

Entitled Art: what makes titles names?

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ENTITLED ART: WHAT MAKES TITLES NAMES?

Michel-Antoine Xhignesse

Abstract: *Art historians and philosophers often talk about the interpretive significance of titles, but few have bothered with their historical origins. This omission has led to the assumption that an artwork's title is its proper name, since names and titles share the essential function of facilitating reference to their bearers. But a closer look at the development of our titling practices shows a significant point of divergence from standard analyses of proper names: the semantic content of a title is often crucial to the identification, individuation, and interpretation of its associated artwork. This paper represents a first step towards an empirically-centred study of our titling practices. I argue that in order to accept titles as proper names we must first recognize the social, rather than the referential, function of naming.*

KEYWORDS: aesthetics, art history, chrematonyms, names, nicknames, philosophy of art, philosophy of language, reflective content, semantic weight, titles

1. Are Titles Names?

It is an everyday assumption that an artwork's title is its proper name. Art historians, philosophers, and ordinary people alike all share this assumption, which is reflected in our critical discourse. But what evidence do we have that it is correct? What is it about titles that makes them names? Ideally, such questions should be settled by empirical work in art history and linguistics, rather than resting on pure intuition.

Onomastics, the branch of linguistics concerned with proper names, groups artwork titles together with the names of other cultural entities under the label of 'chrematonyms', which are distinguished from other kinds of names such as bionyms (creature names) and toponyms (placenames) on the basis of their realm of application. But even this work proceeds under the assumption that titles are names, with scant consideration of the function or history of titles. The error has been compounded by art historians, who have remained largely uninterested in the origins of titles. The few who have ventured into this arena restrict their investigations to artworks from the eighteenth century onwards, focussing primarily on titles' contribution to the interpretation of their associated artworks. The early function and history of titles thus remains virtually unknown, and is assumed to stretch back to antiquity.

And why not? If titles are proper names, then this seems like a reasonable enough assumption—names, after all, are referential tools whose origins lie in human pre-history. Both names and titles appear to share the primary function of facilitating reference to their bearers, artists seem to baptize their works in

much the same way we do more mundane entities, and titles and names alike are passed along through causal chains of reference. Both are used to confer status—titles are usually given only to *finished* works,¹ just as names are (usually) only given to extant objects—and both are also frequently used to arouse commercial and public interest.

But the actual history of our titling practices is not so neat. In fact, it has been characterized by a series of seismic shifts which introduced significant asymmetries with proper names. Titling, it turns out, is a new invention; early titles were purely descriptive labels, and since the nineteenth century titles have cultivated semantic properties at odds with our usual conception of names as referential tools. The evidence, then, tells against our ordinary assumption that titles are a species of proper name.

I do not think we should make too much of these asymmetries, however. The key is to notice that the surface-level differences between names and titles actually point to deep-rooted onymic similarities grounded in the social character of names, rather than in their referential function. Appeals to mere intuition about the nature and function of titles will not do here. In order to show that titles are best considered names, I must first reconstruct the early history of titles, given the extant evidence. To that end I will begin, in section 2, by tracing the origins of titles, which were first applied to published literature (including music). Section 3 reconstructs the early history of titles in the visual arts, arguing that they developed as extensions of literary titling practices and highlighting the recent and problematic rise of what I call *reflective* titles. In section 4 I consider the degree of overlap between titles and names, paying particular attention to titles' frequently reflective character, which supplies a significant point of divergence. Finally, in section 5 I argue that titles are not unique among names for their occasional possession of a reflective character: gendered anthroponyms, nicknames, and toponyms can also bear reflective content. Ultimately, I argue that accepting titles as proper names requires us to recognize that names perform distinctly social, as well as referential, functions.

2. Literary and Musical Titles

¹ In this respect titles act like signatures and have a performative aspect: they assert ownership over the work and stand surety for its fixed state. See Fisher [1984], Symes [1992], and Wilsmore [1987: 405-6].

It is not surprising that art historians and philosophers have neglected titular history, given the difficulties involved.² At a minimum, one would need to be able to distinguish between titles conferred at the time of a work's creation, and those given by cataloguers long after the fact. But most of the original documents and records required to do so no longer exist, if they ever did. Nevertheless, the question of whether there were any titles at all in the ancient world was a source of debate among twentieth-century philologists. There is some evidence of titling for works of literature and theatre in Greece in the fourth century BCE. But it is not obvious that these are titles in the modern sense of the word: they appear on the outside of papyrus scrolls and are likely short- or second-hand attributions used primarily for cataloguing and distinguishing the scroll from other documents in the owner's collection [Oliver 1951: 244; Dahl 1958: 16, 20-1, 25-6; Hoek 1981: 5-6; Genette 1988: 699].

