

1979

The Names of Slaves and Masters: Real and Fictional

Murray Heller

North Country Community College

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/los>

Repository Citation

Heller, Murray (1979) "The Names of Slaves and Masters: Real and Fictional," *Literary Onomastics Studies*: Vol. 6 , Article 11.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/los/vol6/iss1/11>

This Conference Paper is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @Brockport. It has been accepted for inclusion in Literary Onomastics Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @Brockport. For more information, please contact kmyers@brockport.edu.

THE NAMES OF SLAVES AND MASTERS:
REAL AND FICTIONAL

Murray Heller

North Country Community College

William Wells Brown was born into slavery in Kentucky, about 1816, escaping to freedom in 1835 and publishing in 1848 The Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive Slave.¹ This work joined many others, forming a genre called the Slave Narrative.² These autobiographical accounts of slave life were used in the Abolitionists' war against that peculiar institution and as such they hold an important position in American social and political, as well as literary, history.

Brown continued his anti-slavery activities with speaking engagements and other publications. In 1853 he saw, published in London, his Clotel, or the President's Daughter, marking him as "the first black novelist in America."³ Robert Bone's otherwise penetrating study, The Negro Novel in America, dismisses Clotel summarily. Bone says:

Heller 2

Clotel was written to arouse sympathy for the abolitionist cause. Its structure is simple enough. The novel opens with the sale of a mother and her two daughters, traces their subsequent fate, and thereby provides a catalogue of the evils of slavery. It ends melodramatically as the heroine eludes a group of slave-chasers by throwing herself into the Potomic, within sight of the White House. The intended irony depends upon Brown's allegation that Clotel was the illegitimate daughter of Thomas Jefferson.⁴

Whatever polemic use was made of the work, one cannot limit Brown's novel by dismissing it as merely another Abolitionist tract. For as Ronald Takaki rightly argues in his Violence in The Black Imagination, unlike Frederick Douglass and Martin Delany, who were political activists rather than artists...Brown was an artist involved in political action, and his art was his primary political expression...Brown had invested his identity in art....⁵ Indeed, Takaki insists:

In his novel Clotelle: Brown went far...in his effort to create fiction out of the experiences of his past and to construct in his imagination solutions to the predicaments of that past.⁶

These two works by Brown afford an opportunity to examine a unique feature of literary onomastics: that is, the relationship between the autobiographical name and the more fictional name.

Just as the fictional place is never the "real" place, wherever that place may be, if, indeed, it exists at all; just so, the fictional name is never the "real" name. The artist produced a synthesis of impressions, experiences, events, and

Heller 3

technique; a synthesis which we call the creative act. The term creative act itself precludes anything less than newness from the old. Thus every personal name used by the artist is a new name, invested with the spirit of the artist's creativity. That the name carries with it prior energy generated by the lexicon is true for all lexical items, and it is the creative act which informs the word or the name with new energy, new meaning.

Nevertheless, when we know that a work has been produced, the intent of which is to recount precisely and objectively the events of a man's life, for the purpose of offering specific and verifiable evidence of social and personal injustice, we are in an area in which the names used can be more readily accepted as "non-fictional," for want of a better word. This is the case with Brown's Narrative!

We, therefore, have the opportunity to examine the names in these two works, confident that the earlier Narrative offers us personal names of the living actors in Brown's life,⁷ while the later novel offers us personal names created from that list of characters.

However, it seems that the onomasticon creates as well as is created. Not only is it true that an artist will create a character complete with a personality, a body and a name; it is just as true that an artist will create a name and insist

Heller 4

upon his character living up to its name. Although I suspect this to be the case with Brown's fiction, that will be a later study. I intend today to examine the way Brown reinforces his perception of good and evil by his choice of personal names.

The Narrative begins with an introduction to Brown's family. Elizabeth mothered Benjamin, Joseph, Leander, Millford, Solomon, William and a daughter, Elizabeth.⁸ These names are not readily indentifiable as slave names. In a list of 972 black male slave names in the Eighteenth century, there are enumerated one Benjamin, six incidences of Joseph and three of William.

