Balzac's Onomastic Devices in "La Cousine Bette"

Jesse Levitt

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

Repository Citation

Levitt, Jesse (1978) "Balzac's Onomastic Devices in "La Cousine Bette"", Literary Onomastics Studies: Vol. 5 , Article 15.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/los/vol5/iss1/15
La Cousine Bette, one of Balzac's last novels, published in 1846, is, in the words of a recent critic, "riddled with infection and crumbling with decay," a novel in which "all that is human is thoroughly debased," "where men have ceased to be men" and "have contaminated each other with the disease of unchecked passion." Balzac himself has described it as "un roman terrible"—terrifying novel. Its two antiheroes are Baron Hector Hulot and his wife's cousin, Lisbeth Fischer, known as "La Cousine Bette," Hulot, a hero of the Napoleonic wars, senior officer controlling the army commissariat, councillor of State, grand officer of the Legion of Honor, married a peasant from Lorraine, Adeline Fischer, a deeply pious and devoted woman who remained loyal to her philandering husband to her very last breath. After twelve years of fidelity, the baron embarked on a series of disastrous amorous adventures that were to culminate in the near financial ruin of the family,
the death of his older brother Marshal Hulot, and the suicide of his wife's uncle Johann Fischer. Still unsatiated, Hulot penetrates the lower depths of Paris society, taking on adolescent working-class mistresses, and when he is finally found and brought back to the family by Adeline, he has one final affair at the age of nearly eighty with his ugly and vulgar cook, Agathe Piquetard, whom he marries after the death of Adeline.

Cousine Bette, Adeline's poor relation, is an old maid bitterly envious of Adeline and her family. Having developed a platonic, maternal affection for an exiled Polish artist, Count Wençeslas Steinbock, whom she saves from suicide and whose life she wishes to dominate, her resentment of the Hulot family turns to animal rage when Hulot's daughter, Hortense, becomes engaged to and marries Steinbock. Thenceforth she conspires in every conceivable way to bring about the ruin of Adeline and the whole family.

Such are the basic data of the novel. As regards onomastics, Balzac himself attributed great importance to a basic harmony between his characters and their names. In reference to one of his heroes, Z. Marcas, he writes: "There is a certain harmony between the person and the name... Between the facts of the lives and the names of men, there are secret and unexplainable agreements, or obvious disagreements that are surprising; often, distant but effective correlations
have been revealed."³

One of the main instruments of Bette's vengeance is Valérie Marneffe, described by Balzac as a "Machiavelli in skirts," and a "frightful courtesan" as gracious as a siren,"⁴ who conspires with her husband Marneffe, "a master pimp" rendered "unfit for passion,"⁵ to entice Hulot into a trap. At the desired moment, the police enter to find the baron in bed adulterously with a married woman—a punishable offense according to the laws of the time. To avoid charges, Hulot is forced to promote Marneffe to the rank of chief clerk.

This incident appears to be based on a well known scandal involving Victor Hugo. On July 5, 1845, Hugo was discovered by the police in bed with Léonie Biard, the wife of an artist, Auguste Biard, the wife of an artist, Auguste Biard. The outraged husband was intent on pressing charges, but was eventually dissuaded by a donation from the royal treasury.⁶ Balzac's attitude toward Hugo was highly ambivalent. On the one hand he was fascinated by Hugo's genius, glory, and political dignity. Hugo himself was very helpful to Balzac whom he admired. When Balzac became a candidate, unsuccessfully, for the French Academy only Hugo and Alfred de Vigny cast their votes for him.⁷ In a funeral eulogy of Balzac, Hugo proclaimed him "one of the first among the greatest, one of the highest among
among the best." 

While Balzac admired Hugo the writer, he was openly contemptuous of Hugo's philandering. In one of his letters to his mistress, later his wife, Mme Hanska, he writes of Hugo who "having married for love, having pretty children, is in the arms of an infamous courtesan." Elsewhere, he writes that Hugo "has lost many of his qualities and much of his strength and worth through the life he has led. He has loved a great deal." 

The name Hector Hulot bears a strong resemblance to Victor Hugo. The given names are both classical, with assonance. Hulot differs from Hugo by only a single consonant. The maiden name of Hulot's wife, Adeline Fischer, is very close to that of Hugo's wife, Adele Foucher. Adeline, furthermore, has an air of dignity and grandeur that contemporaries attributed to Mme. Hugo. Hulot was faithful to his wife twelve years—exactly the time that elapsed between Hugo's marriage and his first infidelity. Hulot's misadventure, in which he is discovered by the police, takes place at the end of June—almost the same time of the year as Hugo's—and at the same hour of the day, at 5:00 a.m. Hugo's father was a general, while Hulot's brother is a marshal. Hulot's first mistress, Josépha Mirah, is an actress, like Hugo's mistress, Juliette Drouet.