According to Revilo P. Oliver, there is no extant evidence at all for Latin titlature prior to the development of the vellum *codex* in the first century CE. He attributes the development of formulaic titles and title pages to the increased space offered by the *codex* over the *volumen* [Oliver 1951: 241, 248-49]. As Rome waned, however, so too did the use of titles for written works until it had largely disappeared from European literary practices. It is not clear why titling dwindled in Europe; perhaps, as some have surmised, it was a result of declining literacy. Or perhaps, as Oliver has suggested, the decline is partly attributable to other factors: (1) changing editorial practices, which left less room for the production information, dedications, etc. which characterize early titles, and (2) scribal error when transcribing from copies with large letters and narrow columns (namely, *volumen*), which would have made titles difficult to discern. Anne Ferry and John Mulvihill have offered the compatible observation that titling was usually bestowed by editors or vendors and reserved for works destined for public consumption as a sort of advertisement or guarantee of the work's contents. According to them, titles only become commonplace for both public and private literary works in the seventeenth century [Ferry 1996: ch. 1; Mulvihill 1998: 190-92, 195, 201, 203].

² I am aware of three main exceptions: Bann [1985], Welchman [1997], and Yeazell [2015]. Unfortunately, all three are primarily interested in developments in titlature and interpretation after the eighteenth century, and leave early titular history largely unexamined.

At any rate, it is clear that literary titles only came back into vogue in the fifteenth century, with the advent of the printed book. Manuscripts and early printed books made use of an *incipit* instead of a title page, and placed production information in a colophon at the end of the text [Dahl 1958: 20-1, 46, 95-6; Bokobza 1986: 19-20; Genette 1988: 699; Petersen 2006: 30]. By the sixteenth century titles had moved to their own page, separate from the *incipit* and production information.³ Title pages became important tools for promoting and marketing books, and increasing attention was paid to their design. By today's standards, however, these titles were excessively long and unstable, often varying from one publication to the next [Bokobza 1986: 21]. Consider the title page of the first (quarto) edition of *Romeo and Juliet* (1597), which presents the following information in the position where we might expect to see a title:

An EXCELLENT conceited Tragedie of Romeo and Juliet As it hath been often (with great applause) plaid publicly, by the right Honourable the L. of Hunsden his Servants.

As titles go, this one is significantly longer than today's version. It also contains a wealth of information: we are offered a taste of the work's content (a tragic and elaborately metaphorical tale of a man and a woman), we are told the protagonists' names, and can even find some production information. Finally, the title here acts as an advertisement for the work itself: we are told that this is not just any old conceited tragedy, it's an *excellent* one; what is more, it is often played publicly, and to more than merely tepid acclaim.

These lengthy titles were so unwieldy for that audiences referred to the associated works with pithier phrases, until they came to be known by these abbreviations. Printers were quick to economize as audiences became increasingly familiar with individual works and the printed medium, and by the seventeenth century had separated titles and sub-titles typographically, and had subordinated the latter to the former [Bokobza (1986: 22)]. The first folio of 1623, for example, calls it the 'Tragedie of Romeo and Juliet' on the play's first page, and just 'Romeo and Juliet' in the table of contents (note, however, that the folio enjoys its own excessively informative title). Clearly, these contractions are the result of space constraints, themselves imposed by the nature of the work under consideration: the first folio is a collection of works, each of which is titled, while the first quarto is simply an individual work, with its own title page.

³ Printed covers first appeared in the nineteenth century.

Published music charted a complementary course, although the extant evidence remains scanty until the sixteenth century.⁴ Surviving written fragments of ancient music feature neither title pages nor a titular heading, but occasionally offer an explanatory colophon at the end of the text, as with the h.6 Hurrian hymn to Nikkal (c. 1400 BCE). Early vocal music would have been known colloquially either by a functional description of the song's content, like Horace's *Carmen Saeculare* (c. 17 BCE), or by an appellation taken from its first lines much like a book's *incipit*, as with Étienne de Liège's *Itaque Convenit* (c. 9th-10th centuries CE). Instrumental music, on the other hand, seems to have tended mostly towards taxonomical designations (such as 'paean' or 'sonata') in the ancient and classical periods, likely because these pieces were short and not published as standalone works [Escal 1987: 102-3, 107-8]. The first century and a half of music printing was primarily concerned with vocal music such as chansons, madrigals, and sacred music; the publication of instrumental pure music came later, with neumatic notation in the late fifteenth century and modern mensural notation in the sixteenth [Fraenkel 1968: 3-7]. Like their literary counterparts, early volumes of published music featured excessively voluble descriptions of the work's function, patron, or the occasion of its performance, such as Franchinus Gaffurius's *Practica musicae utriusque catus excellentis Frachini gaffori laudesis. Quattuor libris modulatissima: Sumaqz diligetia novissime Ipressa* (1512).