There are no listings for Leander, Millford or Solomon.⁹ Of 603 black female slave names collected in this period, there are only three incidences of Elizabeth.¹⁰ Among free black males in the Eighteenth century, there are found in a list of 645 names one Benjamin, eleven Josephs and twenty-three incidences of William. Leander, Millford and Solomon are names also not found among free blacks.¹¹ Of 406 free black females, there are eight incidences of Elizabeth.¹² It appears that, in terms of names collected from the 1700-1800 period, Brown's family chose or were given names more frequently found among free blacks.

This pattern continues when we consider the period 1800-1860, when Brown's family lived as slaves. William was

Heller 5

the tenth most used name for male slaves; his brothers' names are infrequently used.¹³ However, among free blacks in this period, William is second in popularity; Joseph is eleventh; Benjamin is sixteenth; and Solomon, twenty-eighth.¹⁴ In addition, Elizabeth is fortieth among slave female names, but seventh among free black female names, during the 1800-1860 period.¹⁵

The Georgia Tax Digests of 1790-1800 list 12,565 white names, and William is second in popularity, exactly as with free blacks; Joseph is fifth; Benjamin, ninth; and Solomon, thirty-fourth. For white females, Elizabeth is a most attractive name, second only to Mary in popularity.¹⁶

For a number of reasons, including status as house servants and parentage, the names in this slave family are more identifiable with free blacks and whites than with slaves.

The majority of other male slave names in the Narrative are monosyllabic and shortened forms. These are the recognizable and typical male slave names, conforming closely with the most frequently used names in the collected lists. Throughout the Narrative we meet the slaves Ben, Bob, Frank, Joe, and John, as well as Aaron, Lewis, Peter and Randall. Female slave names in the Narrative tend to be somewhat more phonetically complex and lyrical. The Narrative mentions Charlotte, Cynthia, Delphia, Eliza, Lavinia and Maria, as well as the phonetically unfortunate Patsey and Sally. As with male slave names, these female slaves

had names closely conforming with those on the collected lists.

There is ample evidence that Brown was sensitive to onomastic significances. In the Narrative Brown describes the unfeeling attitude of a steamship captain who learns of the brutal murder of a slave. The Captain says, "You have killed this nigger; now take him off of my boat." Brown inserts the ironic editorial comment, "The Captain's name was Hart."

Later in the Narrative a young nephew of Brown's owner arrives. "When this boy was brought to Dr. Young, his name being William, the same as mine, my mother was ordered to change mine to something else. This, at the time, I thought to be one of the most cruel acts that could be committed upon my rights; and I received several very severe whippings for telling people that my name was William, after orders were given to change it. Though young, I was old enough to place a high appreciation upon my name."¹⁸

Brown returns to this theme after starting on his escape from slavery, significantly, even before he is safe from the slave catchers. "I resolved on adopting my old name of William...So I was not only hunting for my liberty, but also hunting for a name..."¹⁹ He does, indeed, find his freedom and a name, both in the fortuitous meeting with the Quaker, Wells Brown, who at one point says, "...thee must have another

Heller 7

name. Since thee has got out of slavery, thee has become a man, and men always have two names."²⁰ William then takes the name of this good man, his "adopted father."²¹ He becomes forever William Wells Brown.

Brown's Narrative, then, offers ample evidence that personal names were of vital concern. Brown himself took great pride in his name; the names of his brothers and sisters as well as his own were to be identified with free blacks and whites rather than with slaves; and a personal name reinforced or should reinforce one's behavior. In the novel Clotelle we can see how Brown recreated the experiences of his slave life in his fiction, particularly in the way the names given his characters reinforce the author's perception of good and evil.

Clotelle begins by introducing the reader to the slave woman, Agnes. This beautiful mulatto, the daughter of an American senator, has two daughters, Isabella and Marion, by a son of one of Virginia's "best" white families. Isabella grows up and enraptures young Hunry Linwood, of the Richmond upper class. After being purchased by Linwood, Isabella gives birth to Clotelle, who becomes, eventually, an even more beautiful woman.

This pattern of progressively more beautiful womanhood is patently based upon blood and a white aesthetic including fair

Heller 8

complexion, blue eyes, light and gently waved hair, decorous and genteel mannerisms and speech. The pattern is reinforced by the names Brown gives each of these women. However beautiful the mulatto may be, Agnes is still an Agnes. Among slave female names of the 1800-1860 period Aggy or Agnes is forty-first in popularity. Among free black women of the same period, Aggy or Agnes appears twenty-sixth in popularity. However, the name does not appear at all among white women listed in the Georgia Tax Digests.

