gastos de su casa. Iba y venía de las fincas de los pueblos, sin acordarse de traerle nunca nada a su mujer. Ella había tenido que darle las pocas monedas que guardaba de ahorro para ayudarle en los gastos del viaje.) 173

Felipe's position as a leader causes him to be concerned for the group, rather than worrying about providing sustenance for Juana:

He wasn't capable of bringing her even an armadillo for her to cook so they could eat, or even some fruit. He didn't even lift a finger to help. (No era capaz ni de traer un armadillo para que ella lo adobara y lo comieran. Ni de cortar una fruta. No era capaz de nada para ayudarla.) 179

Although Juana should enjoy some social status conferred on her as the wife of the leader, her social recognition is devalued because of her infertility, which is considered a punishment in a society in which women's worth is defined in terms of their childbearing capacity: "God had punished her by not permitting her to have children." ("Dice la había castigado al no permitirle tener hijos." 174). Juana is dominated by her husband so that she desists in any action merely by "Felipe's implacable look" ("la mirada implacable de Felipe," 162. The following description reiterates Juana's subservient role as wife of Felipe within a patriarchal society:

She became a very small thing before him. Stretch left her and she crumpled up till she was on her knees on the floor, shaken like a bush by a gale of sobs. (se fue empequeñeciendo delante del hombre. Y su fuerza la abandon. Juana fue derrumbandose hasta quedar de rodillas en el suelo, sacudida como un arbusto por un viento de sollozos. 183.)

In front of Felipe, Juana is in the traditional role of women—subservient, submissive, silently on her knees. The kinesic

statement is clear: the patriarchy, whether the position of power is dominated by the whites with César or by Felipe the Indian, will continue to subjugate women and define their role in the narrow terms of motherhood and home.

Seen within historical and sociocultural contexts, the interrelationship between Juana and Felipe has significant thematic implications. There is a problem with the program of Felipe as leader of the minority class of Indians and as spokesperson for their rights and demands for a position of equality. Both in word and deed Felipe ignores the rights and position of women. Felipe understands the role of reminding the Indians that they are equal (180), and it is he who symbolizes the subversion of the typical Indian pattern of submission and docility. Nevertheless, if he is fighting for equality, he is also acting within the structure of the patriarchy. It would seem that Felipe merely wants to replace César in the power relationship rather than opening up the system to include women (as Castellanos would prefer). As a male Indian, Felipe is working to benefit other male Indians, exclusive of the females. His disregard of his own wife points to his failure to include the rights and position of women as part of his renovation of the socio-political system. His neglect of women's role functions in a two-fold manner. First, his own struggle for equality is diminished by showing it to be sexist and patriarchal; consequently, his behavior reveals that the oppression of women cuts across socio-economic and racial lines.

This tempered interpretation of Felipe's pursuit of equality, while based on textual references, is also indicated onomastically by the choice of two names of such historical significance as Felipe and Juana. That Juana's role has been ignored by critics, just as she is ignored within the fictive world, underscored all the more the need for critical attention to onomastic study. Once her name is coupled with Felipe's, then the significance of her character and the function of her role are brought to light. The reader is signaled by the onomastic clue to take into consideration not only the obvious white Indian conflict, but also to focus on the relationships between male and female, husband and wife, and ultimately, oppressor and oppressed. One accessible but too often uncommon method to approach this central theme is through an appreciation and understanding of the onomastic level of the text.

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## NOTES

1. Grace Alvarez-Altman, "Literary Onomastic Typology: Analytic Guidelines to Literary Onomastics Studies," Literary Onomastics Studies 8 (1981), 224.
2. Sandra Messinger Cypess, "The narrator as niña in Balún-Canán by Rosario Castellanos," El niño en las literaturas hispanicas, ed., J. Cruz Mendizabal. (Indiana University Press, 1978). 71-78: -----  
 "Balún-Canán: A Model Demonstration of Discourse as Power," Revista de Estudios Hispánicos 19, 3 (1985), 1-15.
3. See note 2.
4. William F. H. Nicolaisen, "Why Study Names in Literature?" Literary Onomastics Studies, 9 (1982), 2.
5. Richard Woods and Grace Alvarez-Altman, Spanish Surnames in the Southwestern United States: A dictionary (Boston: Hall & Co.; 78), 19.
6. Octavio Paz, El laberinto de la Soledad (1950, Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1965), p. 171.
7. Michel Foucault, History of Sexuality, Vol. I, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978), p.135
8. Rosario Castellanos, Balún-Canán, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (1957 México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1973), p. 235. All subsequent references to this edition will appear in the text. Translations from the Spanish are my

own, although I did consult the translation by Irene Nicholson, The Nine Guardianas (London: Faber and Faber, 1959).

9. Octavio Paz, quoted in Rita Guibert, Seven Voices: Seven Latin American Writers Talk to Rita Guibert, trans. Frances Patridge (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), p. 194.

10. J.H. Elliott, Imperial Spain 1469-1716, (1963 New York: Mentor Edition, 1973), p. 244.