There seems little doubt that Balzac's names are coined on the names
of persons associated with Hugo, and that many of the details are parallel to events in Hugo’s life.

There are differences too. Hugo was a Peer of France, while Hulot is only a councillor and a stranger to literature. Hugo is in conspirancy with her husband and finds Hulot ridiculous, while Leónie Biard sincerely loved Hugo and continued to see him in later years. Balzac’s admiration for Hugo seems to be reflected in the fact that Hulot’s industrious and virtuous son, who contrasts so sharply with his licentious and irresponsible father, is named Victorin. In 1846, the date of the publication of La Cousine Bette, Balzac was expecting a son by Mrs. Hanska, whom he decided to name in advance Victor-Honore, i.e., Hugo’s name plus his own. This was to be the first and last name of the child.

Typical of Balzac is his assimilation of humanity with the animal kingdom. In La Cousine Bette, Hulot sounds like a masculine form of hulotte, wood owl. The owl, in folklore, often appears as a stupid, aggressive bird of ill omen, and Hulot is certainly very foolish and persistent in his relations with his mistresses, bringing down catastrophe on his whole family. Cousin Bette says about Steinbock: He told me that Steinbock meant in German animal of
The German noun *Bock*, "buck, ram, he-goat," is also used colloquially for a depraved person, a sexually aggressive man. Steinbock, while not precisely aggressive in his affair with Valérie, is morally weak and pleasure-loving; he even comes to regret his marriage with Hortense.

Valérie Marneffe, who wants to pose for a statuette of Delilah, is described as "the serpent changed into a woman." Mme de Sainte-Estève, the instrument of Victorin's vengeance against Valérie, also goes by the name of Nourrisson, "nursling, suckling"—obviously an ironic name; she is described as having eyes "with the bloody cupidity of tigers"; her nose reminds one of "the beak of the worst birds of prey." "Whoever might have seen this woman would have thought that all painters had failed in portraying the fact of Mephistopheles." Even when the characteristics of the animal do not entirely match those of the human being, the use of animal allusions heightens the impression of brutality and the atmosphere of the jungle.

Above all, the viciousness of the old maid Cousin Bette is strikingly brought out through the use of animal images. The name Bette itself is a homonym of the word *bête*, meaning "animal." When she discovers that Steinbock is about to marry her niece, her rage knows no bounds. "Her black and penetrating eyes had the fixity
of a tiger's. Her face resembled that which we attribute to a pythoness." Elsewhere she is described as having a long and "simian" face. "Envy remains hidden in the depths of her heart like a plague germ that can break out and ravage a city, if one opens the fatal package of wool in which it is contained." Bette herself, says one critic, "stands at the center of this spider's web, imposing her animal-demonic presence upon the other characters and then feeding on their corruption...The sheer animal force of her hatred gives a clear portent of her destructive potentiality." 

Another critic considers Bette "a résumé of all animal instincts, at the same time parasitical, wild as a goat (she is nicknamed the goat) and as cruel as a lioness. She says about herself: 'After starting my life as a real famished goat, I am finishing it as a lioness'". There may, however, be a pun in this use of the word "lionne," "lioness," which in mid-nineteenth-century usage could mean an elegant woman.

Etymology also seems to play a role in Balzac's onomastics. Adeline, Hulot's wife, gives a continuous impression of dignity, worth, and nobility. The name Adeline is a diminutive of Adèle, derived from Old High German adal (Modern German Adel), meaning "nobility." Hulot's licentious associate and rival for the
affections of Valérie is Célestin Crevel, suggesting the verb crever, "to burst." Balzac hints broadly at the origin of Crevel's name as he describes this self-satisfied and immensely wealthy retired grocer, with his pompous airs, dressed in a National Guard uniform. When he rang Hulot's bell, "the bourgeois Captain made great efforts to push his coat back in place, since his coat had been pulled up both in front and behind by a pear-shaped belly."

