

The Brontë Name and Its Classical Associations

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THE NAME CHANGE that Patrick Brunty gave himself when he went to Cambridge as a mature sizar has been regarded, variously, as an indication of an impoverished Irish youth painfully attempting to give himself a little style, as a mildly amusing instance of snobbery, or as simple hero-worship. Patrick was born, in a one-room cottage, into a large and scarcely literate peasant family that was tied to the earth; he educated himself and walked away from it, raising himself by his own intelligence and force of will. That latter quality he certainly passed on; and the Brontë name would become, soon after, so distinguished through the writings of his daughters that any attempt to associate himself with Lord Nelson, newly titled as the Duke of Brontë after the Sicilian city of that name in honour of the naval hero's victories in the early days of the Napoleonic wars, is merely a psychological footnote in Patrick Brontë's life.¹

If Patrick were simply trying to eliminate an Irish identification in his own surname, he certainly did not pick an anonymously English patronymic. On the contrary, the name Brontë before the 1840's would have had a distinctly alien ring, except for the Nelson association. Even then, since honorary titles were used only for ceremonial identification (e.g., the Duke of Wellington's later title of Baron Duoro) rather than everyday use, knowledge of it would be restricted to readers acquainted with national and world affairs over the preceding decades. To be sure, as the *Juvenilia* clearly reveals, all during their formative years, Patrick's children show a fascination and even delight with elaborate and evocative names, with titles heaped upon honorary titles.²

Yet, there is a further significance in the life of the family, beyond the Nelson association, for the Brunty/Brontë name change that does not seem to have been fully realized. As noted, Patrick was himself an unusual man for his time; in every sense, he was a fitting father for his children, who received much of their serious education from him and probably no small share of their temperaments and world view, the distortions of Mrs. Gaskell's biography notwithstanding. By his early twenties, the peasant autodidact had made the transition to intellectual by becoming a tutor in the church school of the Reverend Thomas Tighe. There Brunty so impressed his clerical employer that Tighe solicited a small annuity from wealthy friends to enable his young tutor to go to Cambridge as a sizar. Trudging from one life into another, young Brunty literally walked the land portion of the trip.

When registering at the university, Patrick took advantage of his new surroundings to make the name change, apparently convincing the Registrar that an error in handwriting was responsible for a misreading of *u* for *o* and *y* for *e*.³ He was already then in his mid-twenties. Some three or four years later, before applying for ordination, Patrick persuaded his father, Hugh Brunty, to attest to a later birth date for him (out of fear that he might be considered too old for ordination) and sign the statement with the son's newly assumed name of Bronte. The dieresis appeared only after several more years, during which Patrick used every variation of accent possible on the final *e*. While at the university, Patrick was not notably religious in his concerns. Enthusiastic then as he was in fact throughout his life about martial matters, he trained with a military unit at the university and undoubtedly would have preferred a soldier's life to the clerical one that his Cambridge degree opened to him. However, while he was imaginative and, as he several times proved, of considerable personal courage, he was perhaps even more proud of his ability as a classical scholar, and he very much distinguished himself in his studies throughout his Cambridge career. He was, in fact, among the very best classical scholars at Cambridge in his time. Ambitious as a writer himself, although most of his creative work does not approach that of his daughters, he early translated

Homer, as well as the Latin poets. Later, he gave his son Branwell daily lessons in both languages for some years.⁴ It is as a Greek scholar that Patrick Brontë's newly chosen surname must have held particular meaning for him and, in turn, for his son and, at least by reference, for his daughters.

Brontë scholars are agreed that the immediate derivation of the name was the new Sicilian title recently given to Lord Nelson (Patrick's life-long heroes were, first, Nelson and then the Duke of Wellington, and this was still his Nelson period) in honour of the wresting of Sicily from Napoleon. In a sense, it is a primitive tradition, a symbolic gift or surrendering of the land to the valiant hero who has conquered it, through the conferring of the name that makes the hero synonymous with the island kingdom. However, Sicily had an early classical history, and the city of Bronté had, in fact, an ancient Greek name of rich significance given it by the early Hellenic settlers of that western colony. A careful look suggests that the name was not a casual one. In his rigorous and effective devotion to the classical languages, Patrick Brontë certainly learned, and probably sought out references to the name he had made his own.

