Some Name Symbolism in the Short Stories of Fitz-James O'Brien

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Fitz-James O'Brien is one of those minor mid-nineteenth century American writers (the Irish claim him also) whom most students of literature have heard of. Perhaps they even know the titles of, or have read, a couple of his short stories (e.g., "The Diamond Lens," "The Wondersmith," and "What was It? A Mystery"), but this is about as far as his reputation extends. In fact, I have encountered only one person in recent years who has more knowledge of O'Brien than I have just indicated--that gentleman had written a graduate paper on several of the short stories some thirty years ago. Therefore, before getting to the subject of this paper, name symbolism in some of the writings of Fitz-James O'Brien, it is appropriate to explain something of who and what he was.
O'Brien was born into a well-to-do, even aristocratic, family in the southernmost county of Ireland, Cork, in the latter part of 1828. After studying the usual grammar school subjects, probably principally with tutors, and travelling on the Continent, he claimed that he followed courses at the University of Dublin in the expectation of pursuing a career in law as had his father. Very careful search of the university records, however, has uncovered no evidence that he ever studied there. Before reaching his majority in 1849 he had published almost a score of poems in several Irish periodicals—most notably in The Nation and The Cork Magazine—a number of which received excellent critical comment in their day and are, indeed, fairly well executed pieces. Then, with a patrimony which O'Brien claimed to be £8,000, he arrived in London and apparently lived extravagantly à la mode in the world of high fashion; his biographer, Francis Wolle, states that in London, in little more than two years, he "squandered his inheritance lavishly." During this period he continued to compose poems, about a dozen of which appeared in The Family Friend, Household Words, and The Home Companion. He also published his first two stories, "An Arabian Night-mare" and "The Phantom Light. A Christmas Story." While in England he was probably editor of The Parlour Magazine of the Literature of All Nations, the life of which coincided with the Great
Exhibition at the Crystal Palace, May 3 to December 20, 1851, since it was printed publicly as one of the exhibits of the Fair.

Late in December of 1851, probably as a result of being pursued, and almost caught, by the officer husband of a lady with whom he had travelled to a seaport in the south of England in the expectation of embarking to America, he barely escaped with his life, alone!  

O'Brien was to live in America for only ten years, his death occurring on April 6, 1862, as a result of a shoulder wound received while performing a heroic action in the Civil War. In these years, however, his literary production was enormous--about one hundred twenty-five poems, more than fifty short stories, eight or ten plays, and about three score reviews, essays, and critical pieces. He also contributed prodigiously to the daily and weekly newspapers. This is surely an incredible quantity from a man who was a noted--and perhaps notorious--man-about-town, bon vivant, frequenter of plays and entertainments, and a nightly habitué at Pfaff's, possibly the most popular saloon in lower New York during the mid-century.

Most of Fitz-James's stories and poems published in America are readily available today since, for the most part, they were printed in magazines, journals, and newspapers that have been
preserved; in fact, several of the periodicals in which his work appeared are still being published. Most noteworthy of these are Harper's and The Atlantic Monthly. The original Harper's New Monthly Magazine and Harper's Weekly alone printed forty-one of his poems and thirty-six of his short stories. (It should be pointed out, parenthetically, that one of the stories long attributed to O'Brien is also claimed for Herman Melville. Just a couple of years ago, Professor David R. Eastwood of Emporia Kansas State College, on the basis of a comparative study of "characteristic curves of composition," concluded that the story "The Fiddler," which appeared in Harper's New Monthly Magazine in September of 1854, is more probably Melville's than O'Brien's.)

Volumes I and IV of The Atlantic Monthly, under the editorship of James Russell Lowell, contained two of O'Brien's most popular stories, "The Diamond Lens" in 1857 and "The Wondersmith" two years later. The remaining published stories, sixteen, appeared in a half-dozen different magazines and the rest of the published poems, nearly seventy, were printed in thirteen publications. Indeed, O'Brien spread his work around. When one attempts to collect all of these stories and poems, one fully realizes the range and variety of readership to which he appealed.

