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NICKNAMES IN THE NOVELS OF GEORGE ELIOT

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The prevalent use of nicknames by George Eliot forms an argument by itself for the power of the fictional name as a method of characterization. Feeling that she has not exhausted the possibilities of identification inherent in a name by assigning a telling official name to a character, she renames characters through her narrators and especially through other characters.

The purposes of fictional nicknames are manifold. George Eliot uses nicknames to suggest those fundamental characteristics most aptly conveyed by the name, to shed additional light on the character of the individual in the story who assigns the name, to reveal multiple perspectives of the same character, and to suggest self-image in cases in which the character renames him/herself.

Most significant in The Mill on the Floss are the nicknames attached to Maggie. Tom consciously adopts a set of nicknames as a system of modifying his sister's behavior through positive and negative (mostly negative) reinforcement: "Tom was only thirteen, and had no decided view in grammar and arithmetic ..., but he was particularly clear and positive on one point--namely that he would punish everybody who deserved it" (1, 5). Tom, or the "young sultan" as the narrator calls him (1, 10), is the moral center of the world of his consciousness and, as such, he doles out rewards or punishments as they are merited.
His choice of epithets, in fact, carefully pinpoints Maggie's "flaws" in his mind and the mind of community. Maggie's inability to cultivate the much-coveted "well-balanced mind" of a young woman who never lets her emotions or her love of beauty unsettle her into doing anything rash comes under Tom's fire even in their early childhood. Tom calls Maggie a "greedy" (i, 6) when her pleasure in the day and her absorption in the sensuous experience of eating a jam donut blind her to the dictate of good manners that she share it with her brother. Entire self-immolation Maggie would be quite capable of, but not the modest possession of her delights within strictly guarded boundaries. Closely related to the indulgence of her sensuousness is Maggie's occasional indulgence in bad temper. Frustrations in the fulfillment of her desire for beauty continually require venting in spats of ill-humor. Tom's timely epithet, "spitfire" (i, 7), reflects his and his community's disapproval of such ill-regulated temperament. A further source of anxiety, especially to her parents, is Maggie's "cuteness" which Tom punishes with the name "Miss Wisdom" (ii, 1).

Any adequate system of punishments, however, must have its corresponding rewards. Maggie is Tom's "Magsie" when she has been behaving well for long enough to merit his affection and approval. It is significant that in denouncing and, in effect, disowning Maggie after she has returned from the fateful boat trip with Stephen, Tom applies no name to his sister at all. She has, in his opinion, finally placed herself outside the sphere of salutary influence. His efforts at modifying her behavior have met with no apparent
success and a continuation of them would indicate a sense of responsibility for his sister which he has formally resigned. After she rescues him in the midst of the flood, however, he addresses her once more as Magsie. It is, in fact, almost the last word he utters.

In Eliot's later novels, an artistic character (usually a wit) undertakes a large part of the nicknaming. Stephen Guest is the nicknaming artist in The Mill on the Floss. His first appearance precipitates the introduction of several nicknames almost at once. He refers to himself and Lucy as "Adam and Eve unfallen, in paradise" as opposed to Phillip whom he calls "the fallen Adam with a wounded temper" (vi, 1). Whether the result of sub-conscious premonitions or simply accidental, these epithets correspond closely to the destinies of the characters in question. Lucy acknowledges in herself the quality of an unfallen Eve when she says: "I've never been tried in that way ... I've always been so happy. I don't know whether I could bear much trouble; I never had any but poor mamma's death" (vi, 2). Stephen's passion for Maggie is a fall from this happiness, from Stephen's "paradise." It is, for Stephen, a fall from rectitude and propriety. The fallen Adam and Eve are redeemed eventually through the deaths of Tom and Maggie, the novel's finale suggesting their reunion. Phillip is a type of fallen Adam in his physical deformity, one which the narrator is careful to point out is not congenital, but the result of an accident after birth, presumably involving human carelessness, just as the fall of Adam was not a defect in the Garden of Eden, but a result of his failure to uphold his responsibility.
Phillip has also lost forever the Edenic bliss that he knew with Maggie before meeting her and before he even knows who he is talking about. The subject of Phillip comes up, and he says, "'I think he must be love-sick for some unknown lady--some exalted Beatrice whom he met abroad.'" (vi, 1). The irony, of course, is that Maggie becomes Stephen's Beatrice, though another ironic twist is that she fails to make him share her vision of fidelity to memory and promises as the noblest end of human endeavor. Stephen's Beatrice leads him, not into the divine reaches, but into temptation. Nevertheless, Beatrice plays a salutary role in Stephen's life, in requiring of the "half-sarcastic," self-confident young lover a previously unknown humility and capacity for adoration. Beatrice cannot be patronized and cajolled as Lucy can. Maggie's beatific ministry to Phillip is more effective, as evidenced by his last letter to her (vii, 3):

