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On the use of women's names in Ian Fleming's James Bond novels

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Abstract

This paper deals with the use of women's names in Ian Fleming's James Bond novels. Fleming's main naming strategy was to choose names that tell us something about the characters, names that correspond to their personalities, their occupations or the roles they play in the stories. This is often achieved by providing them with allusive names that hint at several meanings, using polysemy, etymology, or lexical or even phonological associations. Many of these names are given an explanation in the novels, but underneath this explanation there are always others. Special attention has been paid to the cases where I believe the heroines do not have allusive names. I suggest that this has to do with the fact that these women are the ones with the most complex and real characters, and real characters must have real names.

Reasons for studying Ian Fleming

Between 1953 and 1965 the British author Ian Fleming published twelve novels and a number of short stories featuring his hero James Bond.¹ Regarding the literary qualities of his writing, opinions are divided. Although Fleming had influential admirers such as Anthony Burgess and Raymond Chandler, he is not generally regarded as a distinguished author. However, I believe that the justification for studying Fleming's work stems not from its literary value, but from the outstanding impact of its leading character, Commander James Bond of the British Secret Service. James Bond has become something of an archetype in modern popular culture. He has disengaged himself from his creator and begun a life of his own. In that respect he could be compared to great fictional characters such as Bram Stoker's Dracula or Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes.

Having said that, I think one should also acknowledge that there is a significant difference between Ian Fleming's James Bond and what could be called the archetypal James Bond, that is, the set of qualities and behaviours that are commonly associated – rightly or wrongly – with his character. While the archetypal Bond is conceived, I believe, as an efficient, self-confident and cold-blooded hero in the service of the Good – that is, of course, the British government – the literary figure is more given to reflection and more uncertain of himself, and often sets out on his missions with the help of an unhealthy mixture of alcohol and amphetamine (Benedrine). The difference between the literary Bond and the archetypal Bond springs from the fact that the latter has mainly grown out of the James Bond

¹ I will restrict myself in this paper to the novels.

character of the movies – the cinematic James Bond. And the cinematic Bond, who might be regarded primarily as a creation of the director Terence Young and the actor Sean Connery on the basis of Ian Fleming's literary Bond, lacks precisely this quality of introspection and doubt. Now, I am fully aware that it might seem a bit confusing to talk of all these different James Bonds. What I am trying to say with all this is that in this paper I will concern myself mainly with the literary James Bond, not with his cinematic or archetypal counterpart.

Ian Fleming and names

The personal names in the Bond novels are often extraordinary; they are evocative and provocative, they are unusual and conspicuous; sometimes they just sound strange, sometimes they hint at lexical meaning. These are a few examples from different novels:

Auric Goldfinger

Mary Trueblood

Le Chiffre

Blabbermouth

Miss Moneypenny

Ernst Stavro Blofeld

Pussy Galore

M

In 1980 Frederick M. Burelbach presented a paper on the names in one of Fleming's novels, *Dr No*. Burelbach makes a distinction between contextual and thematic names. The purpose of the contextual names is to "evoke mystery and exoticism", but at the same time to "make extreme and implausible events somehow believable" (p. 269) and also to "prepare the reader for the symbolically meaningful names of more important characters by providing a matrix within which the symbolical names can comfortably fit without drawing excess attention to themselves" (p. 270). The thematic names are according to Burelbach these symbolically meaningful names; they are intended to support the themes of the novel.

Although I find this distinction between contextual and thematic names rather useful, I am not entirely happy with the term *thematic names*, as I believe these names are more closely connected with characters than with themes. I also believe that contextual names, the ones that have no deeper meaning than to get the reader used to unusual names, are rather few in number. Furthermore, there is a third kind of name that is not covered by this distinction, namely what I would like to call ordinary names, like *Ronnie Vallance* (of Scotland Yard), *Felix Leiter* and *Vivienne Michel*.