Seventeen of O'Brien's stories, approximately one-third, have been reprinted at least once and a few of them, for
example, "What Was It? A Mystery" and "The Diamond Lens," have appeared frequently throughout the twentieth century. There have been several editions of O'Brien's work, too, but all have been woefully inadequate. The first, edited by his friend, William Winter, in 1881, contained thirteen stories and forty-three poems. It also devoted several hundred pages to prefatory, introductory, and eulogistic materials by a variety of the author's friends. This edition, with some editorial changes and paring, was reissued six times in the next forty-two years. All of the subsequent editions of O'Brien's work, those edited by Edward J. O'Brien (no relation) in 1925, by Gilbert Seldes in 1932, and the French edition by Henri Parisot in 1964, reprinted only stories that had first been collected in the original Winter edition. Thus, and this can be demonstrated on internal evidence, it would appear that no editor subsequent to Winter went directly to the periodicals and magazines in which the stories first appeared; rather, all merely "borrowed" the stories already selected and edited by William Winter in 1881.

Scholarship on Fitz-James is almost minimal. In addition to the doctoral dissertation and subsequent critical biography by Francis Wolle and the article on the question of authorship of the story "The Fiddler" already noted, there has been only
a handful of paragraphs in the various encyclopedias and biographies devoted to American authors,\(^7\) five published articles, the latest of which is dated 1945,\(^8\) passages ranging from a footnote to several pages in critical volumes on American literature,\(^9\) and complete chapters in two fairly recent books.\(^10\)

I might also mention, in this context, that I have read two papers on O'Brien at regional MLA Conferences; these papers, one on the story "The Diamond Lens" and the other on an earlier one, "One Event," have subsequently been published in the *Marist College Academic Quarterly.*\(^11\)

Most of O'Brien's fifty-five short stories, some of which are long enough to be considered novelettes or novellas while a few are what today would be termed short short stories, can be fitted into categories based upon subject matter. As might be expected, however, some overlapping occurs. The motifs of O'Brien used most frequently are:

1. The Death of a Beautiful Woman--8 stories;
2. Satire on Society--8 stories;
3. Fantasy--11 stories (It should be noted here that the title of the chapter on O'Brien in Sam Moskowitz's book, *Explorers of the Infinite*, is "The Fabulous Fantast--Fitz-James O'Brien");
4. Science Fiction--5 stories;
5. The Death of a Child--5 stories; and
6. Stories wherein a setting in a theatre or in theatre life is paramount--8 stories.

Other motifs that appear less frequently in his stories are the Parent-Child Conflict (2 stories), Duelling (2 stories), an
Allegorical Tale, and one story each that might be classified as Ghost, Supernatural, and Mythological. The sentimental abounds in O'Brien's stories and, even though several may be classified elsewhere, about a dozen might be placed in this pigeonhole. Four could be called Dream Visions in the medieval sense of the term, thirteen have non-American settings, and, finally, a few stories, four or five, must be placed in that catch-all category, "Miscellaneous" because they just can't seem to be fitted elsewhere.

An argument could be made out for giving O'Brien a new reading today in the light of some of the critical comments that have been made about him. In 1930, Joseph J. Reilly, writing in The Catholic World, declared that O'Brien "was as emotional as Poe and gifted with as rich an imagination." A few years later Fred Lewis Pattee in his landmark book, The Development of the American Short Story, stated that "No more electric and versatile genius had ever appeared among American authors...Few have missed success by so narrow a margin. Especially was he gifted with invention...Undoubtedly in America [his tales'] influence did far more than the influence of Poe to take from the short story its heavy tread and its clumsy art." In the introduction to the first edition of his short stories, after that of Winter, Edward O'Brien indicated his belief
that Fitz-James is "more significant in our literary history than either [William Harding] Davis or O. Henry, and to his contemporaries he was little short of a god."\textsuperscript{14} This editor goes on to declare that he was the "most distinguished American story-teller between Edgar Allen Poe and Bret Harte."\textsuperscript{15} Several more statements of a similar cast could be marshalled to indicate that Fitz-James O'Brien could be read today with a certain amount of enjoyment to some readers; however, with the directions that fiction have taken in this and the last couple of decades, it is highly unlikely that his work will get an airing other than for the two or three of his science fiction and fantasy stories that continue to be printed.