Her name reinforces the distinction between this beautiful mulatto and the majority of slave women who are called Mary, Betsy, Milly and Fanny. Agnes is not quite a field hand; her name suggests movement toward free black women. But she is certainly not a white woman.

Agnes names her first daughter Isabella. It is a name immediately recognizable as foreign and therefore romantic, certainly so from a white American point of view. Its quattrosyllabic latinate sound evokes images far removed from those suggested by the phonetically prosaic Agnes.

Nevertheless, Isabella, although even more white than her mother, is still a slave. Indeed, Brown calls her "the beautiful quadroon,"²² pressing home the slave and color distinctions then current in the South. Isabella seems to have been a relatively popular slave name among early Spanish and

Heller 9

French slave holders, appearing among the list of sixty-five female slave names prior to 1700;²³ in a list of forty-seven Louisiana female slaves prior to 1800, Isabella appears twice;²⁴ and a small collection of 24 French-Canadian slave names, between 1744 and 1797, includes an Isabella or Bell.²⁵ Our Isabella is also referred to, by another slave woman, as Miss "Bell."²⁶

However, by the 1800-1860 period, Isabella is less frequently used among slave women than Agnes. Isabella ranks seventy-first in popularity, whereas, you will recall, Agnes is forty-first. Isabella, then, hints at an even greater distance from the majority of slave women than suggested by Agnes. Furthermore, Isabella appears eighty-seventh in popularity among free black women of this period, whereas Agnes ranked a relatively high twenty-sixth. Agnes, then, has given her daughter a name which is not to be identified with black women, slave or free, or with white women, if the Georgia Tax Digests are any indication. Isabella is to be identified as non-American.²⁷

Isabella, in turn, gives birth to an even more beautiful child, Clotelle. It is a most unusual name, from an American perspective. Of a collection of approximately 500,000 black and white names from 1619 to the late 1940's, Clotelle appears only once.²⁸ The name is quite euphonious: musical and liquid.

Heller 10

It sounds French; it sounds elegant and a bit precious, less of this earth than the merely foreign Isabella. This is the name given to the little girl of whom Brown says, "There was not even color enough about the child to make it appear that a single drop of African blood flowed through its blue veins."²⁹

It is clear, then, that Brown devised names for his women which reinforce the progression to more stunning physical beauty, finer sensibility and decorum, distance from the slave status, increasingly white parentage, and a foreign and exotic quality. That is, Agnes to Isabella to Clotelle.³⁰ And white, for Brown, was a necessary ingredient for a woman.

All other names of slaves in the novel coincide with the most frequently used slave names of the 1800-1860 period. For males, the author creates Aaron, Alf, Jack, Uncle Jim, Joe, Marcus or Mark, Mill, Peter, Pompey, Sam, Tobias or Toby, Uncle Tony and William. Slave women are called Dinay, Dorcas, Hetty, Jane, Lizzie, Nancy, Nell, Sally and Aunt Winny.

Indeed, the distance between Agnes, Isabella and Clotelle and the rest of the slaves in the novel is even greater, on the basis of the name's investment with the function of reinforcing perceptions, than the distance between Brown's family and all the other slaves in his Narrative.

Heller 11

There is one exception to this. Clotelle falls in love with a slave and manufactures his escape from jail on the eve of his hanging, in a scene familiar to all readers of A Tale of Two Cities. Along with other virtues which make him extraordinary, Clotelle's lover is a Jerome. This is a most uncommon name in the South before the Civil War. Of the 28,287 listed names of males, black and white, slave and free, Jerome is found only three times.³¹

A reading of Brown's Narrative and his novel Clotelle clearly points to the similarities between Randall, a slave Brown knew, and the fictional Jerome. Randall was "a man about six feet high, and well proportioned, and known as a man of great strength and power...He had been on the plantation since my earliest recollection, and I had never known of his being flogged. No thanks were due to the master or overseer for this. I have often heard him declare that no white man should never whip him - that he would die first."³² Later on in the Narrative Randall is mercilessly whipped and beaten, a ball and chain permanently attached to his leg, and he is ultimately cowed into abject passivity. He was made an object to other slaves, and his name was not uncommon among slaves.³³

