
Peacock and His Prosopography

Author(s): George McCracken

Source: *The Classical Weekly*, Feb. 16, 1942, Vol. 35, No. 14 (Feb. 16, 1942), pp. 159-161

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4341403>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

The Johns Hopkins University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Classical Weekly*

PEACOCK AND HIS PROSOPOGRAPHY

That conscientious Epicurean, Thomas Love Peacock (1785-1866), friend of Shelley and father to Meredith's first wife, was the author of seven short novels of a type so original that, had they been widely imitated, they would have established a literary genre. They are available in the beautiful ten-volume Halli-ford edition of H. F. B. Brett-Smith and C. E. Jones (London and New York 1924-34), which I cite, and more accessibly in one volume published by Simpkin (*ibid.* no date). In form not unlike a Platonic dialogue, they are written partly in narrative, with large passages of conversation printed in dramatic style. What they lack in plausibility of plot, they gain in skill of character development, in sparkling wit and ingenuity of idea. With two exceptions, both written on historical or at least pseudo-historical themes, Peacock follows his customary formula. A company of intelligentsia assemble in a noble country-house for a "long week-end" of philosophic conversation, in which Epicureanism, in a rather Cyrenaic form at that, usually comes off the better. Nearly every character bears a name significant of his personality or of his profession, e. g. the Reverend Dr. Gaster, a theologian whose chief concern is with the loaves and fishes, or the painter Sir Patrick O'Prism.

Recently attention has been called by Dr. R. W. Chapman (TLS June 21, 1941, 304—see also 299, and NYTBR August 3, 1941, 8) to Trollope's similar usage in *The American Senator*. He suggests that the practice is at least as old as Homer, but in any case it was carried to its zenith in antiquity by the writers of New Comedy, as Aristotle (Poet. 1451b13-5, see also Plato Crat. 384b, 388bc), indeed, points out, and these Greeks were imitated in this instance, as in many others, by their Roman successors, even as late as 100 A.D. by a contemporary of Pliny the Younger (6.21.5), one Vergilius Romanus. Indeed, the usage of Terence in this respect has been the subject of a dissertation by J. C. Austin (Illinois Studies 7 [1921] no. 4), anticipating Chapman's remark that here is a fine topic for an easy doctoral dissertation.¹ Reading of Austin's study does not suggest that the author found his task a simple one, and even so, Chapman's own article shows how fascinating is the pursuit of such significant names.

The great majority of Peacock's names require no commentary, being derived from simple Anglo-Saxon roots of obvious significance, e. g. the two critics in *Headlong Hall*, Messrs. Timothy Treacle and Geoffrey Gall. Note that the significance is here confined to the surnames, the Christian being apparently chosen for alliteration. Nor, since I lack competence in Celtic philology, shall I attempt to say anything about the

surprising number of names that appear to have their origin in Welsh, e. g. a character in *The Misfortunes of Elphin*: "Prince Seithenyn ap Seithyn Saidi who held the office of Arglwyd Gorwarcheidwad yr Argae Breninawl, which signifies in English, Lord High Commissioner of Royal Embankment."

The Greek and Latin names, however, are worthy of close attention, not only for their erudition but also for their ingenious wit. In the earliest novel, *Headlong Hall* (1816), a tale thought by some misguided critics to be inferior to Peacock's later work, we find a cranio-logist bearing the obvious name of Mr. Cranium (1.25), with a daughter more redundantly known as Miss Cephalis Cranium. We are told by Brett-Smith and Jones (1.xlv), on the authority of Saintsbury, that Peacock derived her name from Marmontel's *Céphalide*, but surely the surname would suggest the Christian, without recourse to a French original. More esoteric is Mr. Panscope (1.28), a polymathic philosopher, who claims to have read in entirety (1.54) the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (evidently one of the first four editions, as the fifth appeared in 1815-7), the *Monthly Review* (London 1749-1844, afterwards resumed), the *Variorum Classics* (Valpy's reprint of the *Delphin* series in 143 volumes), and the *Memoirs of the Academy of Inscriptions* which was founded in 1663! In the first two editions of the novel, this philosopher was known as Panoscope (1.160), but later his name underwent syncope.