What he learned would have given him a complexity of associations equal to that of James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus. While Patrick Brontë was no formally conceived fictional character, he was a self-shaped man with a life-long relationship to imaginative literature, who at least partly through the classics inspired his son Branwell with a sense of heroic destiny.⁵ Undoubtedly, too, by his own enthusiasms and the providing of a constant supply of significant reading material, he channeled his daughters' thinking in ways that their fiction would reflect.

The word "Bronte" in classical Greek means "thunder."⁶ As such, it has a close association with the gods, and with myth in general. However, it also has two other associated definitions of major importance to a good classical scholar. *Brontes* is the name of one of the Cyclopes, the immense one-eyed beings of lawless nature who appear in both Hesiod and Homer. Sons of Uranus and Gaea, they belong to the generation of the Titans and thus are older than the gods of a settled social order. Eventually they were imprisoned in Tartarus by first their father and later their

brother, Cronus. Like Prometheus, they become identified with the next generation of immortals; it was Zeus who freed them, in exchange for which Brontes and the other Cyclopes gave the god the thunderbolt that became his trademark. The word *Bronte* thus evokes reference to both the Cyclopean individual of that name and to the “thunder” he presented to Zeus and which became the mark of divine authority and justice.

The myth, however, spreads out in waves from that point. For instance, the huge furnaces of Hephaestus, in which were fashioned such magical devices and armour as that of Achilles, were worked by the Cyclopes. The roaring fires and the thunder and lightning are parallels in the earth and in the heavens. (In men’s affairs, it is worth recalling, as a passing thought, that Patrick Brontë had a life-long interest in guns and heavy ordnance and twice sent to the army proposals for new field pieces.⁷)

There is, however, still another distinct mythical figure that bears the name *Bronte*. The Sun-god, Helios, whose own name of Light is so significant to all the Hellenes, travels the heavens in a chariot traditionally drawn by four snow-white horses. Breathing light and fire, their names are Bronté, Eoös, Aethiope, and Sĕrāpē. The most widely-known legend associated with them had to do, of course, with the time when they were stolen by the impetuous young Phaethon, who tried to drive his father’s chariot but could not control the great horses. A conflagration threatened the universe. In order to keep the world from being destroyed, when the chariot plunged to earth in a flaming burst of horses’ heads and hooves, Zeus killed Phaethon with a thunderbolt — bringing together three associations of the name: the chariot horse, the thunderbolt, and the Cyclops who had given the thunder to Zeus.

In this convergence of “Brontes” in the thunder and the great white horse of uncontrollable power, the horses themselves are merged with the sea, and the successive legend unfolds further, thereby. According to ancient Greek myth, the island of Rhodes — Rhodos, the Isle of Roses — is where the Sun is born; it is sacred to Helios. A summer festival traditionally dedicated to the god there had as its high point the literal sacrifice of four white horses, which were thrown into the sea after being consecrated

to Helios. (There seems to be a connection here with "the horse fountain" so commonly seen in European public art still today, where only the sculptured horses' heads, with nostrils flaring and eyes wildly rolling, emerge from the churning water source.)

Moreover, in an interesting transfer of roles, logically due to the convergence of names in the Phaeton incident and the correlation with the Cyclops, Brontes, by the time the *Odyssey* was written Poseidon had become identified as the father of the Cyclops. It was Odysseus' blinding of his *son*, Polyphemus, that most outraged the Sea God against the wandering king of Ithaca.⁸ As father, also, now, of Brontes the Cyclop, as ruler of the sea into which plunged the uncontrolled stallion of Helios, Bronte, as recipient of the annual sacrifice of Rhodos to Helios, the ruler of the heavens, Poseidon the ruler of the seas has become an important figure in the convoluted myth of the name.

