

1984

The Exceptional Function of Some Names in Su Unico Hijo

Alfred Rodriguez

University of New Mexico, Albuquerque

Darcy Donahue

University of New Mexico, Albuquerque

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

Repository Citation

Rodriguez, Alfred and Donahue, Darcy (1984) "The Exceptional Function of Some Names in Su Unico Hijo," *Literary Onomastics Studies*: Vol. 11 , Article 16.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/los/vol11/iss1/16>

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 EXCEPTIONAL FUNCTION OF SOME NAMES
IN SU UNICO HIJO

Alfred Rodriguez and Darcy Donahue

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

In his interesting study of names in the short stories of Leopoldo Alas, the nineteenth century Spanish writer better known as "Clarín," Kronik concludes that, for the most part, these are a vehicle for the author's generally ironic vision of society. Allusive names, therefore, "are most often in line with his *métier* as a critic and satirist," and it is through such names that this writer most often communicates a concept of a character which is far from favorable. Other uses of names include, "symbolic effect, the mere desire to be clever, the short story's demands for compression and concision, or even straight portrayal of a character or situation."¹ Such uses of nomenclature are also evident in Alas' novels. It is the purpose of the present study to examine the function of various names in his second and final novel, Su único hijo.

The male protagonist of this unusual work presents an obvious ambivalence in his role both as man and husband,² and thus anticipates the modern projection of masculinity in literature.³

This is due at least in part to the at the time unheard of transference which Clarín effects in sexual matters.⁴ As the passive agent, and it could even be said "object" in its modern sense, in this dimension of life which has traditionally determined sexual roles, Bonifacio, the protagonist, is an anomaly.⁵

This being the case, it seems appropriate to interpret the selection of the name Bonifacio as involving a characterizing function, and what makes it especially meaningful is the rich complexity which the author achieves through this selection.

In the first place, the complete name, Bonifacio, openly sets forth the physical aspect of the character, his great external beauty.⁶ This physical attractiveness is so often emphasized, and exercises such centrality in the novel's plot, that the name selected can only be considered a conscious and calculated device on the part of the author. Thus, Bonifacio, depicted as his wife's sexual object, has a name which carries within it the cause of this subjugation.

It is also quite significant that the protagonist is most frequently identified by the familiar and everyday nickname, "Bonis," an appellation which is almost invariably used by his wife, Emma. Through its use Clarín achieves another level of characterization, since the insistence on the first part of the name, whose semantic value is clear in Spanish, sets forth and'

underlines the psychological or spiritual aspect of this character. The name, almost an epithet, in the circumstances in which Bonifacio lives, suffering the physical and psychological abuse of his domineering spouse, assumes the clear connotation of "meek" or "mild," rather than merely "good." In effect, each time the name "Bonis" is employed, especially by his wife, the reader is openly reminded of the long-suffering and meek nature which distinguishes this character.

Finally, the choice of this name by Clarín can only suggest to the knowledgeable reader an exceptional human situation which proceeds from popular Christian tradition: the biography of Saint Boniface of Tarsus.⁷ Such a linking through names is, furthermore, in perfect accord with the unveiledly parodic nature of the religious allusions which occur throughout the novel.⁸

Although the plot and characterization of this, Clarín's last novel, is well ahead of much of what twentieth century literature would develop in its exceptional insight into both the masculine and feminine psyche, it is significant that the novelist may have acquired some of this insight from the Christian tradition of the lives of the saints. The story of Saint Boniface is interesting in its human dimension because it reveals an enormous sexual aggressivity in its female figures, while the male protagonist is seen as a passive participant.⁹ The parallel with the plot of Su único hijo is obvious.¹⁰

At this point it seems worthwhile to underline the intricate game of characterizing which Clarín employs through the process of naming just analyzed. The assigning of an attributive function to the names of characters is a universal literary device, and of widespread occurrence in the literature of nineteenth century realism which tended to typify explicitly. But this usage of nomenclature was somewhat less complex and rich because it was unidimensional and, therefore, more obvious than that which we see in Su único hijo. In the remainder of this paper, we will suggest other even more subtle ways in which Clarín manipulates nomenclature in this novel.