I will not, however, venture into the difficult task of classification. Instead I will try to discuss the use of names in terms of different naming strategies, consciously or sometimes perhaps unconsciously used by the author. There can be no doubt that Ian Fleming chose the names of his characters with great care. How James Bond himself got his name is the subject of a now well-known anecdote. Fleming has stated that he

wanted the “simplest, dullest, plainest-sounding name” he could find. Now Fleming had an interest in ornithology, and one of his favourite books in that field was *Birds of the West Indies*, written by a man named *James Bond* (Sterling & Morecambe 2003, p. 32). This was a name Fleming found plain enough to use for his hero. It is highly significant – and a bit ironic – that, through the success of the novels, this name has become absolutely loaded with connotations.

The anecdote about how James Bond got his name illustrates one of Fleming’s main strategies for naming his characters. In his first book at least, *Casino Royale*, Fleming purposely sketched Bond rather vaguely. He did not intend him to have any characteristics, only to be, as he puts it, a blunt instrument (Sterling & Morecambe 2003, p. 30). Obviously he wanted a name that corresponded to this blunt character. This points, I believe, to a sort of superordinated naming strategy. The names used are supposed – in one way or another – to tell us something about the characters, to correspond to their personalities or occupations. This can be achieved in different ways. In the case of *James Bond* the name is supposed to work through its lack of connotations, but normally Fleming hints at the characters’ personalities or roles through allusive names like *Auric Goldfinger* or *Tiffany Case*. A common feature of many of these names is that they hint at a lexical meaning, but are at the same time often elusive and ambiguous.

There is, however, another naming strategy that one must be aware of. Fleming quite frequently borrowed at least parts of the names of his characters from friends or people he came into contact with. Bond’s first secretary – Loelia Ponsonby – got her first name from a friend of Fleming’s wife. Bond’s superior in the Secret Service is

referred to as *M*, and *M* was actually the nickname Fleming used for his mother. (Sterling & Morecambe 2003, p. 8, 21, 85).

Bond and women

The literary James Bond and the cinematic James Bond share a common interest in women, although the cinematic Bond is far more successful as a womaniser than his literary counterpart. The latter is often monogamous within each novel, and in *Moonraker* he actually gets the brush-off from the heroine. Nevertheless, the literary Bond is also attractive to women. As Kingsley Amis (1965, p. 45) has noted, his charm works instantly, and one could thus conclude that it lies more in his charisma than in his manners, although his behaviour towards women is always impeccable. Amis has also shown (1965, pp. 44 ff.) that Bond's supposed brutality towards women is, as far as the novels go, unfounded. It thus belongs to the archetypal and not the literary James Bond. It cannot be denied that there is a sexist streak to Fleming's writing and, as for the character James Bond, the thought of equality between the sexes has probably never crossed his mind. But there are also many strong women in the books, women who take an active part in the story and who cannot be classified simply as beautiful-victims-to-be-rescued. It is also obvious to the reader that Bond quite frequently falls in love, although he may not always admit it to himself. Bond sometimes has coarse thoughts about women, but as Kingsley Amis points out (1965, pp. 51 f.):

however much amateur lip-curling towards women in general Bond may go in for, he never uses an individual woman unkindly, never hitting one, seldom so much as raising his voice³

Amis concludes that Bond's habitual attitude to a girl is protective, not dominating or combative. Reading the novels with an open mind, I believe that Bond's sometimes condescending attitude towards women can be apprehended as a means of protecting himself from his own emotions. At the end of *Casino Royale*, the first Bond novel, this is actually spelled out by Fleming himself. Vesper Lynd, the woman that Bond is obviously in love with, and who is in love with Bond, proves to be a double agent for the Russians and kills herself in despair. When Bond has read her letter of farewell, in which she reveals that she has been a spy for the other side, we are provided with a vivid scene of Bond fighting against his own emotions:

Bond threw the letter down. Mechanically he crushed his fingers together. Suddenly he banged his temples with his fists and stood up. For a moment he looked out towards the quiet sea, then he cursed aloud, one harsh obscenity.