The use of names by Fitz-James O'Brien to suggest an allegorical characteristic ranges from the simple and extremely trite to the complex and even arcane and esoteric with, it must be admitted, far more instances of the former than of the latter. Illustrative of the trite use of names would be the name Tom DILLAR in the story "Elegant Tom Dillar."\textsuperscript{16} "Dillar" is obviously a play on "dollar" which O'Brien probably borrowed from the old nursery rhyme "A dillar, a dollar, a ten o'clock scholar." In the same story the character Pete Van SLICER is so named because, by most underhanded means, he "slices" Tom's money, and hence his position in society, from him. In the
story "Mrs. Macsimum's Bill," Mr. and Mrs. MACSIMUM are high on society's ladder and Mr. SILLERY PAYNE, although a "silly pain," almost succeeds in destroying both the Macsimums' position in society and their marriage. At one point in the story the omniscient author notes that "Mr. Sillery Payne fiddled with his brelogues, while an air of unpleasant silliness (emphasis mine) commencing at his boots, began to spread itself gradually over his entire figure." The SEYMOUR sisters in "The Spider's Eye" are members of an audience in a theatre which is so constructed that at one spot all sounds converge, even whispered conversations. In this story the first person omniscient narrator has accidentally found this spot, a cubby hole under the conductor's podium, and, by concentrating on the five sisters and their escorts, "sees" into their lives. St. FANTASMOS in "Jubal, the Ringer" is the name of the church in which a crazed bell-ringer resides; the church, incidentally, is named for its patron saint! A scene-painter in "The Bullfinch" is named UMBER; Annie WYLDE is the name of the urchin purchased by the protagonist of "One Event" whom, Pygmalion-like, he prepares to mold into the woman fit to be his wife; the poor suitor in "Baby Bloom" whom the girl's parents feel is financially unworthy of their daughter is Reuben LOWE; and Mr. Adolphus PENNIMAN is the long-suffering but indigent lover of Miss Agnes
de Belus (later Mrs. Peter Caracole) in "My Son, Sir!".

Among the other names that totally describe the character to whom they are attached are BELLA DONNA, the girl who makes the perfect wife, and NOBLE Sydale, the young man who wins her, in the story "Belladonna;" also, Mr. PLUFF, the sexton of the CHURCH OF THE HOLY SYMPHONY, and Mrs. TRAPEZE and her daughter Miss TRAPEZE in "Dora Dee." It should be pointed out that O'Brien had in mind a specific sexton and a specific church in this story, Isaac Brown of the Grace Episcopal Church on Fifth Avenue. In addition to Brown's appearance in this story as Mr. Pluff, O'Brien bitingly satirizes him in his long poem "The Finishing School" and in "The Ballad of Sir Brown."

There are dozens more of this very obvious kind of name symbol in O'Brien's stories. A few of them are Mr. LUSTRING and Mrs. HORNET, a silk merchant and a society matron alluded to in "Mrs. Macsimum's Bill;" CROTON POOLE in "The Beauty," ("Croton" is a river, falls, and town in southern New York State); Miss Laura BARBELLE in "A Drawing-Room Drama," Miss Helen de RHAM in "Milly Dove;" Mrs. RANSACK, who gives soirees, is mentioned in "Sister Anne;" Mr. VANE is a very self-important young man in "Baby Bertie's Christmas;" Charles BEAUFORT, the young lover in "Twice in Love;" Mr. MORLOT and his nephew, Francois MORLOT, are vying for a fortune in "Uncle
and Nephew, Mr. HALIBUT who disinherits his son in "A Screw Loose" (A halibut, it will be recalled, is a fish which feeds upon smaller fish and lives in cold water); and Roland de BOORE in "Mrs. Jujube at Home." Again, it must be emphasized that this is far from a complete list of the simplest type of allegorical characterization in O'Brien's narratives.