The constant use of allusions and religious parallels with special reference to the New Testament, is, as some critics have observed,¹¹ the thematic crux of the novel. It is not at all surprising, then, that the novelist selected a Biblically emblematic name to baptize the most shocking female character in the work: Marta, the personification of sensual excess in woman.

In Occidental tradition based on the New Testament the emblem of Marta and Maria as it occurs in Luke 10, xxxviii-xlii, has come to represent two opposite sides of woman: Maria - spiritual and mystical sublimation; Marta - an obsession with the earthly and material. Carried to an extreme, as may occur in modern literature, the practical materialism of Marta comes, through a logical progression, to reflect, "the unconscious world of flesh and matter."¹²

Clearly, the fact that Marta is the only feminine name in Spanish which coincides with that of an animal, the marten, belonging to the weasel family, points toward the earthy and even animalistic qualities of a woman so named. It is a coincidence which had already been exploited literarily with a particularly sensual and satirical echo by Góngora upon attacking Marta de Nevares, one of the many paramours of his literary adversary, Lope de Vega.¹³ What Clarín does with the Marta of Su único hijo is to take a decisive step - but one well founded on occidental traditions of literary representation - which broadens, intensifies and modernizes the feminine emblem. At the same time that the name Marta supports the parodic format of the work as a whole, it gives life to a very anti-feminist emblem of female animality.¹⁴

The irony of the name of the woman who becomes Bonifacio's lover can only suggest a Clarín who is both conscious and deliberate in the naming of characters. The name Serafina alludes to a religious dimension, thereby complying with the novel's norm. But this allusion is ironically inverted and made into a parody of its original sense. The religious content of the name indicates two things clearly: the angelic, and musical excellence, since the seraphim by definition form the second choir of angels. Serafina is not angelic (her sensuality and sexual aptitude are clearly depicted in the novel), and her musical

abilities, in a state of total decadence, are the object of frequent jokes.

The case of Eufemia, Emma Valcarcel's personal maid, also reveals a possible innovative use of nomenclature by the author. As Professor Richmond notes in her thorough edition of the work, Clarín's allusions to Emma's lesbianism are vague and indirect.¹⁵ It has occurred to us that Clarín, wishing to establish in this character a lesbianism which would complete the picture of feminine depravation which she personifies (and not able to or desiring to offer the reader anything that might be shockingly explicit),¹⁶ opted to do so through an intelligent maneuver of suggestive naming.

Eufemia, the young woman whom the novel presents in constant contact, day and night, with an Emma described in the most extreme terms of morbid and eccentric sensuality, seems by her very office and condition the logical vehicle for Emma's lesbian tendencies.¹⁷ If we assume that Clarín counted on the intelligent sensibility of his readers to pick up his hints and insinuations, and that the reader would be led to suspect at least the possibility of an Emma-Eufemia relationship, it seems appropriate to interpret the naming of the young maid in these special terms.

Such being the case, it does not seem at all strange, given the subtlety of Clarín's game of allusions, that he chose the name

Eufemia as the key to the true and implicit role which she fulfills in Emma's life. The root of the name in question, from which the term "euphemism" proceeds, could very well have the function of suggesting that this figure's role in the novel, that of personal maid, is only a euphemistic projection of her true function in the work and in Emma Valcarcel's home.

As has already been seen, Clarín employs the naming of characters in an unusual way, to characterize as well as to reinforce the plot development. This is so much the case that even those names which may seem most innocent may have a measurable effect upon the interpretation of a given character. An example of this would be Emma's uncle, Juan Nepomuceno, a name in which Richmond justifiably finds no symbolic value.¹⁸ But it was not necessary for Clarín, for the literary effects which he wished to extract from the name, that it have any symbolism. In contrast to Juan, Juan Antonio, Juan José, etc., names like Juan Evangelista, Juan Bautista or Juan Nepomuceno allude patently to saints, and by association, the saintly qualities they possess.