His eyes were wet and he dried them.

...

He saw her now only as a spy. Their love and his grief were relegated to the boxroom of his mind. Later, perhaps they would be dragged out, dispassionately examined, and then bitterly thrust back with other sentimental baggage he would rather forget.

(p. 187)

³ This is not entirely correct. In *Dr No* he lets his companion Quarrel hurt Annabel Chung's arm to make her talk. However, he is careful not to break her arm and in the end he is not pleased with himself for hurting the girl.

This is obviously a man who ruthlessly suppresses his own feelings. And when Bond later, in a phone call to London, reports that “the bitch is dead now”, his harsh statement has a deeply tragic undertone. In a later novel (*On Her Majesty's Secret Service*) we learn that Bond never really got over the trauma of this adventure. It was staged in a fictitious Normandy seaside resort called Royale-les-Eaux, to which Bond returns once every year to visit the grave of Vesper Lynd. It has been suggested that his traumatic experience with her cast its shadow upon all of his ensuing relationships with women.

Bond's relations to women in the novels are thus complicated. The aim of this paper is to investigate whether Fleming's use of women's names can be of help in analysing the role of women in the James Bond novels.

The names

To achieve some kind of structure in my material, I have tentatively divided the women of the novels into four categories: heroines, villains, recurring characters and others. This is not a completely unproblematic breakdown, as in many cases the heroine starts out as a villain or at least as an ally of the villains. This is the case, for example, with Solitaire in *Live and Let Die* and Tatiana Romanova in *From Russia with Love*. Most problematic is Pussy Galore in *Goldfinger*. Pussy Galore is a gangster leader from New York. She is a partner of the leading villain Auric Goldfinger and is only won over by Bond at the very end of the story. One could thus be justified in classifying her as both a villain and a heroine. *Goldfinger* is an unusual Bond novel in that there are two women who can be characterised as heroines: Tilly Masterton and

Pussy Galore. Furthermore, both these women are described as lesbians. However, Pussy Galore is probably better characterised as bisexual, as she actually winds up in bed with Bond in the end. When analysing the relationship between Bond and Pussy Galore, it is important to be aware that Ian Fleming's wife, Anne O'Neill, was bisexual. And as James Bond is in many ways an alter ego for Ian Fleming, it is tempting to see the turbulent relationship between Bond and Pussy Galore as a reflection of Fleming's own tempestuous but also passionate marriage.

| NOVEL | HEROINES | VILLAINS | RECURRING CHARACTERS | OTHERS |
|---|--|-----------------------|------------------------------------|---|
| Casino Royale (1953) | Vesper Lynd | | Miss Money Penny (M's secretary) | |
| Live and Let Die (1954) | Solitaire (Simone Latrelle) | | | |
| Moonraker (1955) | Galatea ("Gala") Brand | | Loelia Ponsonby (Bond's secretary) | |
| Diamonds are Forever (1956) | Tiffany Case | | | |
| From Russia with Love (1957) | Tatiana Romanova | Rosa Clebb | May (Bond's housekeeper) | Zora, Vida |
| Dr No (1958) | Honeychile Rider | | | Mary Trueblood Annabel Chung Sister Lily Sister Rose |
| Goldfinger (1959) | Pussy Galore Tilly Masterton | Pussy Galore ? | | Jill Masterton |
| Thunderball (1961) | Dominetta ("Domino") Vitali | | | Patricia Fearing |
| The Spy who Loved Me (1962) | Vivienne Michel | | | |
| On Her Majesty's Secret Service (1963) | La Comtesse Teresa di Vincenzo ("Tracy") | Irma Bunt | Mary Goodnight (Bond's secretary) | Ruby Windsor Violet, Beryl m.fl. |
| You Only Live Twice (1964) | Kissy Suzuki | Frau Emmy Shatterhand | | Trembling Leaf Mariko Ichiban |

| | | | |
|---|----------------|--|------------------------------|
| The Man with the Golden gun (1965) | Mary Goodnight | | Artificial ("Tiffany") Daisy |
|---|----------------|--|------------------------------|