Frequently, O'Brien used a character name to make a literary allusion. Thus, in "One Event," in which Annie Wylde is the heroine, three other characters are given names that permit the reader to make larger associations. John VESPAR is the man who desires to create the perfect wife for himself in the person of Annie Wylde. *Vespa*, however, is the Latin word for "wasp" and biologists refer to a colony of wasps as a *vespiary*. John Vespar certainly destroys Annie in his attempt to "perfect" her and he even kills her, although this latter was unintentional in the story. The young man who loves Annie is BOLTON WALLER which name, possibly, is intended as an allusion to the then-popular English novelist Bulwer-Lytton. This allusion is especially likely since Vespar and Waller get into a lengthy discussion on the value of inspiration versus careful honing and revision in the creation of art. Waller (Bulwer-Lytton) holds the romantic view and Vespar the more conservative, classical one. Finally, in the story, the maid is an older
German woman, META, who dwells, in her memory, among the legends and folk tales of her homeland. Thus, she recalls the Lurlei, the Wild Huntsman of the Black Forest, and the Gold Gnomes who were said to inhabit the caves beneath the Hartz Mountains. "Meta," of course, is a Greek prefix which usually means "beyond" or "transcending." The woman's thoughts are beyond the here and now of the story and are centered on her far-away homeland.

There are two rather obvious Biblical allusions in the stories, one from the New and the other from the Old Testament. From the New is LAZARUS Levi, the pawnbroker in "How Nellie Lee Was Pawned,"39 through whom the protagonist and the heroine, Nellie Lee, gain new lives with each other. It is appropriate that JUBAL, in the story "Jubal, the Ringer," be a bell-warden, since his namesake in Genesis 4:21 is said to be "the father of them that play upon the harp and the organs."

A number of the names that O'Brien gives to his characters are simply words in other languages, notably Latin, French, and Italian. Mr. PAPILOTTE is the first person major character in "How Nellie Lee Was Pawned." In French a papilotte is a "curl paper," a "bonbon," a "sweet-meat in paper," or "oiled paper for cooking" and there is doubtless a good deal of irony in O'Brien's choice of this name for the protagonist of this story since many of the facts in it are thinly-veiled details in the life of the author. Also French is the name of Mrs. TINTAMARRE,
one of the minor characters in "Mrs. Jujube at Home." This lady, whose name means "hubbub" or "uproar," and two other women, Mrs. FLÈCHE ("dart" or "arrow" in French) and Mrs. TANTALUS, engage in some very spiteful and vicious gossip. The name of the latter lady is appropriate also since Tantalus in classical mythology was cast from the banquets of the gods into the underworld by Jupiter when he disclosed the secrets that he had learned there. The principal characters in "My Son, Sir!" are Mr. Peter CARACOLE and his son James. This name, which as a noun in French means "winding" and as the verb caracoler means "to circle" or "to gambol," is a term of manage in horsemanship. It also has the connotation of "spiralling." In all of these senses it is fitting in the story since Mr. Caracole is unable to manage his scapegrace son who lives a riotous existence until his early demise from a knife wound received in a drunken brawl. In the same story a Mr. COLOCOTRONI, whose name in Italian means "to place" or "to arrange" or "to manage" a "throne" (collocare plus trono) runs off with the wife of Mr. Caracole, young James' mother. Also from Italian is the name of the ladies' hairdresser, CREMOLINO, in "Mrs. Maerimum's Bill;" cremore, in Italian, means "essence" or "extract" and, hence, Cremolino is obviously a fitting name for one in this unctuous business.