"You have been to my affections what light, what colour is to my eyes--what music is to the inward ear; you have raised a dim unrest into a vivid consciousness . . . I think nothing but such complete and intense love could have initiated me into that enlarged life which grows and grows by appropriating the life of others: for before, I was always dragged back from it by ever-present painful self-consciousness."

Stephen fulfills his destiny as Hercules, the nickname given him by the narrator (vi, 1), in his defiance of norms and his attempt to carry Maggie away by sheer strength of will. As Hercules is admired despite his placement of himself above ordinary morality in killing his friend, Iphitus, so some of Stephen's remonstrances to Maggie, despite their lawlessness, have a definite appeal to sense and emotion:

"We have proved that it was impossible to keep our resolutions."
We have proved that the feeling which draws us towards each other is too strong to be overcome: that natural law surmounts every other... It is too late to say what we might have done or what we ought to have done. Admitting the very worst view of what has been done, it is a fact we must act on now; our position is altered; the right course is no longer what it was before. We must accept our own actions, and start afresh from them" (vi, 14).

Of Esther Lyon the narrator of *Felix Holt* writes, "That changing face was the perfect symbol of her mixed, susceptible nature, in which battle was inevitable, and the side of victory uncertain" (ii, 61).

The battleground for Esther's soul is reflected in various nicknames applied to her throughout her life. Her mother takes no responsibility for giving her a name, but refers to her as "la petite," signifying entire uncertainty as to the future quality of Esther's fiber.

"La petite" is a tabula rasa indicating no definite inclinations. At school, Esther's friends call her Calypso. Like Calypso, she is empowered to bestow a kind of immortality on Harold; in marrying her, he could secure his claim to the perpetuity of the Transome estate. The use of the name is ironic, however, because, in *Felix Holt*, the Ulysses/Calypso relationship is reversed. Harold pursues his Calypso, longing for the immortality that Ulysses rejects. Felix, at the outset of their acquaintance, calls Esther a peacock, condemning her love of display and her addiction to superficial articles of gentility (i, 5). Likewise, the narrator calls her Queen Esther, not as a compliment, but to point to the subjection in which Esther holds her guardian (i, 6). But Esther does not retain an ironic relationship to her names. As Felicia Bonaparte writes, George Eliot constantly presents us with a
chaotic and complex vision of man as a mass of interminably changing attributes. Individual man is in a constant state of evolution, and it is no longer reasonable to ask of any character, Who is he? as though there were a 'he' who, although involved in interactions in time, place and circumstance, yet retained a persistent identity . . . character, in short, is fluid; it never is, it is always becoming.¹

Esther is in the process of becoming the representative of the name she bears. Robin Sheets writes that after speaking on behalf of Felix at the trial,

She is no longer the vain and aspiring Queen Esther of chapter five. Instead, she has developed the independence and outspoken courage that Mr. Lyon must have hoped for when he selected her name. In the Old Testament, Esther defies laws that are written by men and invoked against rebellious wives and culturally alien Jews. She succeeds—and saves her own life—by persuading King Ahasuerus to reverse the death decree issued against Mordecai and his people. Esther Lyon also uses her strong personal presence to interrupt a judicial process administered by men and to rescue an innocent person . . . ²

Esther also improvises on the role of Calypso. Mrs. Transome's calling her "my fairy" indicates a transformation of Calypso into a benevolent influence. In Felix Holt, immortality is bestowed at no charge. Esther neither marries Harold, nor makes any claim on the Transome estate. She also bestows an immortality on Felix, who had consciously determined to remain unwed and childless.

