

ONOMASTIC PUNS

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By far the most popular form of word play is the pun. Linguists who prefer big words call this paronomasia. What it boils down to is a word, phrase, or idiomatic expression with more than one meaning, or two words with the same sound but different meanings. The humor comes when you expect a word to mean something but it turns out unexpectedly to mean something else. Many personal names also lend themselves to puns. The simplest kind is the punning definition: Smithereens = little pieces of someone named Smith, reported by John Bailey in "Definitions That May Be Right Or May Not" in the Oct 31 1953 Saturday Evening Post.

Historically, name puns can be traced to classical times, certainly to the Scriptures. As the 19th century British folklorist Mark Antony Lower pointed out, one of the first puns was inflicted by Jesus on his disciple Simon by calling him Peter (meaning "rock") and affirming that "upon this rock will I build my church."

One of the most prolific personal name punsters was the famed Kentucky newspaperman George D. Prentice. Sprinkled throughout his Louisville Journal for nearly 30 years were short paragraphs of satiric humor, based on news accounts from other papers; many made fun of anti-Whig politicians, his own particular butts. In 1860 many of them were compiled in a privately printed volume, *Prenticeana (or Wit and Humor in Paragraphs)*. Here are some of the best:

- Rhode Island has declined to re-elect Dutee J. Pearce to Congress. She has discharged her dutee.
- A gentleman killed himself in Florida for the love of a Miss Bullit. The poor fellow could not live with a Bullit in his heart.
- Mr. William Hood was robbed near Corinth, Alabama. The Corinth paper says that the name of the highwayman is unknown, but there is no doubt that he was a robbin' Hood.
- Mr. John Love of Alabama was recently lost during a passage from Texas to Mexico. We had supposed that no love would ever be lost between those countries.
- In a recent criminal trial in Texas, a certain General Rule took it in high dudgeon because he was challenged by the Commonwealth's attorney. The sensitive gentleman ought to have remembered that there are exceptions to all Rules.
- James Ray and John Parr have started a locofoco paper in Maine called the Democrat. Parr, in all that pertains to decency, is below Zero, and Ray is below Parr.
- A friend sends us a letter of General Pillow which he asks us to notice. We have more important matters on hand. When we have disposed of them, we may attend to the Pillow case.
- Bill English got up a bad substitute for a good bill. We hope that his constituents will at their next election get up a good substitute for a bad Bill.
- Mr. Brown, editor of the St. Louis Democrat, was married a few days ago to a very beautiful and accomplished young lady, Miss Mary Gunn. May their wedded life be happy, and may a little "son of a Gunn" rise up to bless them.
- A woman in Florida named Cross lately gave birth to an infant son which weighed only one pound. That Cross wasn't hard to bear.
- Old Rough and Ready has proved himself a first rate Taylor. He always gives his Mexican customers fits.

Prentice may best be remembered for telling us about Kentucky Congressman William J. Graves who killed Maine Congressman Jonathan Cilley in a duel in Maryland on February 4, 1838.

Graves' second was Henry A. Wise, a Virginia Congressman and fellow Whig. Prentice thought the affair was simultaneously grave, wise and silly.

A close second among 19th century name punsters, though not as outrageous and certainly not as original, was Mark Antony Lower. From literary sources personally known to him came many of the puns that are still shared in punning sessions throughout the English-speaking world. The best are found in his book *English Surnames: An Essay on Family Nomenclature* (London, 1875).