Classical titlature was not especially concerned to individuate the works in a collection (so that most of Bach's instrumental music was published as 'Keyboard Practice' or 'Exercises'), instead delegating the task to an *incipit* [Escal 1987: 104; Goehr 1992: 200]. The widespread adoption of opus numbers in the late eighteenth century facilitated disambiguation, freeing title pages from the need to refer to occasions and purposes. Yet these numbers tracked publication (rather than composition) order, were inconsistently assigned, and were sometimes supplanted in later editions [Escal 1987: 103]. Nevertheless, it is at this time that we begin to see (1) pieces of pure music titled to indicate their status as self-contained works inextricably linked to their composers (as with Beethoven's *Symphony No. 5 in C minor, Opus 67*), and (2) titles used to indicate programme music's representational goals (as with Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique: Épisode de la vie d'un artiste... en cinq parties* [1830], each part of which is subtitled) [Escal 1987: 108, 111-12; Goehr 1992: 203, 228].

⁴ For what little survives from Classical Greece and Rome, see Landels [1999: ch. 10].

3. Visual Art and Reflective Character

The visual arts were slower to warm to titles, with little clear evidence of titled (rather than merely inscribed) works in Europe prior to the development of literary title pages. At least part of the reason for Europe's late adoption of titles is just that for most of their history, the content of visual artworks was readily accessible to period audiences. Works of visual art existed subordinate to some purpose and place, usually religious, and were eclipsed by their ecclesiastical and other functions [Baxandall 1985: 105-11; Shiner 2003: 123].⁵ When functioning properly their content would have been transparent to viewers approaching them in context and with what Michael Baxandall has called 'the period eye' [Baxandall 1985; see also Welchman 1997: 1-2 and Yeazaell 2015: ch. 1]. This is because prior to the development of the public art market, public exhibitions, and reproductive prints, artists could rely on common cultural touchstones to help audiences to identify visual content. It was only when artworks became divorced from their connection to particular occasions, purposes, and places that—like every pre-modern work in a museum today [Feagin 1995]—they came to be seen as permanent, self-contained *works* whose identification required (first) descriptions and (later) titles [Shiner 2003: 124].⁶ Over time, artists began to supply these descriptions themselves, and eventually shed lengthy descriptions for pithy phrases. Titles are thus a by-product of the mobility of images, to borrow Gombrich's idiom [1985: 216].

Consider the catalogues for the exhibitions of the Paris Salon (1673-1725). The 1673 catalogue says:

To proceed in a more orderly fashion with the *description* of these paintings, we will begin with the façade of the side of the carousel by VI trumeau, which is adorned by the paintings of M. Coipel the father. To wit,
His portrait and his family in one painting.
Hercules sacrificing to Jupiter after his victories.
Hercules deified, or the apotheosis of Hercules.
Hercules reproaching Juno for the harm her jealousy has caused him.
Hercules taming Acheloos... [Janson 1978: 7-8; translation and emphasis mine.]

⁵ The same, of course, was true of much music, which was tied to particular extra-musical functions and occasions—although this is not to say that music was not sometimes appreciated for itself [Goehr 1992: ch. 7; Young 2005].

⁶ Cf. Goehr on the development of the musical work-concept's regulative force [1992: chs. 7-8].

As we can see, the early catalogues contain few if any recognizable titles; instead, they are explicitly conceived by their authors as step-by-step *descriptions*—not names!—of the works, most of which were hung on sections of wall or pillars between openings (*trumeau*) and backed by tapestries from the royal collection. Nearly eighty years later, for the exhibitions of 1750-63, cataloguers numbered the works on the walls in an effort to simplify the task of finding their associated descriptions. Yet, although the works were numbered, they were not yet titled; they were still just associated with the cataloguers' descriptions. Just five years after the introduction of numbers, however, we start to see much less cumbersome descriptions separated out from production information. It is here, with the 1755 catalogue, that we find a presentation of information which strongly suggests the first titles for visual art: short descriptions followed by information concerning the materials, dates, and provenance of the work, just as we would see on object labels today.⁷