Another nickname in Felix Holt that deserves attention is "Bite," little Harry's unloving name for his grandmother. Sheets writes: "Mrs. Transome's grandson astutely perceives the anger that her polite conversation is meant to conceal when he refuses to call her 'Gamma' and renames her 'Bite.'"³ This ignores the fact that little Harry has taken to biting his grandmother. "Site"
suggests the role of victim that Mrs. Transome, for all her magnificence and unwillingness, has been reduced to. The real material bite that little Harry frequently gives her is but a reflection of the greater wounds she receives from her son and from Jermyn, who has figuratively nibbled away a large portion of her estate over the years. Little Harry's nickname reveals an unconscious recognition that his grandmother is someone to "be had."

Nicknames in Middlemarch are also interesting in the context of the relationships they serve to illuminate. The first chapter introduces Dorothea and Celia or, as they call one another, "Dodo" and "Kitty," names that point, to a certain degree, to an inability to comprehend each other. "Kitty" suggests an embryonic state, full of the potential for development. Dorothea, in the choice of this diminutive, shows a perhaps not fully realized hope that Celia's occasionally grating shallowness is the product of youth, that is, something to outgrow. Dorothea has yet, at the beginning of the novel, to realize, as David Copperfield finally had to admit concerning Dora, that Celia's mind is already formed. The name Kitty, however, also shows that Dorothea has some realistic grasp of Celia's limitations. After all, a mature kitten can never be more than a cat. A cross reference to the comparison of Lucy to Maggie in The Mill on the Floss may prove useful here:

Certainly the contrast between the cousins was conspicuous, and to superficial eyes was very much to the disadvantage of Maggie, though a connoisseur might have seen "points" in her which had a higher promise for maturity than Lucy's natty completeness: It was like the contrast between a rough, dark, overgrown puppy and
a white kitten (1, 7).

Dorothea admits, unconsciously, this limitation in Celia when she applies the following faint praise: "'She is a great pet and never was naughty in her life'" (11, 22).

Celia's choice of nickname reflects, in perhaps a more ungrainy manner, the "tragic failure" of Theresas who "found for themselves no epic life wherein there was a constant unfolding of far-resonant action" (prelude). Like the flightless dodo bird, Dorothea never experiences the full efficacy latent in her wings, but sinks "unvept into oblivion" (prelude). And Celia's epithet suggests, perhaps unwittingly, an attitude that finds Dorothea's Theresa qualities as much an anachronism in the nineteenth century as the long-extinct dodo would be.

Whether Dorothea's life can ultimately be construed as a failure is a matter of critical controversy (depending, largely, on whether one considers Will Ladislaw a prize), but by Celia's estimate, which values surface attractiveness, propriety, and self-possession above all else, Dorothea never flies.

The tragedy of Dorothea's marriage to Casaubon is that she mistakenly sees in him the alleviation to her flightlessness. A mature man and a scholar, he must, she thinks, be able to soar aloft vistas that she can only imagine with a feeble flutter. Casaubon, however, is just as, if not more, hampered from flight, not by the extenuating disadvantages of youth and the sloppy education deemed appropriate for a young woman, but by his immense egoism: "his soul
was sensitive without being enthusiastic: it was too languid to thrill out of self-consciousness into passionate delight; it went on fluttering in the swampy ground where it was hatched, thinking of its wings and never flying" (ii, 29).

Will Ladislaw, on the other hand, calls himself "Pegasus" (i, 9). By contrast with birds equipped for flight but earthbound, he belongs to the class of earthbound beings but is preternaturally capable of flight. It is with this unlikely companion, and not with the scholarly Casaubon, that Dorothea takes wing. If her full tragedy can be understood (as I understand it) to be mitigated, then it must be through her marriage to Will, through the salutary reforms that he effects with her assistance and inspiration. Without Casaubon's money, Dorothea's ardour for good works, or the "good" family of either, and with a definite disposition for dabbling and restless-ness, Will looks like the best candidate for some sort of least-likely-to-succeed award, at least throughout most of the novel. Yet it is he who is returned to Parliament and who provides for Dorothea the needed "life filled . . . with a beneficent activity."