If we look at the chronologically ordered table we easily observe that the first four novels stand out. Apart from the names of Bond's and M's secretaries – *Loelia Ponsonby* and *Miss Money Penny* – each novel contains only one female name, and that is the name of the heroine. These names are all very special and clearly designed to make us raise our eyebrows: *Vesper Lynd*, *Solitaire*, *Gala Brand* and *Tiffany Case*. Furthermore, all of them are actually commented upon and apparently explained in the books. These explanations are, however, a kind of smokescreen; they might account for the appearance of the names in the fictional setting of the novel, but they do not uncover their deeper meaning.

As regards *Vesper Lynd* in *Casino Royale*, she herself explains her name rather incompletely by relating that she “was born in the evening, on a very stormy evening according to my parents. Apparently they wanted to remember it” (p. 59). The name *Vesper* is easy to come to terms with. The word *vesper* is a loan from Latin, where it means ‘evening’ or ‘evening star’. In English, the *Vesper* is also the evening star, and in poetic language the word can be used with the meaning ‘evening’. So the name *Vesper* clearly associates her character with the evening. In the same time, the evening star is actually the planet Venus, that is, the planet that carries the name of the Roman goddess of love. The name *Vesper* thus also has an erotic dimension. The character's surname is *Lynd*. After giving this name a lot of thought, and also

discussing it on a couple of James Bond sites on the Internet, I am inclined to believe that it has no hidden meaning. It simply provides a soft-sounding end to her name.

The heroine *Solitaire* in *Live and Let Die* bears a stage name. Her real name is *Simone Latrelle*. She received her stage name while working at a cabaret in Haiti, doing a telepathic act with, we may assume, playing cards. The villain Mr Big uses her because he believes she can read the future with cards. Her name hints at this ability, as her fortune telling with the help of playing cards can be compared to a game of patience, in American English *solitaire*. But it can also be apprehended as a characterising name. This is Bond's own reflection on it:

Solitaire. It was an attractive name. No wonder they had christened her that in the sleazy nightclubs of Port au Prince. Even in her present promise of warmth towards him there was much that was withdrawn and mysterious. (p. 101)

This shows how intriguing Fleming's use of personal names can be, how they can allude and characterise through associations and polysemy, and how one name can be understood in different ways.

Gala Brand of *Moonraker* presents a problem. In the book, *Gala* is explained as a short form of *Galatea*: "She was a cruiser my father was serving when I was born" (p. 110). This accounts for its origin, but most probably the name is also designed to reveal something about the character. Actually, *Gala* is a variety of apple and *Brand* is of course a brand, so *Gala Brand* ought to be a sort of apple. This could refer to the freshness of the character's appearance, the apple-cheeked physiognomy of this competent policewoman. However, what is most remarkable about *Gala Brand* is

that, in the end, she actually gives Bond the brush-off and goes back to her fiancé. So for Bond she becomes the forbidden fruit, the apple he is not allowed to sink his teeth into.

With *Tiffany Case* in *Diamonds are Forever*, Fleming taps into the same vein of farcical slapstick humour as when in a later novel he names two officials of the College of Arms in London *Griffon Or* and *Sable Basilisk*. *Tiffany Case* obviously hints at the world-famous jeweller's shop Tiffany's in New York. Tiffany herself tells Bond the story of her name:

And the reason I got called Tiffany is because when I was born, dear father Case was so sore I wasn't a boy he gave my mother a thousand bucks and a powder case from Tiffany's and walked out. (p. 244)

At the same time, Tiffany is a diamond smuggler and her name obviously also alludes to this. The diamonds are, as it were, smuggled in a Tiffany Case. So we are given one explanation in the text, but behind this explanation we find that the name also hints at the occupation of the character.