It is enough, then, for Clarín, that the name as it occurs throughout the novel allude both generally and directly to a religious dimension which reinforces that of the whole work and that, in particular, it allude to a saintliness which is diametrically opposed to the conduct of the figure bearing this name in the novel.¹⁹ It represents, therefore, a form of linguistic irony which supports the tone of the entire work.

In conclusion, a great part of the naming in Su único hijo, as has been noted by the critics in some specific cases,²⁰ suggests a Clarín willing to employ and raise to innovative levels, the technique of including characterizing and novelistic functions in the names of literary characters. The preceding pages prove, we believe, the extent to which the author achieves his esthetic ends through his naming devices.

Alfred Rodríguez and Darcy Donahue

The University of New Mexico University at Albuquerque

Notes

1. J. Kornik, "The Function of Names in the Stories of Leopoldo Alas," Modern Language Notes, 80 (1965), 260-265.
2. See, for example, M. Baquero Goyanes, "Una novela de Clarín: Su único Hijo," in Prosistas españoles contemporáneos: Alarcón, Leopoldo Alas, Gabriel Miró, Azorín (Madrid, 1965), pp. 60-79.
3. The weak and passive male is, for example, a standard fixture in Unamuno's narrative.
4. Both Emma, his wife, and Serafina, his lover, impose upon Bonifacio their own sexual style and demands. In both cases the sexual aggressivity is shifted in a radical way.
5. The male who is weak and dominated by the woman is not, in Clarín, as he is not later in Unamuno, of doubtful masculinity in sexual matters. The anomaly in the functioning of masculinity is due in both cases to will, and not to biology.
6. The Latin definition is unequivocal: good face, good appearance.
7. For another literary version, in this case explicit but equally insistent about feminine sensuality, see Francisco Rojas Zorrilla's La vida en el ataud.

8. See, for example, F. W. Weber, "Ideology and Religious Parody in the Novels of Leopoldo Alas," Bulletin of Hispanic Studies, 43 (1966), 197-208.
9. The religious fervor and martyrdom of the saint naturally have no concrete equivalents in the life of Bonifacio Reyes, but his strongly religious attitude, although clearly a parody by Clarín (the Annunciation, the awaited son, etc.), still has, with all the parodic provisos, a certain similarity to that of the homonymous saint.
10. In the saint's biography, he is the servant of a rich and powerful woman who actively woos and wins him.
11. See Leopoldo Alas, Su único hijo, Carolyn Richmond, ed., (Madrid: Espasa Calpe, S. A., 1979), P. 1.
12. S. K. Ugalde, Gabriel Celaya (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), p. 120. The reference is to Lazaro calla, the Spanish poet's novel in which the nominal paradigm of the New Testament is given a universal projection.
13. For the exact context in which this attack occurs, see Rennert-Castro, Vida de Lope de Vega. (Madrid: Impr. los Sucesores de Hernando, 1919), p. 242.
14. For a study of the anti-feminism in this novel, see P. L. Ullman, "The Antifeminist Premises of Clarín's Su único hijo," Estudios Ibero-Americanos, 1 (1975), 57-91.
15. Alas, Su único hijo, p. 191. Richmond's note refers to the Emma-Marta relationship.

16. The powerful taboo concerning sexual aberration which dominated the literature of the last century should be kept in mind. We know of no novel which deals with homosexuality explicitly.
17. For the indications of a special, secret relationship between Emma and her maid, see Alas, pp. 122, 128, and the following quote, 148: "La doncella, en verdad, tenía sus motivos para no asombrarse tanto como los otros; primero, porque las locuras de la señorita eran para ella el pan nuestro de cada día, y locuras algunas de un género íntimo, secreto, que los demás no conocían..."
18. See Alas, p. 14, note 6.
19. Uncle John is, in the novel, the personification of avarice, deceit, and lust.
20. See Richmond's long note concerning Emma's name, for example. Alas, p. 1. As will be seen in the same note, Richmond sees a personal, sarcastic intent in the name, Bonifacio.