If Dorothea is Dodo, she is also Diana, as the narrator calls her in depicting Will's reverent devotion (v, 43). This reflects the curiously asexual, albeit highly romantic, nature of their relationship throughout most of the novel. The narrator frequently characterizes them as children. Only at the end of the story does the recognition of a mutual passion surface. Until then they are unconsciously involved in the childlike process of discovery; Will must
discover that he is not content to idolize only, Dorothea that her
kinder feeling for Will is, in reality, a symptom of the love that
has so far eluded her in her relationships with men.

By contrast, Casaubon "always said 'my love' when his manner was
the coldest" (11, 28). Will regards the woman for whom he holds the
one passion of his life as a goddess and, at that, as Diana whose
likeness in a woman can hardly be said to portend warm conjugal re-
lations. Casaubon reverses the formula, using the term of deepest
endearment toward one whom, at the best of times, his passion ran no
wilder than a "shallow rill."

Casaubon's lack of vitality is epitomized by Naumann's nickname
for him, "Geistlicher" (11, 19). Again, an artist serves an impor-
tent function in characterization of other characters. Naumann's
portrait of Casaubon as Thomas Aquinas is a metaphor for the function
of nicknaming and name-calling. Though the painting purports to have
a historical subject, we see the model who sat for it more clearly
than ever before. Mrs. Cadwallader who formerly referred to Casaubon
as "our Lowick Cicero" (1, 6) transforms the allusion into a new
nickname on the Casaubons' return from their honeymoon. Martin
Svaglic writes,

it is hard to avoid the feeling that George Eliot is offering a
comment on the worthlessness of scholarly Christianity by coup-
ing with his (Casaubon's) the name of the saint whom the Age of
Enlightenment had set down as the unassailable proof of schol-
astic folly: the butt of the jokes of Laurence Sterne and even of
Charles Lamb.5

The nicknames bandied between Rosamund and Lydgate are a good
index to the course of their relationship or, in other words, to the systematic destruction of Lydgate. Lydgate is pathetically prophetic when he addresses Rosamond as "Mademoiselle de Montmorenci" during their courtship (iii, 31), little knowing that Rosamond is going to command their marriage, command, in fact, all his professional genius as Anne Montmorency commanded his forces in France. Rosamond is not even aware of the full incisiveness of her wit in calling Lydgate "Doctor Grave-Face" after their discussion of Vesalius' body-snatching (v, 45), the gist of which is that while Lydgate sees in Vesalius the emblem of the striving researcher who must defy public opinion to advance public good, Rosamond feels unshakably that body-snatching could never consist with good lace-tablecloths and popularity in Middlemarch. Rosamond is not only playing with the alternate meanings, "burial place" and "serious," of the word grave; she is quite emphatically addressing a dead man, dead, for all practical purposes, to what he might have achieved, by virtue of debt and of marriage to the relentless Rosamond. Once they are married, Lydgate, like Rosamond's other familiars, Fred and Mary, calls his wife "Rosy," a name used by those best acquainted with that character's faults. The term is particularly ironic in Lydgate's mouth for the contrast it suggests with his dim and dismal future. Lydgate appears only once to have indulged himself in calling Rosamund by a name that starkly reflects their relationship--"basil plant" (finale). Rosamond flourishes on Lydgate's thwarted dreams, which seem to have been linked to his very life force (he dies at the relatively early age of
fifty), just as the basil plant flourishes on the dead man's skull, blithely unconscious of the crime its source of nourishment represents.