In the novel Jerome finds himself in jail, about to be hanged for striking his master, because he too refused to be

Heller 12

flogged. "I will serve you, Master Wilson, I will labor for you day and night, if you demand it, but I will not be whipped."³⁴

It is the heroism of Clotelle, if not the inspiration of a Charles Dickens' plot, which saves Jerome. His fate is far different from Randall's. But that is not the only difference. Jerome is strong and proud, as was Randall, but in addition Jerome is highly intelligent, articulate, handsome, and deep black, with pure African blood coursing through his veins. From near hanging, Jerome goes on to England and great successes and final reunion with Clotelle. Jerome becomes an aristocrat of taste, behavior, sensibility his name befits him. Randall could only tear at his chains till he was broken; Jerome escapes to a higher plane.³⁵ Of great interest is Brown's perception of good concerning the black male. He must be pure African, in sharp contrast to his perceptions of the female.

There are other transformations from the Narrative to Clotelle. Brown tells of a slave girl forced into concubinage under the threat of being sold to a rice plantation. Later the woman and her children were separated and sold, despite the master's promises. Her name was Cynthia, "a quadroon, and one of the most beautiful women I ever saw. She...bore an irreproachable character of virtue and propriety of conduct."³⁶

Heller 13

This pattern of sexual exploitation, common in slave America, is implicit in the destinies of Agnes, Isabella and Clotelle. However, Brown softens its cruelty by having Isabella love her owner and enabling Clotelle to escape the sexual advances made toward her.

Cynthia becomes Isabella in Brown's fiction. Whatever Isabella's feelings of love for her owner, she too is betrayed and finds herself separated from her daughter and sold. Cynthia's fate most likely included continued sexual exploitation or cruel labor on a plantation. Isabella, on the other hand, lives heroically and dies faithful to her daughter and white lover. Cynthia has been romanticized into Isabella, and the names reinforce this notion.

Cynthia's oppressor, a slave-driver, or as the slaves themselves said, a soul-driver, was Mr. Walker, a most common white surname in the South of the 1800-1860 period.³⁷ The commonness of his name merely hints at the commonness, the ugliness of his behavior and attitudes. In Brown's fiction Walker, the soul-driver, becomes Dick Jennings; it is a surname not among the collected lists of the period.³⁸

Walker is common enough, but potentially respectable; Dick Jennings is violent, corrupt, insensitive. His name is emblematic of the viciousness with which he carries on his vicious business, the buying and selling of human beings. The other half of Mr.

Heller 14

Walker - the half which fathers Cynthia's children and then sells them all into the deep South - this side of Walker becomes in the novel Henry Linwood, a name similar to Dick Jennings only in that it too is not found among the collected lists of names of the period. Henry Linwood hints at a French urbanity, civility and sophistication. Linwood rings true. But it is tainted by weakness. Would you trust your future to a Henry?³⁹ Even Henry Kissinger?

The non-descript Mrs. Young of the Narrative is transformed into the sadistic Mrs. Miller in the novel, and the apologist for slavery, the Reverend Sloane in the Narrative, takes on the character of a cruel exploiter and hypocrite, the Reverend Wilson of the novel. Here again the names echo the degree of insensitivity of the characters. Miller is heavier, more phlegmatic, more grinding, if you'll excuse the pun, than the lighthearted, open, Young. And surely Sloane is a more cosmopolitan, advanced, effete if you will, Vicar, than the bread and butter, unimaginative and grasping, Wilson.

I think it clear that Brown, in his fiction, chose names that tend to make his villains a bit more evil and his heroes more elegant and admirable; to invest in personal names the function of reinforcing his perceptions of good and evil, especially in terms of slave status, and to use names of ironic

Heller 15

editorializing. The first steamer taking Mr. Walker's slaves to the New Orleans market is the Patriot; another steamer with a similar cargo is called the Washington. Isabella is instrumental in a slave's escape, when she arranges for their passage north on a steamer called the Heroine. Clotelle, part of another slave-drove, is carried deeper into slavery on the steamer, Columbia.