It is worth mentioning, at this juncture, a tale often told in art-historical circles [see, for example, Stokstad 1995: 680-81]: in 1573 Veronese was hauled before an Inquisition tribunal for daring to paint a last supper featuring Christ associating with dogs, dwarfs, German soldiers, and a parrot. Compelled by the tribunal to change his picture, Veronese instead simply changed the title from *The Last Supper* to *The Feast in the House of Levi*. The trial's transcript likewise seems to indicate that the picture was titled: after Veronese lists several of the Last Suppers he has painted, the inquisitor replies 'But that one is not a Last Supper, and is not even *called* the Supper of Our Lord' [Crawford 1905: 31; emphasis mine]. The tale does not survive scrutiny, however. First, the only evidence we have of *any* action taken by Veronese contradicts the telling: he *did* change the painting. Veronese added inscriptions on the pillars at the head of the staircase (*Fecit D. Covi Magnum Levi* and *Luca Cap. V*, a reference to a passage in the Gospel of Luke) [Grasman 2009: 125, 127]. But while these might effectuate a change in *subject*, they do not amount to a change of *title*. Second, although the English translation of the trial transcript is faithful to the prior French translation, neither of these accurately reflects the Italian original, which simply refers to the picture's subject matter rather than its

⁷ Gombrich dates the first visual art titles to the 1740 Salon exhibition, which contained Chardin's 'La Bénédicte' [1985: 216]. Yeazell finds the first concrete evidence of titles (rather than descriptions) in the minutes of a *Conservatoire* meeting for the 1796 Salon exhibition [2015: 39]. Nothing much hangs on this difference: the point is that works of visual art acquired titles late in the game, in the mid- or late eighteenth century.

appellation.⁸ Finally, my point here concerns the development of the *convention* of titling works of visual art which, as the 1750-63 *Salon* catalogues amply demonstrate, became established practice in the eighteenth century.

Everything changed in the nineteenth century, however, when artists started using titles to influence the appreciation and interpretation of their works (especially by violating audience expectations), rather than to catalogue and identify them.⁹ Consider the work colloquially known as the *Portrait of Whistler's Mother*, whose artist-given title was *Arrangement in Grey and Black* No.1 (1871). While not the first unexpected title, it is perhaps the most notorious. In his 1890 book *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*, Whistler explained his choice of title:

Take the picture of my mother, exhibited at the Royal Academy as an 'Arrangement in Grey and Black.' Now that is what it is. To me it is interesting as a picture of my mother; but what can or ought the public do to care about the identity of the portrait? [1890: 128]

Its different appellations compel us to regard the work differently: the original constitutes a speech act at odds with our expectations and so demands an explanation, thus calling our attention to the painting's formal properties as its proper subject. The colloquial title, by contrast, focuses our attention on the themes of family values and filial affection, so that the figure in the foreground becomes the work's primary subject matter. In this case, the original title helps to focus the audience's attention on particular features of the work which they might otherwise miss entirely. As George Yoos puts it, the title gives us a set of initial directions to guide us in our appreciation and interpretation of the work [Yoos 1966: 360; see also Fisher 1984: 288].

Jerrold Levinson usefully characterizes such titles as having *semantic weight*, meaning that the title's semantic content has significant bearing upon its associated work's *artistic* content [Levinson 1985: 38; see

⁸ The original says 'Questa non è cena, ne si domanda della Cena del Signor' [Dorfles et al. 2015: 49]. The relevant verb is 'domandare' ('to ask') rather than 'nominare' ('to name'). A more appropriate translation would be: 'But that's not a Supper; we are asking about the Lord's Supper.' The 'ne' may be a corruption of 'né', meaning 'neither'; other texts sometimes suggest the emendation 'et'. Regardless, the sense is the same: the Inquisition cannot quite see *the subject* of a Last Supper in Veronese's painting.

⁹ Hollander [1975: 221] dates the spread of artist-given titles to the nineteenth century, Welchman [1997: 2] to roughly 1860, and Bann [1985] argues that some of the works of J.M.W Turner (1775-1851) fit the bill. In China, painting's origins lie in manuscript illustration. The move towards pictorial autonomy took place between the 7th-10th centuries, culminating in an official titular practice in the eleventh century which generated reflective titles in the thirteenth, with the works of Ma Lin [Zhang 2005: 612-17]. A similar relationship between calligraphy and the visual arts developed in early Islamic art, especially with the floriated Kufic and Maghribi scripts of the tenth century onwards.

also Fisher 1984: 286-7]. The point is not that semantically weighty titles have semantic *content*; that much is to be expected of any well-formed linguistic formula. Rather, the point is that this content is mobilized in such a way as to bear upon (or be reflective of) the nature of the title's bearer: it becomes a vehicle of meaning—a part of the work—rather than a purely referential tool. The resulting titles play an essential role in the identification, individuation, and interpretation of their associated artworks. To avoid confusion over the semantic content/weight distinction in what follows, I will call weighty titles *reflective* and characterize them as having a 'reflective' character or content.