The association of Gwendolen Harleth, at the beginning of Daniel Deronda, with morally ambivalent immortals from ancient mythology reflects, as in the case of Esther Lyon, what Barbara Hardy would perhaps call her "possibilities." These possibilities are explicitly outlined in the first sentences: "What was the secret of form or expression which gave the dynamic quality to her glance? Was the good or the evil genius dominant in those beams?" (i, i). Daniel Deronda is much less a love story than Adam Bede, Felix Holt, or Middlemarch, despite a sustained magnetism between the two central characters, for the reason that it is occupied with the ethical destinies of those characters. The narrator begins the set of mythological associations, which are connected by Gwendolen's custom of wearing green, by calling her a "nerieid," an appropriate name given the often inflated conception that Gwendolen and even others often entertain of her. Like a nereid, she is charming, beautiful and clever, but she is not Hera or Athena or even, as Klesmer is later at pains to point out, a muse. Others, however, are immune to this realism with respect to Gwendolen and therefore exaggerate her positive or negative qualities, usually according to their own virtues or faults. An unnamed hissing dowager, for instance, calls her a serpent. Thus name-calling becomes, in addition to a partial revelation of the truth, a form of projection. Along these lines, Sir Hugo's insistance on calling Gwendolen "Diana" is, in part, perceptive. Part of Gwendolen's fierce longing for
autonomy is a resistance to "being made love to" as she puts it to Rex.

At the same time, Sir Hugo's use of "Diana" is a large hint that he is, despite suspicious appearances, not another Grandcourt. Deronda is partly sensitive to Sir Hugo's real innocence and never reproaches him even in his heart. Far from a young rake, Sir Hugo turns out to be capable of the most undemanding love characterizing any man in Eliot's novels. Sir Hugo, in fact, in part projects his own innocence of sexual abuses on Gwendolen in his choice of nickname. Eliot reveals an understanding of the phenomenon of projection when she writes (about Gwendolen): "She was in that state of unconscious reliance and expectation which is a common experience with us when we are pre-occupied with our own trouble or our own purposes. We diffuse our feeling over others, and count on their acting from our motives" (viii, 65).

Gwendolen's possibilities are outlined in numerous other names. The narrator playfully calls her a witch (1, 9). And, indeed, Gwendolen's beauty and appeal coupled with something of a cold heart do portend a bewitchment of a least one if not several men. No such enchantment, however, occurs unless it is in the case of Rex, with whom Eliot leaves us some hope at the end that he will yet win the now broken and contrite Gwendolen. Deronda is always able to maintain a margin of objectivity in his dealings with her. Grandcourt can hardly be said to fall under a spell, as his whim in marrying Gwendolen is similar to her motive for marrying him. Each thinks he/
she will master one who is worthy of such esteemed patronage, a feeling not unlike that entertained by horse trainers. Even Klemer, with his susceptibility to women, is guarded from entanglement by his preoccupation with the more straightforward Catharine Arrowpoint and musters enough detachment to tell Gwendolen plainly what he thinks of her potential for high art. "Witch" is, ultimately, an ironic epithet. Gwendolen does not cast any spell to her advantage, but her belief in such a power hurts her.

Gwendolen, herself, refers to the uncertain nature of her own future character when, in discussing her married life-to-be, she speculates on "'going to court—and being Lady Certainly—and Lady Perhaps—and grand here—and tantivy there'" (iv, 31). The title "Lady Certainly" raises, of course, the question, certainly what? And "Lady Perhaps" suggests even more ambiguity.

After her marriage to Grandcourt, however, and subsequent to "the struggle of mind attending a conscious error" waking "something like a new soul" (iv, 29), Gwendolen's nicknames take on much more the complexion of the prey and the victim. Vandernoot suggests a grim end for her by calling her Creusa, for whom Jason (Grandcourt) is forsaking Medea (Lydia Glasher). The jewels Gwendolen receives from Lydia do not, however, literally poison her, though they poison her marriage, forever unsettling her ability to rationalize her decision.

