(Im)proper Wife: Robert Graves' Wife to Mr Milton

As a novelist, Robert Graves is probably best known for his reconstructions of turning points in the history of the Roman Empire (the Empire at its height in the "Claudius novels," and at its fall in *Count Belisarius*), of Christianity (*King Jesus*), of the Republican interlude in seventeenth century England (*Wife to Mr Milton*). As the filter of the narration in these texts is always a specific historical subject --either the protagonist (as in *I, Claudius, Claudius the God* and *Wife to Mr Milton*) or an eye-witness (e.g. in *Count Belisarius*)--the conventions of (auto)biographical writing are employed as much as those of the historical novel, and I therefore prefer to call them "fictional (auto)biographies of historical characters."

This, I would argue, is a specific genre which started with Virginia Woolf's *Flush* (1933) and which had a strongly critical intent from its beginning; this is shown, for instance, by Woolf's choice of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's dog, rather than either the poet or the poetess, as her main character. In *Wife to Mr Milton* (1942), Graves similarly chose to focus on the historically silent and nearly forgotten wife rather than on the great voice of English poetry, John Milton. Dogs and wives: in less than a decade, an interesting combination of new subjects comes to centre stage, already foreshadowing some of the typical features of postmodern fiction such as ex-centricity, the rewriting of history from marginal points of view, the reconsideration of tradition as well as of a particular (hi)story, and the blurring of generic boundaries (fiction, history, biography, autobiography).[1]

However, Graves' novel does not parody the (auto)biographical form or question the literary genre and its conventions as *Flush* had done. Instead, it exploits the potential of the genre for narrative and thematic purposes, rather like the (auto)biographical novel of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century--with the important difference, of course, that *Wife to Mr Milton* selects a *real* character as its protagonist and narrator and constantly relies on historical documents to support its recreation of the (hi)story. In this sense, *Wife to Mr Milton* can be located at the borderline between different genres and traditions: the historical novel, the mainstream tradition of the character-centred novel, and the new fictional biography of historical characters. The woman--a historical subject that historiography and literary history have silenced and brushed aside by choosing to exalt and glorify her husband--is now lent a voice through which she can speak and make her side of the story (and of history) heard: "I had thought it only fair, since Milton's prejudiced account of Marie had so long held the field, to let her borrow my pen and say her say as the spirited daughter of a Royalist father,"[2] Graves wrote in 1947 to defend his reconstruction of the life and history of Marie from the outraged reactions of Miltonian critics.

The autobiographical form also enables both Marie and Graves to bypass the poetic / authoritative (and authoritarian) voice of the seventeenth century - that of Milton himself - as well as that of subsequent centuries (the voices of the poets and critics that have exalted Milton and belittled her). Graves' own view of the poet could not be more explicit: "He was egotistical, unscrupulous and grasping. Fundamentally he was interested in nothing but his own career; in hacking his way to the Temple of Fame over the dead bodies of his enemies, rivals and friends" (GM 317).

Marie's story starts from the moment when, on her fifteenth birthday, she is presented by her aunt with a diary in which she can record the events of her life and her intimate thoughts, and it is from this diary that Marie rewrites her life as we read it in *Wife to Mr Milton*. From the start, the episode of the diary establishes Marie as a writer and story-teller in her own right, as worthy of literary credit as Milton[3] and, as a direct witness, worthier of historical credit than some of the documents on which her "historical" image (i.e., that transmitted to subsequent history) has been constructed (GM 318-19; 320). Thus, although Graves does not claim to write a strictly factual account of Marie's life ("Since this book is a novel, not a biography"),[4] he can nevertheless highlight the split inherent in the concepts of "history" and "historicity," which denotes both what adheres to known facts and what has been assumed to be the right interpretation of events and people, no matter how unfounded it may be.