The name, Balzac notes, was "admirably appropriate to the appearance of the man who bore it." 24

Valérie's name is ultimately derived from the Latin verb valere, "to be strong," 25 and Valérie is certainly very strong minded in her pursuit of evil. The family name, Marneffe, a relatively rare name, has a certain assonance with that of Molière's infamous hypocrite, Tartuffe. Like Tartuffe, Valérie is a vicious parasite who destroys her naive and trusting benefactor. Like Tartuffe, she can play the comedy of religiosity when she tries to dissuade her lover Crevel from giving a large sum of money to the pious Adeline. Thus she calls upon God to gather up his lost sheep, and on the Virgin to lead her from "evil paths," and she will, like Mary Magdalen "renounce the deceptive joys, the false glitter of the world." Having reduced Crevel to tears, she bursts out laughing and tells him to choose
between her and the virtuous Adeline as a mistress.  

Mme. Marneffe presents some obvious similarities with Molière's coquette Célimène in *Le Misanthrope*, and Steinbeck at one point refers to her as Célimène.  

Balzac's admiration for Molière was well known, and at one point in the novel, he refers to Crevel who "looked at Mme. Hulot the way Tartuffe looked at Elmèire."  

Henri Montes de Montejanos, a hot tempered Brazilian nobleman and Valière's only true love, is described by Balzac as an Othello and as a "magnificent example of the Portuguese race in Brazil."  

Montes, who becomes convinced of Valière's infidelity as a result of a complicated maneuver undertaken by Victorin, with assistance from Mme. de Sainte Estève, to rid the Hulot family of Valière's influence, infects Valière and her new husband Crevel with the germs of a fatal disease. "I will be the instrument of divine anger," he proclaims, and Hortense sees "the hand of God," who has smitten the evil Valérie.  

The name Montes means "mountains" and suggests Henri's high-minded notions of fidelity, as well as God on high wreaking vengeance on his enemies.  

The name of Hulot's son, Victorin, a diminutive of Victor, suggests Victor Hugo. Etymologically, the name means "winner" or "conqueror," and Victorin, the virtuous, hard-working son of a reprobate, has won the esteem of judges and counselors by his wisdom
and "severe probity." Yet the victory of virtue is short-lived, since Victorin is forced to use the diabolical Mme. de Sainte Estève to rid the family of Valérie.

Hortense, Adeline's daughter, is a young woman "of strong imperious sensuality," a positive and attractive girl who faces with dignity the distressing situation, in which Bette's machinations put her. Her name is ultimately derived from the Latin hortens, "urging, pressing, exhorting," but all her exhortations to her husband and her father against the evil influences of Valérie are futile.

Finally, the name of the child prostitute, Atala Judici, is an obvious mockery of Chateaubriand's romantic American Indian child heroine in his novel Atala. Chateaubriand's heroine had been promised to the Virgin by her mother, but falls in love with Chactas. In order to remain faithful to her mother's wishes, she naively commits suicide, still remaining a virgin. Balzac's chapter heading—"the new Atala, as wild as the other and not so Catholic"—clearly shows his satirical intention. Balzac is openly contemptuous of romantic love—"that new art of love" which hypocritically "devotes an enormous amount of evangelical words for the work of the devil." The child's family name, Judici, is the Latin word for "judges," or perhaps Italian (giudici)—a name that
also seems ironic.

Thus the role of onomastics is significant in the development of Balzac's themes and is of considerable importance for an understanding of his works.
NOTES


2 Honoré de Balzac, La Cousine Bette, (Paris, Gallimard, 1972), Introduction by Pierre Barberis, p. II.


5 Affron, p. 70.


8 Maurois, p. 599.

9 Hunt, p. 382; Maurois, p. 231.

10 Barrere, pp. 106-107.

11 Barrere, pp. 108-111.

12 Josephson, p. 258; Maurois, p. 324.

13 Balzac, Bette, Introduction, pp. XV-XVI.

14 Balzac, Bette, p. 70.

15 Balzac, Bette, p. 259.
16 Balzac, Bette, pp. 396-397.


18 Balzac, Bette, p. 131.

19 Balzac, Bette, p. 59.

20 Balzac, Bette, p. 61.

21 Affron, p. 69.

22 Bijaoui-Baron, pp. 567-568.

23 American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1970) under Adeline and Adela

24 Balzac, Bette, pp. 32-33.


27 Balzac, Bette, p. 254.

28 Balzac, Bette, pp. 33-34.

29 Bijaoui-Baron, p. 566.

30 Balzac, Bette, p. 437.

31 Balzac, Bette, p. 444.


33 Prendergast, p. 322.

34 Hunt, p. 383.

35 Balzac, Bette, p. 456.

36 Balzac, Bette, pp. 124-125.