SIGNIFICANT CHARACTER NAMES
IN ENGLISH DRAMA TO 1603

by

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ABSTRACT[1]

The names of characters with significant names such as *Lightborn*, *Pistol*, *Fastidious Brisk*, *Champerty* are analyzed in all available plays up to 1603, when representative modes of naming had become firmly established. The analysis of this material aims at doing several things that have not been done to date: gathering together separate and uncoordinated studies of significant names, reinterpreting them by the evidence of the text on which they were based, interpreting dramas which have never before been analyzed for significant names, and compounding these investigations into one historical survey, primarily to discover the origin and date of significant names in English drama, secondarily to explain the manner in which they were employed in their development. Evidence is sought for a definite and meaningful relationship between a character and his name according to his description, occupation, characterization, function, and actions in the play.

The evidence shows that the significant name is nearly as old as English drama and native in origin. The first significant names in English drama date from about the middle of the fourteenth century, appearing in the vernacular mysteries and moralities. At first crude devices of derision, invective, and name-calling, their aim was to belittle character as well as describe it. The same usage continued until about the middle of the sixteenth century, when two innovations occurred — their use to describe with more fullness some essential quality of character, good or bad, and to enliven

dialogue with verbal play on names. Both these developments were largely the result of the reading of Latin comedy in the schools and of English translations and adaptations of Latin comedy. The classics contributed to the development of the English significant name by refining, increasing, and enriching its employment.

English humanist dramatists coined their own significant names, not only for minor characters and comic roles as has been traditional, but in imitation of Latin comedy for principal characters playing serious roles as well. After 1550, when school drama based on classical comedy made its influence felt, there is a burgeoning of significant names, many of them Greek and Latin, given to characters more fully developed than before. Chapman's names foreshadow Jonson's, but Jonson brought about the triumph of classical significant names in English drama, thoroughly assimilating them. Credit goes primarily to Jonson not only for the use of classical names in major and minor roles, but for systematically fitting whole casts with "humor" names that brought name and characterization into the closest possible relationship, setting a fashion recognizably Jonsonian for two centuries of English comedy.

With the development of regular comedy after *Ralph Roister Doister* verbal play on the meaning of significant names increases in quantity and complexity. Lyly uses them with refined wit. Peele's wordplay borrows from Plautus. Greene and Chapman have extended plays on names. Jonson exploits the comic possibilities of his names with the most deliberate thoroughness. Marston is a trenchant ironist. Dekker, Heywood, and Middleton show a surprising facility in wordplay and wit, but the master of verbal play during the last dozen years of this period is Shakespeare.

The English significant name is from its earliest origin comic or satiric, an obvious signal for laughter; the foreign name is more likely to be used for serious or tragic characters. In either case the audience expects a significantly named character in some way to live up to his name, and this anticipation lends drama the vital quality of interest.

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