According to Levinson, all titles have a reflective character, and are narrowly constitutive of their associated works. Titles are indispensable parts of artworks, and help to determine the work's artistic content [Fisher 1984: 292; Levinson 1985: 29]. Even mere descriptions—'neutral' titles—are reflective, because they represent an artistic decision that was made rather than left undone, and because the title *slot* itself is pregnant with semantic potential [Levinson 1985: 29, 34]. The proof, he thinks, is to be found in a simple thought-experiment: change a work's title, and you have thereby altered its work's artistic content [Levinson 1985: 34].

But that need not be so. For works with merely descriptive titles, for example, substituting one appropriate description for another does not seem to change the work's artistic content. It makes little real difference to the work's identification, individuation, or interpretation whether it is called *Still-Life with Partridge and Gauntlets* (1504) or *Still-Life with Partridge and Iron Gloves*. A change of title may well entail a shift of focus, but where descriptive titles are concerned these changes leave the works themselves largely unaffected.

What should we make of descriptive titular substitutions which change date or order, such as from *Sonnet 10* to *Sonnet 100*? Such changes were especially commonplace in early classical music, where opus numbers were inconsistently applied. We can easily imagine such changes resulting in different work-level property ascriptions, so that the composition now seems rather derivative where before it was prescient. Or consider Rembrandt's *Militia Company of District II under the Command of Captain Frans Banninck Cocq* (1642), known for centuries as *The Night Watch*. It was discovered in the 1940s that the colloquial title misdescribes the painting, which shows Cocq's militia company in daylight; the painting became known by its colloquial title only after the ageing varnish had darkened the scene.

These cases do not show that substitutions of descriptive titles change their associated works; rather, they serve to demonstrate the unsurprising fact that *inappropriate* descriptions misidentify their associated works. So long as we substitute appropriate descriptions the work suffers no change, since a single work can support many different descriptions. The more reflective the title, the more important it is to the work's identity and the less well the work will survive titular substitution. At the top of the scale, titles are so strongly reflective that they are narrowly constitutive of their works, so that a change in title entails a change of work [see Wilshire 1987: 403]. Call these part-titles. Part-titles are most obvious in conceptual art, where they help to distinguish the work from its vehicular medium: this is the case with Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953), and Jenny Holzer's *Please Change Beliefs* (1995). But part-titles are by no means limited to conceptual art; they are also commonplace in the visual arts. Just consider Magritte's *La trahison des images* (1929; *The treachery of images*, better known by its inscription, 'ceci n'est pas une pipe' ['this is not a pipe']), whose image, inscription, and title interact to convey a sophisticated meta-message. In fact, reflective titles can help to distinguish perceptually indistinguishable works with different subjects. Compare, for example, Walker Evans's Depression-era photographs (*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 1941) to their counterparts in Sherrie Levine's series entitled *After Walker Evans* (1981). Although they consist of visually indistinguishable works, these are different series of distinct photographic artworks, each with its own particular artistic content. In such cases, the title is quite literally part of its associated work.

As visual art embraced abstraction and made strides towards the non-representationalism of the twentieth century, the practice of using titles to indicate the work's proper subject culminated in artists bestowing works with reflective titles which became indispensable parts of those works, and thus helped to determine their artistic content [Hollander 1975: 218; Levinson 1985: 28]. Not all titles have much of a reflective character, or are parts of their works; on the contrary, many titles remain bare descriptions. But since the nineteenth century reflective character has become closely intertwined with a work's identity conditions. So much so that, in her interviews of artists, Margery Franklin found that they *all* viewed titling as integral to the process of completing or 'crystallizing' a piece [Franklin 1988: 165-67]. Reflective titles suffuse

the work and give it content which it might otherwise lack, sometimes to the point where changing a reflective title generates an entirely new work (since a change of parts entails a change of work).

4. What Makes Titles Names

So far, I have focused my attention on the history of our practice of titling artworks because it has been neglected by art historians and philosophers alike. By paying careful attention to that history, we are now in a position to assess the extent to which the forms and functions of names and titles overlap—or not, as the case may be.