These are the first four heroines of the Bond novels. As regards the Bond women and their names, these early novels constitute a distinct and homogeneous phase. But after this things start to change. The number of women, and hence women's names, increases. We get real female villains like Rosa Clebb and Irma Bunt, both with rather

brutal, monosyllabic names with negative connotations or associations.⁴ We also find several minor characters, women who occur in a single scene or a smaller part of a novel. One could also speak of a sexualisation or erotification of the series. Although Bond remains in principle monogamous within each novel, he occasionally has a fling on the side. This is the case with, for example, Patricia Fearing in *Thunderball* and Ruby Windsor in *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*. We also get female names with sexual allusions, such as *Pussy Galore*, *Kissy Suzuki*, *Mary Goodnight* and the intimating but possibly less obvious *Honeychile Rider*.⁵ It may be worth noting that such names do not occur in the early novels, and also that these names are generally passed over without comment by the author, as has earlier been observed in the case of *Pussy Galore* (Ladenson 2001, p. 422).

Tatiana Romanova in *From Russia with Love* is a Soviet agent, but it is obvious from the very outset that she is not actually a bad person. This is further reinforced by the fact that she carries the name of the Russian imperial family, *Romanov*. What is

⁴ *Cleb* can evoke associations with words with negative connotations such as *cleg*, *clod* and *club* and also with German *kleben* 'sticky'. But as far as I have been able to find out there is no English word *cleb*. As for *Bunt*, the *New Webster's Dictionary* (p. 207) includes three meanings of a word *bunt*: 1. *bunt* n. A disease of wheat which destroys the kernels, due to the parasitic fungus *Tilletiatrifici*. 2. *bunt* n. The bellying part of a square sail. 3. *bunt* v. To strike with the head or horns, as a goat does; push. In baseball to tap the ball with the bat so that it goes only a short distance. In German *bunt* means 'particoloured'.

⁵ *Honeychile* (*honey child*) is a term of endearment used by coloured people in the south of the USA. Another interpretation is given in Burelback 1976, pp. 274 f.

hinted to the reader is that a Soviet agent with such a name cannot be a real communist.

Dominetta Vitali in *Thunderball* has a half-fake Italian name that obviously carries associations of domination and vitality. This is also fully in line with her personality, as she is described as “an independent, a girl of authority and character” (p. 109). But her name also hints at masculinity. *Dominetta* is actually a nickname for *Domino*,⁶ which of course is created on the basis of Latin *dominus* ‘lord, master’. It has been observed that Ian Fleming often gives his leading ladies a trace of masculinity.⁷ In *Dominetta*’s case, it is her car driving that is masculine: “this girl drove like a man,” Fleming writes, continuing: “She was entirely focused on the road ahead and what was going on in her driving mirror . . . And, equally rare in a woman, she took a man’s pleasure in the feel of her machine, in the timing of her gear changes, and the use of her brakes” (p. 110). Now, for a man as obsessed with cars and driving as Ian Fleming was, this is not just a casual observation, but an important clue to his character’s personality. I believe that *Domino*’s style of driving can be regarded as a reflection of her masculine qualities.

⁶ It is in due course revealed to the reader of the novel that *Dominetta Vitali* is an alias for *Domino Petacchi*.

⁷ E.g. Honeychile Rider in *Dr No* is described as having a behind “as firm and rounded as a boy’s”. See Sterling & Morecambe 2003, p. 66.

The girls with ordinary names

Among the names of heroines there are a few which do not seem to be suggestive or ambiguous, at least not in the same joking sort of way as many of the others. These are above all *Teresa di Vincenzo* and *Vivienne Michel*.