It would be doing William Wells Brown an injustice were we not to note, in closing, that his anti-slavery concerns did not blind him to other forms of servitude. On his way to freedom, Brown stopped at a house to ask for food. A couple stood in the doorway. "I walked up to the door, but the husband remained in the passage, as if unwilling to let me enter. She asked him two or three times to get out of the way, and let me in. But as he did not move, she pushed him on one side, bidding me walk in! I was never before so glad to see a woman push a man aside! Ever since that act, I have been in favor of women's rights."⁴⁰

Murray Heller

North Country Community College

NOTES

¹William Wells Brown, The Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive Slave, intro. by Larry Gara (London, Addison - Wesley Publishing Company, 1969). Biographical notes taken from Mr. Gara's introduction, p.x. Hereafter referred to as the Narrative.

²See, for example, the introductory remarks in Gilbert Osofsky's Puttin' On Ole Massa: The Slave Narratives of Henry Bibb, William Wells Brown, and Solomon Northrup (New York, Harper, 1969).

³Ronald T. Takaki, Violence in the Black Imagination (New York, Capricorn, 1972), pp. 11-12.

⁴Robert A. Bone, The Negro Novel in America, Rev. ed., (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1965), p. 30.

⁵Takaki, p. 228.

⁶Ibid., p. 223.

⁷Although many narratives employ fictitious names to protect those who helped slaves escape and, therefore, committed illegal acts, Brown managed his escape alone; thus we can assume he used "real" names.

⁸Brown, Narrative, p. 1. The names are listed alphabetically and by sex rather than in order of birth.

⁹Murray Heller, ed., Black Names in America: Origin and Meaning (Boston, G.K. Hall and Co., 1975), pp. 21-23.

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 25-26.

¹¹Ibid., pp. 28-29.

¹²Ibid., pp. 30-31.

¹³Ibid., male slave frequency list. 7700 names, 1800-1864, pp. 70-79.

¹⁴Ibid., male free frequency list. 8668 names, 1800-1864, pp. 97-98.

¹⁵Ibid., female slave and free frequency lists, 1800-1864, pp. 91-92; p. 99.

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 112-114.

¹⁷Brown, Narrative, p. 26.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 43.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid., p. 46.

²¹Ibid., p. 47.

²²Brown, Clotelle, p. 233.

²³Heller, p. 7

²⁴Ibid., p. 36

²⁵Ibid., p. 40.

²⁶Brown, Clotelle, p. 233.

²⁷Isabella was a very popular name in England; from the Latin, Elisabeth. History of Christian Names, Charlotte M. Yonge (London, MacMillan and Co., 1884), pp. 33-35. Singing game in the Cotswolds in the nineteenth century: "Isabella, Isabella, Isabella, Farewell": The Folklore of the Cotswolds, Katharine M. Briggs (New Jersey Rowman and Littlefield, 1974), p. 51; Peacham, Compl. Gent., 1661, p. 156: "Isabella colour signifieth Beauty"; O.E.D. (Oxford, Oxford U. Press, 1933), Vol. V., p. 499.

²⁸Heller, p. 499.

²⁹Brown, Clotelle, p. 270.

³⁰Agnes and Aggie were very popular in England; from the Greek and Latin, saved or pure, and lamb. "In Durham, there is a curious custom of calling any female of weak intellect, 'a silly Agnes'." (The saintly fool?). Yonge, pp. 118-119; Clotelle: Yonge, p. 404.

³¹Heller, pp. 74; 96; 112.

³²Brown, Narrative, pp. 2-3.

³³Heller, Randall appears 69th in popularity among male

slaves, 1800-1860, p. 79. Randall, from prefix Rand; Rondolfr,
or House Wolf: Yonge, p. 421.

³⁴Brown, Clotelle, p. 290.

³⁵Jerome. From Greek, hieros; sacred, the Priest. Yonge, p. 89.

³⁶Brown, Narrative, p. 18.

³⁷Heller, p. 121. Walter is 13th in popularity.

³⁸Heller, pp. 74; 96; 112.

³⁹It must be noted that the identification function of these names rests less with their traditional meanings as lexical items than with their onomastical properties. That is, their traditional meanings have probably been lost to contemporary users and therefore their values are more likely to be onomastic rather than lexical. It is the opaque rather than the transparent which is operative.

⁴⁰Brown, Narrative, pp. 47-48.