First, it is worth observing that it is not uncommon to see theorists and historians distinguishing between those titles given by artists themselves as guides to interpretation, and those given by others, which are often seen as an interpretations [for example, Adams 1987: 12]. Levinson's remarks about what I have called reflective titles are confined to the former category, a kind of title which he calls 'true titles'. These are titles conferred by works' authors at roughly the time of their creation [Fisher 1984; Levinson 1985: 33]. On this view, artists enjoy a privileged position since only they can confer reflective titles on their works. Titles supplied by anyone else are merely interpretations or reappropriations of the work in question. The result is that there are no—or at best very few—true titles prior to the eighteenth century, when artists started titling their own works. While I have no interest in pronouncing on the usefulness of true titles, it is important to note that the notion supplies a potential source of divergence between titles and names. Ordinary names, after all, can be conferred by just about anybody at just about any time: although official channels exist for naming some things (such as children), those channels are easily and often subverted (such as by using a middle name or nickname). The notion of a person's legal name may roughly approximate that of a true title, but it is also underpinned by a much more readily apparent and institutionalized set of conventions.

Let us now turn our attention to the case for treating titles as proper names. The most obvious point of contact between names and titles that both have the essential functions of denoting their bearers and facilitating reference to them. When a name or title is so long or complex as to hinder reference, our natural inclination is to abbreviate or nickname it for our convenience. With anthroponyms, our habit is to use either

a first, last, or nickname in ordinary conversational contexts, unless further disambiguation is required. The same is true of exasperatingly long titles such as Gaffurius's *Practica musicae*..., since embedding them into sentences is a recipe for error and frustration. In this respect, titles closely resemble toponyms, which frequently use singular or otherwise compact lexical items to encode a descriptive phrase characterizing the place to which they refer. So, for example, the Karuk name for northern California's Stony Flats is *asánaamkarak*, a single word meaning 'where a rocky flat place extends into the water' [Bright 2003: 675]. As for nicknames, just consider Haydn's *Symphony Number 96 in D* (1791), popularly known as *The Miracle* because a chandelier fell during a performance yet injured no one [Kellman 1975].

But denoting an object and facilitating reference to it alone are not sufficient to name a thing. Although all parties agree that the referential function of proper names is necessary—and thus that proper names uniquely identify their referents in context—there is not much agreement among linguists or philosophers of language over the precise set of necessary and sufficient conditions for naming. Naming is thought to be largely a matter of convention, while the identification of proper names is left mostly to intuition.¹⁰ We have already seen how titles came to be ascribed to works of visual art for initially purely referential purposes. Insofar as facilitating reference is an essential property of names, then, it is fair to treat titles as names. But we also saw that our titling practice has grown beyond supplying referential aides and moved towards imbuing reflective content. The question before us, then, is whether proper names can also bear reflective content.

At first glance, the answer is an unambiguous 'no'. The standard Millian and Kripkean analyses of proper names allow no reflection: names are not parts of their bearers, they are external labels which we apply for referential purposes. This is not to say that ordinary proper names lack semantic content or associations: on the contrary, names come with all sorts of cultural baggage (such as being common to particular linguistic groups or geographic areas) and they often contain common nouns (like 'bridge'), so that they have some kind of meaning. The point is that this semantic content has no necessary bearing upon or connection to the identification, individuation, or interpretation of the entity in question. So although the name 'John'

¹⁰ Although some languages do mark out written proper names, much as English does by means of capitalization.

reportedly derives from a Hebrew phrase meaning ‘Yahweh is gracious,’ and although in English it is also associated with toilets and men who purchase sex, we all recognize that it would be inappropriate to read any of these meanings into a particular John’s character or identity. Even if he were so-named because his parents fervently believed the Hebrew phrase, ‘John’ would tell us nothing at all about the man since the name’s semantic content is only contingently connected to the individual himself.

But as we saw in section 3, the same cannot be said of reflective titles. If a change in title would result in a new or substantively different work, then the title in question has a reflective character (and isn’t a Millian name); if it wouldn’t, then it doesn’t. Imagine, for example, that *La trahison des images* had instead been titled *Temujin’s Pipe*. Although the work’s *physical* properties would remain the same, the subject that is parasitic upon the interaction between image, inscription, and title could not, since the title would bear a different evocative relationship to the vehicular medium. Substituting *Temujin’s Pipe* for *La trahison des images* in art-critical contexts yields descriptions of the work at odds with its artistic properties: it results in an altogether new work.

The contrast with proper names should be clear, since changing one’s name from ‘John’ to ‘Russell’ has no substantive effect on one’s identity or properties. Neither does changing a pet’s name from Emmeline to Elsewhere, a town’s name from Berlin (Ontario) to Kitchener, or renaming the Molson Centre the Bell Centre. People can change their names, pets are sometimes renamed when they change ownership, towns are named anew to serve political ends, and new sponsors purchase fresh naming rights to buildings. In none of these cases is the act of renaming thought to significantly change or influence the entity’s properties, since it is merely a change of labels, not of parts. The more reflective the title, however, the more important it is to the work’s identity-conditions. Intuitively, it matters a great deal what *La trahison des images* is called, and that Manet’s *Olympia* has the title it does,¹¹ that *War and Peace* is neither *The Year 1805*, *All’s Well That Ends Well*, nor *War, What Is It Good For?* How is this possible, if names are supposed to be bare labels?