Passing to the second novel, *Melincourt* (1817, reprinted with a new preface by the author in 1856), we are met (2.328) by "the poeticopolitical, rhapsodico-prosaical, deisidaemoniacoparadoxographical, pseudolatreiological, transcendental meteorosophist, Moley Mystic, Esquire, of Cimmerian Lodge." Peacock points out that the first name has a superfluous e, and this is a reference to moly, the drug given by Hermes to Odysseus to protect him from Circe's spell (Od. 10.305). The name of his residence probably signifies nothing more than north-country, but may be a picturesque geographical epithet. The remarkable polysyllabics which describe him appear to have escaped the eagle eyes of the editors of the *New English Dictionary*. They cite meteorosophistical (anno 1814) from Peacock's own works (the 1875 edition [3.21], not accessible to me), and give the prefix poeticopoliticopolitical, but not this compound or any of the others. I suspect also a classical allusion in the surname of Sir Telegraph Paxarett (2.25), who claims that before he was expelled from college he had studied the works of the classical scholar Heyne. Peacock himself was never expelled from college, in fact never even matriculated, but he did read the works of Heyne and Hermann (Essays and Studies of the English Association 17

¹Other studies have treated names used by Aristophanes and Plautus. See CW 34 (1940-1) 119 and 35 (1941-2) 67-8.

[1933] 131). The surname gives me trouble and I can only make with reluctance the suggestion that it may be derived from the Greek expletive *πάξ* meaning 'well' and a corruption of *ἀρετή*, while the first name, chosen by Peacock in 1817, can bear no connotation of electricity, for the word had been used in English as early as 1794 for a non-electrical method of rapid transmission of messages.

In the third novel, *Nightmare Abbey*, written in 1817 when Peacock was in close association with Shelley, we find Mr. Asterias the ichthyologist (3.56), whose name must allude to the *ἀστεραῖος* or *squalus stellaris*, a kind of fish. This man's son, Aquarius Asterias, is abundantly fishy. Passing over the fourth and fifth novels which offer for the most part no examples of Greek or Latin derivatives, we come to what is generally regarded as the masterpiece, *Crotchet Castle* (1831), in which a fickle lover is called a Strephon. This, however, seems to be a now obsolete usage once quite common, but the same novel gives us also a geographical name of this type, *Apodidaskiana*, appropriately applied to the state from which an escaped embezzler writes to his daughter (4.134). Finally, in *Gryll Grange*, published in 1860, after an interval of thirty years, we have the Reverend Theophilus Opimian, D.D., thought by some (*London Mercury* 8 [1923] 31) the source for Dr. Middleton in Meredith's *The Egoist*. His surname suggests a line of Martial (1.26.7), while the Christian name reflects perhaps the fact that this clergyman, the creation of an older Peacock, is more devoted to the duties of his calling than his predecessors in the earlier novels. Among the suitors rejected by the heroine of *Gryll Grange* (5.37of.) are Sir John Pachyderm, a man of little feeling; a Mr. Geront, who seems too old for her; and the Honourable Escor A'Cass, a gambler. This last derives his name, so a note by Peacock, from the Greek phrase *ἐς κόρακας*. (Until late in life Peacock omitted accents and breathings on Greek words but the Halliford edition prints them beginning with the fourth volume.)

With still other significant names Peacock also append etymological notes. Lord Anophel Achthar in *Melincourt* is so called from "ΑΝΩΦΕΛΟΝ ΑΧΘΟΣ ΑΡΟΥΡΑΣ=*Terrae pondus inutile*," suggesting His Lordship's cosmic unimportance. The same root has been borrowed by modern entomologists to denote the anopheles mosquito which carries malaria, but Peacock can hardly be calling Lord Anophel an insect. *Nightmare Abbey* has a Mr. Ferdinando Flosky (3.9), "a very lachrymose and morbid gentleman, of some note in the literary world . . . [with a] very fine sense of the grim and the tearful." The note on his name is: "A corruption, quasi *Φιλοσκίος*, a lover, or spectator, of shadows," who named his eldest son after Emanuel Kant (3.50). James Davies, writing of the 1875 edition

of *Peacock* (*Contemporary Review* 25 [1875] 744) apparently found in that badly edited text the readings *φιλοσκος* or *φιλόκιος* and rejected both in favor of *φίλος σκιῶς*. The name of the minstrel in *Maid Marian*, Harpiton, is annotated as from *Ἑρπετον*, a creeping thing (3.88).

