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Robert F. DeGraaff
St. Lawrence University

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MEREDITH'S USE OF NAMES IN THE ORDEAL OF

RICHARD FEVEREL

Robert M. DeGraaff

St. Lawrence University

Readers who are moved by the crushing conclusion of Richard Feverel¹ and wish to read it as a tragedy are likely to object to the qualities of wit which pervade the narrative style. The very proliferation of these comic effects, however, should indicate to the critic that they are not the random extravagances of an exuberant young author or merely lapses in tonal control, but rather an important means of maintaining a comic perspective on characters whose personalities are painfully limited and whose actions are ultimately absurd. An examination of Meredith's ingenious use of names and epithets in the novel should illustrate this point.

An essential flaw in the character of Sir Austin Feverel, repeated in that of his son, is the necessity to generalize and

glamorize events and people, rather than to deal with them in individually realistic terms. Meredith makes use of the capitalized epithet to expose this weakness.² Thus Sir Austin had brought both his wife and his friend to his ancestral home: "He had been noble Love to the one, and to the other perfect Friendship. He had bid them ... live a Golden Age with him at Raynham." (19) Understandably, perhaps, they soon grew bored with this arrangement and left together. With ludicrous incongruity The Pilgrim's Scrip pontificates: "Women are, by nature, our staunchest Conservatives. We must look on them as the Bulwarks of Society." (29)

The Baronet's Note-Book (bare bones of The Pilgrim's Scrip) maps out the progressionary phases of Richard's life in sections, "from Simple Boyhood to the Blossoming Season, The Magnetic Age, The Period of Probation, from which, successfully passed through, he was to emerge into a Manhood worthy of Paradise." (35) In another place is written: "Between Simple Boyhood, and Adolescence -- The Blossoming Season -- on the threshold of Puberty, there is one Unselfish Hour: say, Spiritual Seed-time." (121-122). All this conceptual abstraction indicates that to his father, Richard is more of an experiment than a son.

The narrator himself utilizes the capitalized epithet to emphasize the "flat" quality of some of the characters.³ Adrian Harley, who pretends to a wisdom beyond his years, is

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satirically referred to as "the Wise Youth"; an anachronistic great-aunt of Richard's is termed "The Eighteenth Century"; the doom of the House of Feverel is embodied in one "Mrs. Malediction"; a farmhand overheard in conversation with a tinker becomes "Speed-the-Plough"; another lumbering farmhand, who already carries the sobriquet "the Bantam," becomes the "Punic Elephant" for his role in the rick-burning episode; Lucy becomes for Richard his "fleur-de-luce." On a more serious level, even the main characters often forfeit their identities to abstractions: Sir Austin is "the Scientific Humanist";⁴ Richard is first "The Hope of Raynham," then "the Experiment," and finally "the Hero"; Lucy is "beauty," in Richard's eyes. These titles indicate the characters' limitations.

In this cosmic context the author turns his wit loose on the actual names of his characters. Many of the names are really only clever descriptions; these proliferate among the incidental characters: of the women who court Sir Austin, for example, one with questionable moral scruples is Mrs. "Breakycline," a banker's wife is Mrs. "Cashentire," and the fastest young woman of the day is "Camilla" Duvergey; an earthy country squire is Sir Miles "Papworth"; a venerable lady who has money to bequeath to the Heir (none other than "The Eighteenth Century") is appropriately named Great-Aunt "Grantley"; the Raynham game--

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keeper's old pointer is called "Mark'em"; representatives of muscular Christianity are Parson "Brawnley" and Mr. Morton of "Poer Hall"; a prestigious London physician is Doctor Benjamin "Bairam"; a lecherous old lord is "Mount-falcon" -- "falcon" describing both his social status and his morality, "mount" his activities (one of his mistresses, Bella, is facetiously referred to as "Mrs. Mount").