¹¹ For some connotations carried by the name ‘Olympia,’ rendered as ‘Olympe’ in French contexts, see Flescher [1985: 27-35]. The title is widely attributed to Manet’s friend Zacharie Astruc, and was conferred two years after the painting’s creation and exhibition.

5. Reflective Names

So far, we have seen that titles and proper names share a number of their properties. But we have also seen that reflective titles are necessarily connected to their works, and that fact precludes their substitution with a putatively coreferential title, suggesting that, unlike names, they encode an associated descriptive sense. We might then conclude that titles are the names of artworks except when they are reflective. But first, we should ask whether it is in fact true that names are never reflective.

Consider nicknames. When they are not merely diminutives, nicknames are often given in virtue of some property or reputation of their bearers. Nicknames can thus be descriptive, as in the cases of ‘Shorty’ and ‘Little John’. But they may also sometimes require interpretation or previous knowledge, as when ‘Shorty’ and ‘Little John’ are ironically applied, or in the cases of the bynames ‘Haraldr harðráði’ (Hard-ruler), ‘Eiríkr blóðøx’ (Bloodaxe), ‘Onund Treefoot,’ (read: ‘Peg-leg’) or ‘Genghis Khan’ (conjectured roughly to mean ‘Ruler of All’). At a minimum, these violate the Gricean maxim of quality, and demand interpretation. Indeed, it seems likely that the bearers (and users) of these historical nicknames thought of them as expressing or reflecting important personal traits, to the point where some aspect of their reputation or personal identity hinged on their possession of just that name.

Bynames are especially instructive in this regard since, in addition to physical or mental characteristics, they were used to denote relationships (like the –son and –dotter/dóttir suffixes), to indicate social function or rank (like Baker, Miller, Prince, and Smith), or to commemorate special events (like Austmannaskelfir, meaning ‘terror of the east-men’, Loðbrók [‘hairy-breeks’; named after his snake-proof hide trousers], or Pardoe, meaning ‘par Dieu’ [‘by God’]). Most telling of all are locative bynames, many of which were adopted from a person’s estates in order to cement hereditary land claims: in English, this is especially true of names formed just after the Norman conquest of England, such as ‘Richard de Clara’ and ‘Ralph de Gaël’ [Brylla 2016: 242]. Although bynames got their start as descriptions, over time many have had their semantic content bleached and became given names (like Björn, originally meaning ‘bear’) or heritable surnames [Brylla 2016: 241]. At least until their bleaching, such nicknames seem to have had a reflective character, if not one as fully developed as that associated with some titles. Bleaching eventually stops the

entailment from “Brynhildr Buðladóttir prophesied Sigurðr’s doom” to “Brynhildr’s father is Buðla” by rendering the surname’s semantic content inert. True bynames are not Millian; bleaching makes them into heritable and Millian family names.

Alternately, consider toponyms (placenames). Some toponyms have no discoverable original etymology, such as ‘London’, ‘Paris’, or ‘Rome’. If these placenames have their origins in descriptive phrases in some Indo-European language, they have been so thoroughly bleached of phonetic and semantic clues that we have no hope of ever discovering those origins. But just like anthroponyms, a great many toponyms do have their origins in descriptive phrases: these include ‘Canada’ (derived from the Iroquois word for ‘village’), ‘Ellesmere Port’, ‘London Bridge’, ‘Montréal’ (derived from the French words for ‘Mount Royal’), ‘Scotland’, and ‘United States of America’. While some of these (especially Canada and Montréal) have undergone assiduous bleaching via borrowing, others (especially Ellesmere Port, London Bridge, and Scotland) have not yet been entirely scoured of their reflective character.¹² The town of Ellesmere Port is situated at the outlet of a canal which was never completed, and is the site of England’s National Waterways Museum. The name’s aspirational character can be gleaned from the fact that some time before or during the construction of its canal to the Severn, the town changed its name from the rather less auspicious ‘Netherpool’. Similarly, it matters a great deal that London Bridge is not called ‘London Port’ or ‘The Super-Aquatic A3,’ and that Scotland designates the land belonging to the Scots and is not called ‘England’. Note also, in this connection, that toponyms have played a particular political role in colonial contexts, where the assignment of new placenames in a new language works to legitimize the colonial power’s land claims, and to assimilate or erase the traces of pre-existing cultures.¹³ The more remote a name’s historical origins, the less pellucid its semantic content is to our perception, and thus the less reflective its character. Bleaching facilitates the process of lexicalization, and renders the connection between a name and an individual contingent, rather than necessary.