In Latin lupus is a wolf and the female of the species appears in the person of Miss Carita De LUPA in "The Duel."
The irony here is compounded in the lady's first name, CARITA, which is rooted in Latin caritas, "love." One of the duellists in this story is Frank CADELLE. A "cadelle" in English, which derives from French and Provençal, is a small blackish beetle, but in its original vulgar Latin form the word is catellus, "dog." The Latin for fox, vulpes, appears in "The Diamond Lens."

One final instance of O'Brien's having turned to Latin for names is to be found in the character Dr. LUXOR ("to riot" or "to revel") in "The Golden Ingot." Lux, in Latin, signifies "light" and Dr. Luxor, in this story, is an alchemist who is seeking to transmute baser metals into gold. Incidentally, he dies believing that he has accomplished this feat.

Four, somewhat exotic uses of names to indicate their holders' principal characteristics, might well be grouped together: AURELIA, ORMOLU, JUJUBE, and CRISSALIS. An aurelia, the given name of Mrs. Macsimum in "Mrs. Macsimum's Bill," of one of the Seymour girls in "The Spider's Eye," and of Mrs. Trapeze's daughter in "Dora Dee," is a crysalis, that is, the pupa of insects of the lepidoptera class. Principally in this class are butterflies and moths. When in the pupal stage these insects are in a helpless condition, they do not take food, and they are generally encased in a firm integument. Such a state is at once the condition of all of the women given this name by O'Brien. They are generally quiescent,
permitting things to occur around them, protected or encased by others in their lives, and helpless. Mr. Ormolu appears in "Elegant Tom Dillar" and in O'Brien's long, satirical poem "The Tenement House." The word, which in English properly describes an alloy which resembles gold, is immediately derived from French or (gold) plus moulo, the past participle of moudre (to grind), and ultimately from Latin aurum (gold) plus molère (to grind). Mr. Jefferson Ormolu in O'Brien's two pieces is depicted as a grasping, money-hungry, thoroughly selfish person who has acquired his wealth through the exploitation of the poor. He is shown to be totally without sympathy or compassion for the plight of those less fortunate than he. In fact, in "The Tenement House" he and his friends are seen enjoying a sumptuous dinner while, nearby, tenement houses that he owns burn to the ground.

The title character of the story "Mrs. Jujube at Home" is a fashionable lady, nouveau riche of course, who is planning to announce the engagement of her daughter Harriette, to Mr. Roland de Boore at an evening bal de poudre as the narrative opens. Harriette, however, is interested only in Mr. BEAUFORT (the beautiful and strong one). At the bal, not only does the young couple trick Mrs. Jujube out of announcing the daughter's engagement to de Boore, but they also succeed in getting married before the assembled guests during the production of an
entertainment written by Mr. Beaufort. A jujube is a fruit-flavored chewy candy or lozenge. The word derives from Middle English, Old French, Medieval Latin, and, ultimately, from Latin and Greek where it is the name of a spiny tree that is native to Europe and which has small yellowish flowers and dark red fruit.

The last of the four names in this group, CRISSALIS, is the surname of a woman who is alluded to by the vicious dressmaker, Mrs. Laramie, in "Mrs. Macsimum's Bill." The situation is that Mrs. Macsimum is in arrears in her payments to the dressmaker by several thousand dollars and she doesn't have sufficient money to pay them. It is also posited that Mr. Macsimum is having business reverses. At this point Mrs. Laramie states that:

There was Mrs. Crissalis, the other day, ma'am—I was very near losing a thousand dollars by her, when Mr. Crissalis failed. But I was cautious, Mrs. Macsimum, so I sent in my little accounts a few days before the gentleman went, ma'am.44

In ornithology, the crissal or crissalis pertains to the feathers surrounding, or the region itself of, the anus of a bird. Thus, it might be said that Mrs. Crissalis exemplified the characteristic of being a bird's ass!