The author occasionally toys with the names of his characters in amusing ways: Uncle "Hippias" inspired "Hippy verteth"; Austin "Wentworth" is absent during the great portion of the novel's events (he is the one character of unquestioned worth); Farmer Blaize's rick, fired by "Rick" with the aid of Tom "Bakewell," goes up in blazes ("old Blaize'll soon be old Blazes, Rip," said Richard (69); Adrian declares,

After all, the Country would be dull if we hadn't a rip here and there to treat us to a little conflagration.

"A rip!" laughed Richard, to his friend's disgust and alarm

at his daring: "You don't mean this Rip, do you?" (73)

Mrs. Berry, bemoaning the faithlessness of her deserting spouse, tells Lucy "He was a 'black Berry' to me, my dear!" (322)

Mrs. Doria "Forey" is the foremost female at Raynham, and, because her daughter Clare is blindly obedient to her, Adrian terms them "Mrs. Doria Battledoria and the fair Shuttlecockiana."

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(341) The Feverels' butler is called Heavy Benson by Adrian "from the mace-like fashion with which he wielded his respectability, and the fact of a connubial misfortune" (34); later in the story, when the spying Benson has been thrashed severely by Richard, Adrian rejects his plea to be carried home: "You will admit that you are heavy, Benson, so I can't carry you." (218) When Sir Austin invades London in search of a suitable wife for his son, he pauses long enough at Lawyer Thompson's to aid in the unmasking of Ripton (Chapter XIX) -- instead of law books, Ripton is buried in the pornographic "entrancing Adventures of Miss Random, a strange young lady" (169); much later in the novel Ripton is appalled to discover the low moral character of the ladies at the Richmond dinner party: "The Aphorist would have pardoned Ripton Thompson his first Random extravagance..." (450); after the party, having been discarded by his bosomy companion, "random thoughts laid hold of him." (454)

The proliferation of name-play amongst the lesser characters leads one to examine the names of the more important figures in the novel more closely. The relevance of Lady "Blandish" is apparent. The double pun in "Raynham" Abbey fits the action of the novel: the Feverels are the foremost house in the county, and so "reign 'em" (the town below their grounds is "Lobourne") , and Sir Austin's method with Richard is to

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"rein 'im" (his inability to do so results in Richard's wild career). Sir Austin's full name, Austin Absworthy Bearne Feverel, suggests a further line of investigation: the "Bearne" ("burn") reinforces the "fever" in "Feverel," pointing to the major defect of both father and son -- the tendency to smoulder with wounded pride. When Sir Austin regards the elopement of his wife as a special dispensation of Fate (the "Ordeal of the Feverels"), the author explains that "Stricken Pride, and a feverish blood, made him seek consolation in this way." (17)

Sir Austin's fever is repeated in the life of Richard: Richard's whipping by Farmer Blaize brings "the fever on him severely" (51); his witnessing of Sir Austin's kissing of Lady Blandish brings Richard a restless night, but "Towards morning the madness of the fever abated somewhat" (143); after the "first feverish energy" he dreams of knightly deeds (145); parental interference in his romance with Lucy brings him to bed with an actual case of fever (260) and his final duelling escapade results in Lucy's death from "brain fever". Of the women in Richard's life, "Bella" is a fiery beauty; the tidings of his mother "were a vivid fire in his brain" (459), while both "Clare" and "Lucy" suggest calmer lights.

Meredith's use of names and epithets in Richard Feverel is clearly not a stylistic accident, but an important tool in the narrator's exposure of the weaknesses of his characters.

Thus it connects directly with Meredith's educational purpose in novel writing -- the presentation of tough-minded character analysis.

Robert DeGraaff

St. Lawrence University

NOTES

¹I am using the Modern Library Edition of the novel, edited with an introduction by Lionel Stevenson (this edition reproduces Meredith's original 1859 version of the work). Page citations will be made in the text of my essay.

²Joseph Warren Beach comments on this use of capital letters in The Comic Spirit in George Meredith (New York, 1911), p. 52.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., pp. 53-54. As Beach points out, Sir Austin is actually neither properly scientific nor a humanist -- the title is applied ironically.