¹² As for the United States, I leave it to readers to make up their own minds.

¹³ This particular issue has received more attention in anthropology and cultural geography. On anthroponyms and colonialism, see vom Bruck and Bodenhorn [2006]; for toponyms and colonialism, see Berg and Vuolteenaho [2009].

Finally, even ordinary anthroponyms exhibit a degree of reflectiveness quite apart from their origins in descriptive phrases. Consider the fact that many (most?) personal names are gendered. Unlike other kinds of content associated with names (such as ethnicity, geographic origins, or religious significance), the practice of taking names to indicate gender is so deeply ingrained that many people *do* think that a change in gendered names entails (or reflects) a substantive change in one's significant properties. I mentioned earlier that it might not matter much to anyone whether someone's name was 'John' or 'Russell'; but it matters a great deal more whether it is 'Michel' or 'Michelle'. In such cases, it is entirely appropriate to read gender into a person's name (hence the suffix). Anthroponyms also serve a distinctly social function: in the context of our official binary naming system, surnames express family affiliation, while forenames identify individuals of that family. So, for instance, we understand the name 'Agatha Christie' to designate the English (contrast 'Agathe' or 'Αγαθη') female 'Agatha'-member of the Christie family. Gendered names thus join nicknames and toponyms in conveying reflective content, although vigorous bleaching ensures the entailment is pragmatic (from social function) rather than semantic.

If these observations are correct, then we are faced with something of a dilemma. On the one hand, titles act like names, look like names, and are widely assumed to be names; but if titles are names, then proper names are more than mere referential aides, and can be reflective. On the other hand, if a title's reflective character precludes it from counting as a name, then what about gendered names, nicknames, and placenames? To excise such intuitive candidates from the class of proper names would leave it looking *ad hoc* and somewhat sparse.

To my mind, the most parsimonious strategy is to class titles as a species of proper name, one whose function is more than merely referential—and thus not strictly Millian. Reflective titles are hardly unique in being deviant; we can locate them at one end of a spectrum measuring a name's reflective content, with fully bleached anthroponyms and toponyms at the opposite pole. Nicknames lie somewhere in between, closer to the reflective than the unreflective pole. Gendered names, however, may count as properly Millian, since their descriptive sense is encoded by their social function and lexical markings rather than their semantics. Much as repetitive and popular use of metaphors can inoculate us to their original, literal meaning, resulting in a

semantic shift, so too with reflective names. Bleaching shifts the burden of encoding a descriptive sense from semantic to pragmatic entailment. Extensive repetition, especially across cultural, historical, and linguistic contexts, will inoculate a name's audience to its reflective content until it is eventually treated as entirely unreflective, as with the personal name 'Morgan'.

To see this process in action, we need look no further than a surname's cultural and ethnic profile. Consider 'Smith': the surname obviously derives from the Old English word designating a metalworker. As an occupational surname, it dates back to Anglo-Saxon times. To a sixth-century Anglo-Saxon, the surname would mean a great deal and be closely interwoven with the individual's identity: nobody would call Steapa the baker 'Steapa Smith'. But thanks to the Norman conquest, the spread of the British Empire, and the evolution of our naming system, the surname 'Smith' has lost its connection to blacksmithing. It is now the most common surname in Australia, the UK, and the United States, and the second-most common surname in Canada. Nor is it essentially connected to those of English descent, since a number of African Americans adopted it following the Emancipation Proclamation, indigenous peoples adopted/were forced to adopt it in their dealings with colonists, and many immigrants anglicized their equivalent surnames (such as 'Schmidt') upon emigrating to Anglophone countries. 'Smith' and other matronymic, occupational, patronymic, and toponymic names may once have enjoyed a reflective character, but their spread has worked against taking that character seriously. At this point in time, it would be entirely inappropriate to read anything into someone's identity based on such a common surname. Although they began their lives at the reflective end of the spectrum, today these surnames are decidedly unreflective. Millian names aren't born, they are bleached; and reflective titles are unbleached names.

6. Conclusion

According to the story I have told, the titles of artworks are best conceived as their proper names. Although titles often have a reflective character and are not always merely referential aides, I have argued that we should not hold these facts against them, since many other prototypical proper names exhibit the same features. The trick simply lies in recognizing that artworks have only acquired their titles comparatively

recently, whereas most of the other proper names we bandy about have much more remote historical origins, so that their reflective character and social function are no longer ready to hand. Names are indeed labels which we apply for the purpose of facilitating reference. But that is not all they are, for names also serve social functions, and these sometimes require a degree of reflection.¹⁴

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