La Comtesse Teresa di Vincenzo, or *Tracy*, appears in *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*. She is the daughter of an English governess and Marc-Ange Draco, head of the Union Corse, the Corsican Mafia. Tracy is portrayed in a masterly way as a spoilt but deeply unhappy young woman, living on the edge, totally careless of her own life. To Bond she is irresistible, and after several adventures in the Swiss Alps he ends up marrying her. Their happiness, however, is cut short, as the villain Blofeld kills Tracy just as she and Bond set off on their honeymoon.

Vivienne Michel is the heroine of *The Spy who Loved Me*. This is a highly unusual Bond novel, as it is written in the first person from the point of view of a young woman, Vivienne Michel. This forced Fleming to live the part of his heroine in a way he had never done before. Apart from a few lapses he does it brilliantly, and Vivienne Michel is generally considered by far the best of Fleming's female characters.

I believe that it is no coincidence that these two characters do not have allusive, joking names. Such a name can help to build a character, but it also makes that character rather one-dimensional. We fully understand that Auric Goldfinger, for example, is a man obsessed with gold, but it would be very difficult to make him into, let us say, a devoted butterfly collector. An allusive name also lends a character a touch of unreality that is unwanted if you are trying to create a realistic personality.

When Ian Fleming created the composed and rather subtle characters of *Teresa di Vincenzo* and *Vivienne Michel*, I believe he found it hard to provide them with names of the same allusive and ambiguous kind as he was accustomed to giving his heroines. They had simply become too real to him, and real characters must have real names.⁸

Conclusions

Concluding, then, I believe that Ian Fleming's main naming strategy was to choose names that tell us something about the characters, names that correspond to their personalities, their occupations or the roles they play in the stories. This is often achieved by providing them with allusive names that hint at several meanings, using polysemy (*Solitaire*), etymology (*Vesper*, *Dominetta*), or lexical or even phonological associations (*Goodnight*, *Clebb*). Many of these names are given an explanation in the novels, but underneath this explanation there are always others.

I have also paid special attention to the cases where I believe the heroines do not have allusive names. I suggest that this has to do with the fact that these women are the ones with the most complex and real characters, and real characters must have real names.

Finally, a very brief comment on how Fleming's naming strategies have been administered by the film-makers. It is obvious that the use of names to characterise individuals has been included in the set of recurring themes or *topoi* which are so

⁸ This does not necessarily mean that the names do not convey a message. The noble name of *Teresa di Vincenzo* certainly corresponds to her noble personality. Furthermore, it is an evident manifestation of her self-contempt that she dissociates herself from that name and calls herself *Tracy*.

characteristic of the universe of the James Bond movies. However, my impression is that, when it comes to the women's names, this theme has been dominated by names with sexual allusions. An early example is *Plenty O'Toole* in *Diamonds are Forever*; others are *Holly Goodhead* in *Moonraker* and *Xenia Onatopp* in *Golden Eye*. This is probably due to the occurrence of a couple of such names in the early movies. That *Honeychile Rider* in *Dr No* was regarded as a bit too risqué is indicated by the fact that in the film *Rider* was altered to *Ryder*. Even more daring was *Pussy Galore* in *Goldfinger*, a name which the American censors were reluctant to accept - a suggested change of name to *Kitty Galore* was, however, fortunately avoided (Sterling & Morecambe 2003, p. 149).

The most sophisticated use of a woman's name in the movies is to be found in *The World Is Not Enough* from 1999. At the beginning of the film we are presented with a beautiful young woman who we are led to believe is the heroine. However, when we learn that her name is *Elektra King*, we become a little suspicious. Recalling Sophocles and Euripides, we remember that Electra was not a totally harmless woman. Rather the opposite, she actually urged her brother Orestes to avenge their father Agamemnon by killing their stepfather Aegisthus as well as their real mother Clytemnestra. As it turns out, Elektra King is actually the real villain of the film and also responsible for the killing of her own father. Hopefully, this is an indication of a new and more refined use of the naming legacy of Ian Fleming.

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