The nucleus of nicknaming in Daniel Deronda is the artistic Meyrick family, all of them busily reconceiving characters in terms of existing portraits and their own endeavors in the visual arts. These
reconceptions exaggerate a quality of the character in question. Barbara Hardy, in her edition, notes that when Deronda imagines Mrs. Meyrick calling Mordecai "Habakkuk Mucklewrath" (vi, 46), he is alluding to an existing caricature of a Puritan preacher.7 "Mucklewrath" reflects Mrs. Meyrick's common sense attitude toward extreme religious enthusiasm which she views as a confused (muddled, muck) manifestation of unfocussed anger (wrath). Mrs. Meyrick is, of course, worried that Mordecai will turn out a new trial rather than a blessing to Mirah. She is afraid that Mordecai will be the sort to isolate himself in a watch-tower from which he will look down on the human race at a distance, disregarding his ties to those very people as Habakkuk did. "Habakkuk," however, also means "embrace" and it is this aspect of the name that more closely characterizes Mordecai who faithfully embraces his family obligations, who resigns his intellectual ambitions to return to his mother in her time of need, who gratefully embraces his kinship to Mirah.

The Meyrick labels are often only temporary assignments, conceived in premature haste to characterize a new figure on their horizon. Mab quickly designates Klesmer as "Satan in grey trousers" (v, 39) to reflect her dread of his pronouncement on Mirah's singing. Klesmer, as fellow artist, participates in this exaggerative nicknaming. Contrast his own name for himself--Elijah--which wildly exaggerates his virtues to Mab's name which magnifies his severity. Even Catharine who dotes on him is occasionally embarrassed by
Klesmer's defensive bravado, as perhaps Elijah's admirers were when he challenged the prophets of Baal (as Klesmer challenges the idle, mediocrity-loving upper class), declaring in advance that he could defeat them single-handedly.

Hans Meyrick is the most prolific nicknamer. In fact, his nickname for Gwendolen is perhaps a pure illustration of the process by which an imaginative insight becomes an established epithet. Hans sees her at a social gathering and, with his artist's sensibility, picks up on the artificiality of her self-composure. Gwendolen has, after all, been since her marriage playing rather than feeling the part of grandeur. She stifles any appearance of her real wretchedness in favor of an artfully glamorous surface. Hans pictures her the subject of the painter perhaps best known for recording graceful poses which, however, affect one as slightly forced and self-conscious. Gwendolen could pose, Hans pronounced, for such a portrait. When his lightning-quick mind perceives a relationship between Deronda and Gwendolen, he refers to her, in conversation with Deronda, as "your Vandyke duchess" (vi, 45). His sisters latch onto the epithet, shortening it to "the duchess" which abbreviation Hans also thereafter adopts.

Berenice, Hans' name for Mirah, demonstrates the psychological complexities of nicknames. Again he starts by envisioning her as the model for a series of paintings of Berenice, a beautiful and ambitious Jew who lived in the first century and who married outside
her faith with Titus, but was finally separated from him by the
Roman antipathy for Jews (v, 37). Hans, of course, wants to appro-
priate the example of a beautiful Jew marrying a gentile as a
precedent for himself and Mirah. Deronda has an uncomfortable
feeling he can't articulate—probably involving an unconscious
awareness of the power of such portraiture to result in self-fulfill-
ing prophecy. Hans' imagined conclusion for Berenice—sitting
among the rubble of the fallen Jerusalem—creates in Deronda an
anxiety for Mirah whose very being is inseparable from devotion
to her faith. Marriage with a gentile would, Deronda speculates,
poison her existence, just as it ultimately proved the ruin of
Berenice. Hans persists, however, in figuring Mirah as Berenice,
uninfected by Daniel's superstition. He uses the name to simul-
taneously represent both Mirah and a type of woman she represents
as evidenced by the following conversation between Deronda and
Hans:

"I thought you could admire no style of woman but your
Berenice."
"That is the style I worship—not admire," said Hans.
"Other styles of woman I might make myself wicked for, but
for Berenice I could make myself—well, pretty good, which
is something much more difficult" (vi, 45).

Nicknames inevitably immobilize qualities that are, by nature,
fluid and fleeting, as do paintings and novels. The effect of
nicking in Eliot is imitative of the effect of portraiture.
As Hans says, "'Art, my Egerius, must intensify!'" (v, 37).

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NOTES


4Sheets, p. 161.


6See the chapter by this name in The Novels of George Eliot, pp. 135-151, in which Hardy explores "the strong and deliberate suggestions of the possible lives her [Eliot's] characters might have lived," p. 136.