This little study of names in the stories of Fitz-James
O'Brien is far from complete. Space could certainly be devoted to such other names as BULLRUSH, TWITTER, DUCKLING, HERCULES, PEARL, TITTLES, CHAT, TUTT, COGGLESHELL, and GRIPPLE COLLERER. Also worthy of some consideration would be a place name like HOMINY HOUSE in HOPSCOTCH, New Jersey, and newspapers like the Daily Aloe, which signifies a cathartic drug, and The New York Daily Cockchafer, the name of a Western European destructive beetle. Enough has been touched upon, however, to demonstrate that the young Irish-American writer was well-acquainted with the technique of employing names to set forth many of his one-dimensional characters. It has also been shown that he drew upon a number of sources for his names. Thus, he used several ancient and modern languages, the Bible, classical mythology, biology and botany, ichthyology and ornithology, plays on sound and spelling, paranomasia, exact one-to-one meanings, and even the name of candy. Therefore, it can be concluded that, if Fitz-James O'Brien was not the most creative and imaginative of the mid-nineteenth-century story tellers, he was at least innovative in the names that he gave to many of his characters and eclectic in the range of sources from which he selected those names.

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NOTES

1 The scholar who has done most work on O'Brien is Francis Wolle whose 1933 doctoral dissertation was edited and published in 1944 as Fitz-James O'Brien: A Literary Bohemian of the Eighteen Fifties (Boulder, Colorado: University of Colorado Studies, c. 1944). Wolle states that, while in Ireland in 1929, he found "no record at Trinity...of his [O'Brien's] having matriculated there." Wolle goes on to suggest that "It is possible that he went up to Dublin and became a Sizar Candidate; but, if so, he failed to obtain the desired appointment, and consequently his name does not appear on the college books" (p. 14).

2 Ibid., p. 2.

3 The story of O'Brien's departure from England is given in considerable detail by Wolle. The account contains, however, a certain amount of conjecture on Wolle's part. Ibid., pp. 27-28.


8 R.H. Stoddard, "The Best of the Bohemians," Critic,


11 George J. Sommer, "The Microcosmic Worlds of Fitz-James O'Brien and Ray Cummings," read in the Science Fiction and Fantasy Section of the Northeast Modern Language Association
Conference, Montreal (April, 1975), and published in The Marist College Academic Quarterly, III (1975), 107-124; and "Fitz-James O'Brien's First Story on the Death of a Beautiful Woman," read in the American Literature Before the Civil War Section


13 Pattee, The Development of the American Short Story, pp. 155, 158-159.


15 Ibid., p. viii.


18 Ibid., 661.


20 This is not unlike the situation posited by Chaucer in The House of Fame, namely, that there is a point in the heavens to which all sounds gravitate that are generated on the earth, in the sea, or in the heavens. Chaucer also has these sounds assume their original shapes as they are released in Fame's House:

Ryght even in the myddes of the weye
Betwixen hevene, erthe, and see;
That what so ever in al these three
Is spoken, either privy or apert,
The way therto ys so overt,
And stant eke in so juste a place
That every soun mot to hyt pace,
Or what so cometh from any tonge,
Be hyt rouned, red, or songe,
Or spoke in suerte or in drete,
Certeyn, hyt moste thider nede.

The House of Fame, 11.714-723, in The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer,

21 The Knickerbocker, or New York Monthly Magazine, LII
(August 1858), 176-186.

22 There are some very obvious parallels between this story
and Victor Hugo's The Hunchback of Notre Dame.

23 The Knickerbocker, or New York Monthly Magazine, LVIII
(July 1861), 29-40.

24 The American Whig Review, XVI (October 1852), 351-362.


26 Harper's New Monthly Magazine, X (January 1855), 246-251.

27 Harper's New Monthly Magazine, IX (June 1854), 78-83.


41. The Atlantic Monthly, I (January 1858), 353-367.

42. The Knickerbocker, or New York Monthly Magazine, LII (August 1858), 176-186.

44. Putnam's Monthly Magazine, IV (December 1854), 660.