- The English physician John Coakley Lettsom, who is said to have signed his prescriptions 'I Lettsom,' is remembered by these lines: "When any patient calls in haste, I physics, bleeds, and sweats 'em; if after that they choose to die, why, what care I? -I Lettsom." It's not known who actually penned them, though they were reported in Edward Nares' *Heraldic Anomalies* in 1823. It is said the good doctor was so fond of them that he had them placed on his tombstone when he died in 1815.
- Alexander Gunn was fired from his job in the Customs house of Edinburgh for doctoring the books. More cleverly put, "A Gunn was discharged for making a false report." Similarly, a lawyer in a New York court finished his questioning of a witness by saying "Mr. Gunn, you can now go off." When the witness looked questioningly at the lawyer, the judge clarified his instructions by adding "Sir, you are discharged."
- Nares told of the Reverend Noys, a canon in one of England's cathedrals. A ball was to be held at his home and he was asked if he'd be there. "Of course," he said, "How could a canon ball go off without Noys?" We recall the recent occasion of the promotion of Peter Ball of St. Paul's Cathedral to canon, from then on known as Canon Ball. According to the London Daily Telegraph, he was clearly the right caliber for the job.
- The firm of Fogg and Mist of Warwick Street, London, was joined by Mr. Fogg's son and soon became known as Fogg and Son. What happened to Mist? Why, he was driven away by the son.
- A man named Dunn had as his assistant a Mr. Welldone. It confused people to know that Mr. Welldone was under Dunn.
- London wags had a field day when a Mr. Lamb married a Miss Wolfe, "fulfilling an ancient prophecy."
- Two New York attorneys entered into a partnership and their firm became known as Catchem and Chetum. Their colleagues felt that such a name would hardly inspire confidence among prospective clients, and suggested that they find some other name or at least prefix the company name with their given names, which were Isaiah and Uriah. This they supposedly did, but it only made matters worse, for American custom then was to use only initials.
- A lady whose favorite poet was Bobby Burns once bought a book entitled *An Essay on Burns*. She was taken aback when she learned that it was a medical book on burns and scalds. Lower mused that this might not be too much of an error since among Scandinavians scalds were also poets.
- A capital offender named Hogg was being tried by the eminent jurist Sir Nicholas Bacon. He appealed to the judge to spare his life on the grounds that they were related, or at least there was an affinity in their names. "That may be," said the judge, "but not yet, for a Hogg is not Bacon until it is hanged."
- I. Came, a Liverpool shoemaker, moved across the street and put up a sign at his new quarters: "I. Came from across the street." Similarly, James Fell announced, when he moved from Ludgate Hill to Fleet Street: "I. Fell from Ludgate Hill." That, some wag remarked, was quite a fall.

The English barrister Sir John Strange was a very private man. On his deathbed he told his wife that he wanted no fuss, that everything should be as simple as possible. Instead of his name, he instructed that his tombstone contain the single line "Here lies a lawyer who always spoke the truth." "But," argued his wife, "how will anyone know whose grave this is?" "Oh, they certainly will," said Sir John, "for those who read that inscription will say 'That's Strange.'" This is reminiscent of the story in the December 9, 1955 *Colliers* magazine about the French boy named Formidable. Although he grew to manhood hardly fitting his name, he married and lived with only one woman for more than half a century. He, too, begged to be buried nameless, with these

words on his tombstone: "Here lies a man whose wife was absolutely faithful to him for 57 years." To this day, every Frenchman, passing his grave, remarks "C'est formidable!"

Finding the body of Juan Rodriguez near the fourteenth hole, two fellow golfers tried to determine the cause of his death. "I think he was shot," said one, "by a golf gun." "What's a golf gun?" asked the other. "I'm not sure, but it certainly made a hole in Juan."

According to the December 10, 1989 New York Times, a woman was overheard on a New York bus describing a concert she had recently attended. When asked what music had been performed she said she couldn't recall, but it sounded like the name of a famous singer. "Oh," she was told, "it must have been Franck's Sonata in A Major." This is the place to recall two other musical puns. Someone asked the hurdy-gurdy man if the piece he had just played was by Mozart. "No," he answered, "by Handel." And inveterate punster Victor Borge was once asked what Mrs. Haydn said when she came home one day and couldn't find her husband: "Where are you, Haydn?" (The composer himself responded to "Are you Haydn?" with "No, I'm right here.")

Mrs. Jones, interviewed by a census taker, was coy about revealing her age. She asked if her neighbors, the Hills, had given their ages. When told they had, she said she was the same age. "O.K.," said the census taker, "I'll just put down that you're as old as the Hills."

Several bits of name play relate to time. A reporter said upon the marriage of a Mississippi couple, Lorenzo Day and Martha Week: "A Day is made, a Week is lost, but time should not complain; there'll soon be little Days enough to make the Week again." This poem was quoted by Sir Herbert Maxwell in the April 30, 1927 issue of Notes and Queries, concerning the 1870s marriage of Eton master Day to a Miss Weeks. Before the First World War, an English lady had two gardeners named Noon and Knight. Early each day she would go into her garden and greet them "Good morning, Noon and Knight." When, early in his tenure, George the Third knighted a Mr. Day he knew he had arrived at kingly status—he had just turned Day into Knight. And in 1783 Edward Miller Mundy became M.P. for Derbyshire, succeeding a Mr. Noon. Thus he was known as Munday Afternoon.