Patrick Brontë himself is an indomitable and stoic figure, whose imagination must have been touched by such classical associations, but he would never have made them the occasion for an improper action. However, it is tempting to think of Branwell Brontë, the youthful wastrel, the wildly romantic and self-indulgent despair of his family's hopes, as a self-willed Phaethon, of course. If one associates the name of "Brontes" with Euripides' play *Cyclops*, almost certainly read by Branwell in his aimless but enthusiastic boyhood reading through the classics, the relevance becomes even more touching. Could Branwell, willingly coached by an eager classical scholar of a father, have failed to know his name referents? As a young man Branwell certainly equated himself with his father's first heroic model. The original title of Branwell's long poem on Nelson was, simply, "Bronté." Except for the changeable accent mark, the title and the author's name were thus synonymous. As we see the youthfully dissolute Branwell in his own writings, in his letters, in the family reports, Euripides might almost be writing his epitaph in the words of the philosophy of the Cyclops, the anarchic race of the first mythic Brontes:

To eat, to drink
 from day to day, to have no worries —
 that's the real Zeus for your clever man!

And for those who embroider human life
with their little laws — damn the lot of them!
I shall go right on indulging myself —⁹

Finally, the home of the Cyclopean brothers is, by tradition, Sicily. It was here, allegedly, that Odysseus met and maimed the unfortunate Polyphemus, Brontes' brother. However, it was here, too, for the Greeks that the mythic arc of the sun, which was born in the *east* at Rhodes, is completed as it plunges into the *western* sea, at the far western edge of the Greek world. In the flaming death of the sun in a brilliant sunset on the sea is perpetuated, too, the thunderous crash of the horses of Phaethon.

And so, appropriately, was founded the town, named for the mythic horse of Helios, the anarchic Cyclops, the thunder of Zeus, which would give Lord Nelson his title and Patrick Brunty a new name for his children to make famous in their own right. In their hands, the mythic name was extended to legend.

NOTES

- ¹ The best detailed account of the life of Patrick Brontë is that of John Lock and Canon Dixon, *Man of Sorrow. The Life, Letters, and Times of the Reverend Patrick Brontë* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1965).
- ² See *Legends of Angria*, eds. Fannie E. Ratchford and William C. DeVane (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1933), *passim*.
- ³ There is no complete agreement on the detailed circumstances of the name change, other than the period of its occurrence. See Lock and Dixon.
- ⁴ See Winifred Gerin, *Branwell Brontë* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd., 1961).
- ⁵ "The whole emphasis of his education was directed upon heroic example . . . implanted in him in earliest childhood by his father. . . . From Mr. Brontë Branwell early imbibed a reverence for the fictitious and real heroes of literature and history that was little short of idolatry." Gerin, p. 24.
- ⁶ Derived from *βροντή* — "thunder." Charles Anthon, *A Classical Dictionary* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1841) is a work from which the classical references in this paper have been drawn. Since it is a work contemporary with the Brontës, it reveals the common understanding of readers of a classical bent at that time. The sub-title itself is of interest: "A Classical Dictionary Containing an Account of the Principal Proper Names Mentioned by Ancient Authors and Intended to Elucidate All the Important Points Connected with the Geography, History, Biography, Mythology, and Fine Arts of the Greeks and Romans, Together With an Account of Coins, Weights, and Measures, with Tabular Values of the Same." Anthon took himself seriously.

- ⁷ See Lock and Dixon, pp. 303-06, 414.
- ⁸ In a fascinating essay on the meaning and significance of the name, G. E. Dimock, Jr. tells us that "Odysseus" in the classical Greek world meant, literally, "the bringer of pain," that "to odysseus someone" meant to play a vile, painful trick on them. Dimock thus sees Odysseus' name as equivalent to "Trouble." G. E. Dimock, Jr., "The Name of Odysseus," *The Hudson Review*, IX:1 (Spring 1956), 52-70.
- ⁹ *Euripides*, Vol. III, trans. William Arrowsmith, *The Complete Greek Tragedies*, eds. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 247.

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