Crotchet Castle has three such annotations: on the economist, Mr. MacQuedy, this note: "Quasi Mac Q. E. D., son of a demonstration" (4.14); a transcendental poet, Mr. Skionar, gets his name from "ΣΚΙΑΣ ONAP. *Umbræ somnium*"; and the geographer, Mr. Philpot, his from "ΦΙΛΟΠΟΤΑΜΟΣ. *Fluviorum amans*" (4.65). Yet the chief character of this novel, indeed in all of Peacock, is the Reverend Dr. Folliott, an eminent scholar, but, like all Peacock's clergy, greatly interested in the pleasures of the table. He possessed (4.11) an interminable swallow and an indefatigable pair of lungs. His pre-eminence in the latter faculty gave occasion to some etymologists to ring changes on his name, and to decide that it was derived from *Follis Optimus*, softened through an Italian medium to *Folle Ottimo*, contracted poetically into *Folleotto*, and elided Anglicè into *Folliott*, signifying a first-rate pair of lungs.

Finally, the most ingenious of all the etymologies are those applied to the three philosophers in *Headlong Hall*, Mr. Foster the 'perfectibilian,' Mr. Escot the 'deteriorationist,' and Mr. Jenkinson the 'statu-quo-ite,' strange philosophers, indeed, since they speak only in accord with their professed schools of thought. Their names, which at first sight appear to bear no relation to their character, are striking examples in Peacock of common English names of no obvious significance in which the author sees esoteric meaning. The notes are as follows:

Foster, quasi *Φωστήρ*,—from *φᾶος* and *τήρεω*, lucem servo, conservo, observo, custodio—one who watches over and guards the light; a sense in which the word is often used amongst us, when we speak of *fostering* a flame. (Really from AS *fōstor*, *fōster*, feeding, food, etc. So E. Weekly, *Etymological Dictionary of Modern English* [London 1921] 594).

Escot, quasi *ἐς σκοτον*, in *tenebris*, scilicet, intuens; one who is always looking at the dark side of the question.

Jenkinson: This name may be derived from *αἰεὶ ἐξ ἰσων*, *semper ex aequalibus*—scilicet, mensuris, omnia metiens; one who from equal measures divides and distributes all things: one who from equal measures can always produce arguments on both sides of a question, with so much nicety and exactness, as to keep the said question eternally pending, and the balance of the controversy perpetually in *statu quo*. By an aphaeresis of the *a*, an elision of the second *e*, and an easy and natural mutation of *ξ* into *κ*, the derivation of this name proceeds according to the strictest principles

of etymology: *αεν* *εξ* *ισων* — *Ιεν* *εξ* *ισων* — *Ιεν* *εκ* *ισων* — *Ιεν* *’κ* *ισων* — *Ιενκισων* — Jenkinson.

These etymological annotations have been called “intolerable pedantry” (Nineteenth Century 53 [1903] 655), but they are pedantic and intolerable only to those who read them without a sense of humor, for they are really a satire on pedantry. To the enthusiast for pedantry they are exciting.