Speaking in her own voice and writing for her own purposes and delectation, however, is not an easy option for Marie. When she receives the diary, not only has she to fight to keep it for herself and to write what she wants instead of what others want her to (her youngest brother, for instance, wants her to record there the tales of ogres and of the "good old days" which she is so good at inventing, *WMM* 10-11); she also has to ask for "a bundle of goose-pens, an ink-pot and a sand-caster" (*WMM* 12) from her father--an overtly symbolic request to the paternal authority in the house for the right to write independently. It is significant that as Marie asks her father for the implements that will enable her to write her *private accounts* of her life, he is busy checking the family's disastrous *financial accounts*, anticipating thus the unhappy linking of personal and economic matters that will haunt Marie in her later life and marriage with Milton. Equally significant and foreshadowing the ill luck that is to come is Marie's invitation to her father to make an inscription on the first page of the diary. Richard Powell draws on the as yet spotless diary the initials of his daughter's name and the coat of arms of the Powells; his daughter's future writing is thus already inscribed under the sign of the father's name, determining, as it were, the appurtenance of her voice to a pre-determined social and genealogical line. This is further underlined by Mr Powell's colouring of the coat of arms with a drop of his blood (*WMM* 12-13),[5] and the ill omen is

completed by the caption written at the foot of the page, which places the present time in an ideal heroic age on the brink of extinction: "*These Were the Brave Old Days, / saith Richard Powell.*" The reference clearly is to his worries about the contemporary social unrest and his foreboding of the hard times that will soon beset both England and the Powells (faithful royalists) in the civil war and during Cromwell's Commonwealth. But the effect of the inscription is, more specifically, to situate Marie at a moment of transition, at the extreme margin of a present-but-already-past golden age that, on account of its mythical nature (the "brave old days"), almost escapes history, and on the brink of an imminent fall into the temporality of a vulgar, unhappy future-which-is-already-present (the deictic "these" situating in the present what Marie still has to write). It is to the chronicle of this predestined fall that Richard Powell's bitter inscription condemns young Marie.

The full import of the father's inscription will be better seen later, when Marie agrees to become Milton's wife in order to delay the poet's claim of a debt Richard Powell had contracted with him: Marie is a pawn as much as a wife, and she becomes Milton's property after having been her father's. As Milton's property and pawn, she soon loses her value: when her father dies, Milton claims the money that was owed to him anyway, and the dowry that Marie should have brought with her but which was never paid.

As she forfeits her family name for Milton's, her first name, Marie--that which signifies her own individual identity rather than the social / familial one and therefore should not change--is also changed by Milton into the English Mary (Mary is, by the way, the name used by Miltonian critics; *GM* 316). Milton's own name, as well as his relationship with it, is foregrounded too. Until Milton and Marie get married, his name is always in question whenever it is mentioned--whether it is withheld, hidden under a pseudonym, or revealed. Milton appears for the first time in the long flashback of chapter three, "A Sight of Their Majesties, and of Another," in which Marie tells of how she met him once, as she was going to a reception in honour of the King and Queen. On that occasion, he is described as a "gentleman" of curious appearance (*WMM* 46-48), and, when asked his name by a lady in Marie's party, his haughty reply is: "Madam, today I have no name. But you may speak of me, if you will, as Tiresias; for by profession I am a poet" (*WMM* 48). The episode is revealing: Milton introduces his pseudonym as he learnedly explains to Marie and her companions how the echo can, in a particular spot, audibly repeat up to nineteen syllables (*WMM* 47). Appropriately, Milton makes it repeat two lines from Ovid's tale of Echo and Narcissus, which in the *Metamorphoses* are introduced by the prophet Tiresias (and it is certainly beyond his own best hopes that the pseudonym will later ironically fulfill its prophecy, when Milton becomes blind like the Greek seer).

Marie encounters Milton again at the reception for the sovereigns and overhears a conversation in which a London agent presses him to publish a masque he has written,[6] but Milton finally agrees only on condition that his name will not be revealed. Milton's reticence is very striking and it is made to stand out against the assurance with which Marie tells her name when she is asked by the Queen (*WMM* 54). Milton's unwillingness to have his name made public is important on at least two levels. From the perspective of Graves' technique of characterisation, the nature and attitudes of the two main characters towards their names enable us to contrast their openness and degree of social integration (sincere and direct, the woman's; suspicious and secretive, the poet's); the chosen pseudonym, moreover, casts a shadow over Milton's sexuality, which is also underpinned by his fascination with Marie's hair.[7]

