

ONOMASTICS TO THE RESCUE

The giving of names to things or persons means calling them *virtually* into existence. It is the paradigmatic act of creation on the human plane. In Genesis (2:19-20), God leaves the naming of all the creatures, including woman (3:20), up to Adam, whose name means "man." Technically speaking, naming involves the differentiation of the world (phenomenal and mental) into discrete entities through a translation into metamedia (words, images, numbers) that can be processed by the human mind. This can imply separation and fragmentation as well as unification: the name is a part that can stand for the whole and, for the mystics, any part can be the whole.

My name is my password into the world of human codes and meanings, that is language. What is recognized as existent is admitted into the system of social interrelationships and transactions that can also be termed the human economy. What "is" can be "had"; that is, commodified and possessed, be it material or immaterial, actual or virtual. Today there is a market for identity, or, more exacty, identification: identity by proxy. The names of famous artists and performers are copyrighted as soon as the lives of their original owners expire. Ultimately, a name is about all that remains of the rest of us. Naming is the name of the game.

The belief in the emblematic and programmatic significance of names—*Nomen est omen*—is still widespread and attests to the aura that surrounds the originally sacred act of naming. A name is encoded information referring to origins, relation, status, rank, and identifying or associated qualities. If the line of transmission of the meanings of a name has been lost or interrupted, the science of *Onomastics* is there to help us.

One day it occurred to me to ask, "what does the name Rembran(d)t mean?" Although I lived in Paris, the answer was easy

enough to find. I only had to consult the nearest etymological dictionaries of Dutch names at the Institut Néerlandais and ask Mrs. van de Leeuwen, the librarian, to translate the entries.

I consulted three reference books: Meijers and Luitingh (1955), Huizinga (1957) and Van der Schaar (1967).

The first source gave the meaning: "*Het kloeke zwaard' (met wijsheid het zwaard hanterende)*," which can be translated as "the clever sword (to wield the sword wisely)." The second source referred me to the name Rembertus, which means "*De schitterende raad(gever)*," or "the bright advisor." The third split the name into two parts: "*Regin- 'raad'*" and "*-brand 'vlammend (Zwaard)*" (flashing, sword), without specifying a combined meaning.

The three sources differ enough to exclude copying, and agree enough to suggest a specific image: that of a sword used advisedly. The word "*raad*" stems from the Latin "ratio" and means advice or counsel; the word "*brand*" ("*brant*") is a cognate of the identical English word, which comes from an Old High German word meaning "torch" (hence "to brand," "firebrand," "brandish," etc.) and the idea of "sword" comes in through the image of sunlight glancing on a polished blade.

This derivation brings us easily to the idea of "brand," as in branding or marking a horse with an iron, and so to trademarks: ®. What immediately caught my attention, however, was the image of the sword, and, by extension, that of the



shield. The first fits neatly into the network of Pauline associations (St. Paul, Paul Rembrandt, see entries 59 and 64) and the second with the etymology of the Dutch word for painter, "schilder": one of the secular painter's jobs was to paint shop signs and coats-of-arms on shields (see entry 63).

Although not strictly etymological, I pass on the information that the famous Dr. Nicolaes Tulp(ius), another son of Leiden who made good in Amsterdam, is said to have been inspired to change his name from Claes Pietersz. by the image of a tulip carved on the gable of his home, a former tulip auction house. The success of the enterprising self-made man empowers him to re-baptize himself and literally to be his own maker.

The oil sketch of David with the head of Goliath being presented to King Saul (1627, Br. 488; previous page), is one of Rembrandt's earliest-known paintings.

Be all that as it may, to claim that Rembrandt had a special relationship to swords because of his name obviously assumes that its meaning was current or accessible knowledge in his day. On the other hand, what are the sciences of Etymology and Onomastics all about?



Above: the apotheosis of the wise, unifying sword in The Conspiracy of Claudius Civilis from 1661-62 (Br. 482).



Above: The youthful Rembrandt(?) as sword-wielding angel in the 1626 Balaam's ass admonishing its master, Br. 487 (see entry 14).