Nares reported that two men competed for the same position. One, a Dr. Goodenough, got it; the other, asked why he hadn't, observed simply that he wasn't good enough.

In 1968 English-born Vicki Willder told me that she was often confused with persons with the better-known name Wilder, but, she pointed out, "there's an L of a difference between our two names."

The March 1955 Reader's Digest printed Bennett Cerf's account of a subscriber's attempt to learn the telephone number of Theatre Arts magazine. He was told by Information that she had no listing for a Theodore Arts. He said, "I don't want a person named Theodore Arts, but a magazine named Theatre Arts." "But I told you," she repeated, "we have no listing for a Theodore Arts." "Confound it," he said angrily, "the name is Theater. T-H-E-A-T-R-E." "That," said the operator, "is not the way to spell Theodore."

A patient at the local hospital was told that he would need an operation immediately. He demurred on being informed that the surgeon would be a Dr. Kilpatrick of the hospital staff. The nurse tried to convince him that Dr. Kilpatrick was an exceptionally capable surgeon, and that he would be in good hands. "That may be so," replied the patient, "but my name is Patrick."

When I was a kid, my friends and I would brag, bet and even fight about which of us was the biggest or strongest, or whose father could lick the stuffings out of any other father. Later I heard that grown men would bet on the toughness of their names. A man entered a saloon to wager that he had the hardest name around. "What is your name?" he was asked. "Stone." "You lose," said another, "my name is Harder."

In the July 3, 1978 obituary in Time magazine for British Labour Party leader Sir Dingle Foote, it was pointed out that he and two brothers, politicians Hugh and Michael, were jokingly referred to as England's three left feet.

The following is loosely attributed to Jonathan Swift. Two men, Smith and Hatch, came to a farmer to buy his poultry. The farmer preferred to auction his stock in one lot and accepted their bids. Smith, outbid by his rival, was later asked how he had fared. He replied "Not so well. I dropped out of the bidding for the chickens when I saw they were going to Hatch." Henry Ward Beecher is the subject of another chicken story. After he had spared a chicken from the cooking pot, she presented him with an egg: thus did the hen reward Beecher.

Admiral Ernest J. King was well respected during the Second World War. It is said that he once boarded the USS Texas in the middle of Sunday morning worship services. Noting this, the ship's chaplain interrupted his sermon to announce that they would sing "Come, Thou Almighty King."

Lieutenant Ann Kerr was stationed at the Lakehurst New Jersey Naval Air Station. When she was not on the base her secretary would simply inform her callers that "Ann Kerr's away."

A ship crossing the Atlantic encountered some rough weather. When he realized that his steerage passengers were having a hard time staying warm, the captain called down to the crew's quarters "Is there a mackintosh there big enough to keep two young ladies warm?" "I'm afraid not," yelled one of the crew, "but there's a McGregor who'd like to give it a try."

When I was a kid George Birthington ran our town laundry, but it was only open one day a week. We always called it George Birthington's washday.

During the Klondike gold rush, hundreds of prospectors purchased their equipment from a manufacturer named Tate, whose products were poorly made and fell apart after minimal use. His compasses were particularly inferior, leading to the observation that he who has a Tates is lost.

When a man named Longworth was introduced to the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, he noted the similarity in their names, but was put at ease by the poet's recollection of Pope's immortal lines "Worth makes the man but want of it the fellow."

When asked his relationship with Theodore Hook, Thomas Hood, the poet-punster, is said to have replied "Hook and I are very close."

A wealthy man named Colley wished to leave in his will a substantial sum to his friend, a Mr. Mellon, but only if the latter agreed to combine their two names. Mr. Mellon had no objection to Mr. Colley's generosity, but he did take issue with the conditions when he realized that he would be known as Mellon-Colley. This story has been traced to C.W. Bardsley's *English Surnames* (London, 1889).

Yogi Berra was once given a check inscribed "Pay to Bearer." He thanked his benefactor but pointed out that his name was misspelled.