More important than these psychologising traits, however, are the ideological implications which are raised. Milton's ambivalence towards his own name points to his belief in the existence of a very close link between family name (i.e. the historical and social name) and personal "essence." When Marie learns for the first time that Tiresias' true name is John Milton, she comments on the "singleness of his heart and mind and ... his evident jealousy to be John Milton and no other ..." (*WMM* 139). How can anyone be "jealous" to be himself and no other - how could it be otherwise? The character Milton, it seems, sees his "essence" ("character" in the sense of "essential peculiarity; nature," *OED*) as that of the great poet, and as long as this "property" ("quality" *OED*)[8] is not publicly and universally accepted as the true one, he does not condescend to be publicly acknowledged as "John Milton." The proper name is something that the character must earn or show himself worthy of in order to make genealogy, individual success, and identity coincide. As long as this coincidence is not recognized, Milton prefers to give himself a mask or *persona* through the *pseudonym* Tiresias. In this context, it is certainly appropriate that the first instance the reader is offered of Milton's literary production is an as yet untitled *masque*.

In fact, despite his "jealousy to be John Milton and no other," Milton is not the proper family name of the Miltons; it is, we could say, their improper name; the poet had undergone a change of name too (although not an imposed one, like Marie's) when his grandfather had modified the family name of Melton into Milton and had appropriated the coat of arms of the Mittons of Shropshire (*WMM* 144). Thus, by the change of a letter, Milton's origins are deviously enhanced to confer on the family the lustre of an aristocratic past, while the royalist Marie, through the Anglicisation of her name, is normalised and made to conform to the nationalistic and Republican will of her husband. Milton's construction of his own character ("distinguishing features," *OED*)[9] is thus founded on falsity, on the appropriation of the history, the qualities and the value(s) (that is, the properties) of others. The name is "improper" because the proper name should designate a unique individual, whereas in Milton's game it ends up being an apriori category which the subject has to fill and fulfill before earning it, thus inverting the relationship between name and referent.

The whole question acquires other important overtones --of "good name," "good reputation" and of material property --when Milton and Marie become engaged. Marie becomes, as I have said, Milton's pawn and property. Once the economic terms of the contract have been discussed and before the poet finally accepts Marie as his fiancee, he asks her to tell him in public, before witnesses, whether she is what she "pretends" to be--a virgin: "I must insist upon hearing from your lips that you are verily what you pretend to be;" "are you the maid I take you for?" (*WMM* 164).[10] In other words, Milton wants to make sure that Marie's "character" is as intact as her hymen, that her name is "proper" and not "bespattered with filth," that her behavior is, and has always been, "proper" ("appropriate") before she can become his property and take his proper name.[11] Milton's behavior and attitudes are more suitable to a man of the *ancien régime* than to a supporter of the Republican party against the crown. And the "propriety" that the wife must prove to have had jars with the husband's defense of regicide: for the political structure (the property of all) to be proper and righteous, regal blood must be spilled; for the wife (private property) to be proper and righteous, blood must not have been spilled.

The spilling of the blood becomes the focus of a critical debate between Graves and Miltonian critics (*GM* 315, 319-20): for the latter the marriage was consummated on the first night, for the former it was not. The issue would indeed be sterile and unworthy of any further critical notice were it not for the use that Graves makes of the episode. He portrays a hypocritical and bigoted Milton whose ridiculous mystique of love is unable to take in the natural biological event of a woman's menstrual cycle. Milton prepares the bridal chamber with plenty of flowers and scents, but refuses to have intercourse with Marie on their first night because he thinks, owing to a misunderstanding, that she has "the flowers" and would therefore pollute him. Once again, it is not proper for Marie to spill blood, not even through the natural process of menstruating, unless it is the man that causes the spilling by deflowering her--an obtuse and implicitly violent moral in which his desire for royal blood to be spilled at the hand of Republicans finds an adequate counterpart.[12]

The notions of both character and name have been under attack in structuralist and post-structuralist criticism because they have been interpreted as one of the referential devices of realist "conservative" narrative, implicitly repressive and typical of a bourgeois ethics.[13] But, as I hope to have shown, the use of the proper name and a mimetic or referential method of characterisation (what is more referential that a historical character?) is not repressive or conservative in itself; on the contrary, the thematisation of the concepts here at issue shows how the novelist can expose and criticise the way in which they can indeed acquire an economic value and be exploited for "repressive" ends (e.g. in Milton's treatment of his and Marie's names). In other words, it is not necessary to discard either the name or, more radically, the character in order to "liberate" the subject.[14] In particular, by focusing on the proper name and on the notion of the "proper," and by linking it with both the technique and the concept of "character," Graves depicts the ambivalent or even downright contradictory attitude and ideology of the character John Milton. More generally, the problematisation of the status of the proper name shows, on the one hand, its value in the economy of the novel and, on the other hand, links the question of identity with those of economic property and moral, social, and political propriety. Economic value is one of the main factors in the construction of character and identity in fictional biographies of historical characters which may suggest the presence of an ongoing critical "dialogue" both with the bourgeois origins of the novel condemned by such readers as Barthes, Cixous, and Docherty and with the biographical and autobiographical conventions. "Character" is originally a Greek word which describes the instrument used to impress a stamp or mark in order to give something a specific and fixed value. Then, character and characterisation in the modern fictional biography can perhaps be usefully compared to coins whose value is not fixed once and for all and which enable the writer to negotiate between reality and fiction, historical referent and artistic recreation, in order to expose certain strategies (both in the construction of identity and in its re-presentation) and give them new critical scope. By exploiting the possibilities offered by the fusion of the new genre (what I have called "fictional (auto)biographies of historical characters") with the established novelistic and (auto)biographical traditions, *Wife to Mr Milton* thus carries out a critical reflection on the "value" of the individual and its clash with the economic constructions of identity in a given culture, and on the arbitrary foundations of literary values, hierarchies, and traditions.

Notes

1. I have argued elsewhere in favor of defining fictional biographies of historical characters separately from the postmodern category of historiographic metafiction as it is defined for instance by Linda Hutcheon in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*), since the issues that these novels raise and the conventions that they exploit and often parody are in many respects specific to them. See my "'It was part of the joke, you see.' The Author in the Novel between Historical Life and Theoretical Death."

2. Robert Graves, *The Ghost of Milton* (hereafter "*GM*"), 316.

3. On the other hand, being an inventor of tales, Marie can also be suspected of making up history, and the initial presentation of Marie as a capable story-teller can thus also be seen as a double-edged weapon.

4. Robert Graves, *Wife to Mr Milton* (hereafter "*WMM*"), "Foreword," 7.

5. Were it not for the fact that it is Marie who asks the father to write in her diary, the father's inscription would seem a sort of *droit du seigneur*, and the inscription a sort of symbolic deflowering; but see below for the different overtones of Richard Powell's spilling of a drop of his own blood and Milton's hypocritical and violent relations

6. Biographically, it is *Comus*, performed in 1634 and actually unpublished until 1637.

7. Later, this latent homosexual tendency will be confirmed by his own confession to Marie (*WMM* 176).

8. The *OED* reports uses of "property " as a synonym of "character" until at least the end of the Seventeenth century.

9. In particular, "distinguishing features of a species or genus," which transfers the enhancement of Milton's self-created origins to his entire genealogical line; cf. also "proper" as "genuine, true, real."

10. Although "pretend" did not necessarily imply feigning or lack of foundation in the Seventeenth century (*OED*), the use of the word casts an additional shadow of deviousness, lack of trust, bad faith on the character of John Milton when it is written and read in modern times.

11. Despite being repeatedly described as a "proper gentleman" (*WMM* 146) and a "proper man" (*WMM* 154), and despite his insistence on the adjective "proper," Milton shows a rather improper mixture of presumptuousness, aggression, and pedantry from the first time we "hear" him speak in the episode of the echo already referred to: "That sottish Auriga of yours (the driver of the coach) has no knowledge, nor so much the least inkling of the proper manner to address Nymphs, and by your leave, I will show these young maidens the proper manner" (*WMM* 46).

12. In this context, Mr Powell's voluntary spilling of one drop of his blood to colour the coat of arms in his daughter's diary takes on a decidedly more luminous aura, despite the undeniable symbolism of male dominance over the female subject within the family and within society.

13. Cf. e.g. Barthes, *S/Z*, esp. 65-66, 89-90, 162-163, 173-174, Cixous, "The Character of Character," and Docherty, *Reading (Absent) Character*.

14. This is true also of such postmodern novels as John Banville's *Dr Copernicus* (1976), in which the scientist's relation to his own familial and self-asserted names (respectively, Koppernigk and Doctor Copernicus) parallels his scientific and historical rupture with tradition (I argue this point at length in "Scienza, linguaggio, economia in *Dr Copernicus* di John Banville").

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