Lacking a university education, Peacock nevertheless must have been well trained in the classics in the school at Englefield Green, and must have continued his reading in ancient literature in later life. This is abundantly proved by the frequency with which ancient authors are cited throughout the novels. His favorites were apparently Homer, Pindar, Euripides, Aristophanes, Vergil, Horace and Juvenal, but most surprising of all, he seems to have been among that select company who have read with appreciation the *Dionysiaca* of Nonnus, a work cited, quoted and translated more often than any other. To show the breadth of his reading we may cite also the references to such authors as Suidas, the scholiast to Aristophanes, Servius on the *Aeneid*, and the *Orphica*, while the only important writers not included are Thucydides, Xenophon, Aristotle, Caesar, Livy and Suetonius. Moreover, these citations are not the sort that could easily be procured by the judicious use of a collection of familiar quotations, a convincing proof of the author’s erudition, the more remarkable when one considers that he was not a professional scholar but in early life a poet and afterwards a busy official at India House.

Among other classical echoes we should point out the animated argument in *Headlong Hall* (1.32-7) between the ‘perfectibilian’ and the ‘deteriorationist’ on the relative merits of the Greeks and English in seamanship. Foster because of his principles must favor the English, while by the same token Escot champions the Greeks, Mr. Jenkinson as usual maintaining the middle of the road. Dr. Folliott evidently voices his creator’s own views when he succinctly says (4.126): “Let him who loves them [truth and simplicity], read Greek, Greek, Greek.” On the other hand the same worthy is not above telling us (4.28) that the Latin word for camp is *castrum* (sic). This is the only downright error in all Peacock’s classicism, but it may be intentional. In *Maid Marian* the friar ingeniously derives pun from *Punica fides*, thereby demonstrating that the punster is both anti-catholic and anti-christian. Such passages abound throughout the novels.

It has been the fashion to disparage Peacock’s scholarship on the ground that he was careless in his use, or rather disuse, of Greek accents (so Carl Van Doren in his biography [London and New York 1911] 16), but he was not alone in this respect, and his worst critics were themselves unable to correct him without error. A case in point is Davies’ review of the 1875 edition, already cited, where *ἐς σκοτόν* is given incorrectly for *ἐς σκότον*. In any case, one of his early reviewers (*North British Review* 45 [1866] 86) seems to me to have uttered a fair judgment of Peacock’s scholarship when he says that Peacock is *αὐτοδίδακτος* but not *ὀψιμαθής*.

GEORGE MCCrackEN

OTTERBEIN COLLEGE

REVIEWS

The Arts of Orpheus. By IVAN M. LINFORTH. xviii, 370 pages. University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1941 \$3.50

This is an analysis of the ancient literary evidence, down to 300 B.C., for Orpheus and of ancient literary evidence as a whole for rites and institutions ascribed to Orpheus. For Linforth the modern conception of Orpheus as the supposed founder of a specific movement, now called Orphism, is a mirage. In its place he sets the picture of Orpheus as at once less and more, in fact as the supposed author of an extensive literature and the founder of mysteries in general and of certain private rites in particular; and, while willing to admit “that the myth of the dismemberment (of Dionysus) and its consequences is Orphic if we mean by that, that it was told in Orphic poems and belonged to teletae,” he denies outright “that it was the very core and center of Orphic doctrine and that the world saw in it the

essential and peculiar possession of an organized religion or of a recognized school of thought” (356).

Linforth’s examination of the evidence is throughout marked by acuteness and width of vision. If at times (e.g. on Onomacritus, 353) he may be thought hypercritical, that is not serious in a field where credulity has been common. His interpretation of Euripides *Hippolytus* 952-4 (50ff.) as ‘you’re no better than one of those Orphics’ is convincing; his discussion of *Herodotus* 2.81 (38ff.) very useful (though it is much to credit an interpolator with the longer reading), as are his remarks on *Strabo* 10 p. 467ff. (pages 234ff. : but should *τὸ φιλότεχνον* [p. 474] be ‘ingenuity,’ ‘virtuosity’ rather than ‘enjoyment of the arts?’) and on the identity of *Epigenes* (115ff.): and one phrase “this subjective element in the evidence” (300) is a perfect formulation.

As for his conclusions, he is surely right in extending the common concept of the activities ascribed to Orpheus (we must do as much for later so-called Pythagoreanism: *HThR* 33 [1940] 312) and in denying that there is ancient evidence for “an Orphic religion”: