Uses of Names in Medieval Literature

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T HE MEDIEVAL PERIOD did not undervalue the potential significance
of the names by which it designated people and things. After all,
one of the most used pieces of its intellectual baggage was the *Ety-
mologies* (sometimes called *Origins*), a universal encyclopedia com-
piled by the Spanish scholar and Bishop, Isidore of Seville.[1] The 20
books which comprise the *Etymologies* deal with much more than
the explanation of names – in fact, Isidore was concerned with the
origins of things generally – but it is to the more narrowly etymo-
logical sections of the compilation that we owe the coinage or
preservation of such famous derivations as "rex" from "recte
agendo" and "lucus" (grove) from the absence of light ("lux")
within it. We may laugh at such pseudo-science (by our standards),
but a great scholar of medieval Latin literature has called the *Ety-
mologies* "the basic book of the entire Middle Ages"; its influence
was enormous.[2] To the clerical-intellectual milieu of the Middle
Ages, writing in Latin and nourishing itself on the Latin traditons
of classical antiquity and the western Fathers, Isidore's enormous
miscellany of scholarly doctrine and example offered not only a
priceless and inexhaustible hoard from which all could borrow, but
a rationale for elaborate wordplay and (to us) false etymologies.
Isidore's understanding was that the origin of a word (or at least of
many words) was closely linked to its force (*vis*), i.e., to the natural,
human, or divine functions and attributes which are subsumed
under it.[3] According to this understanding, imaginative etymo-
logies, far from being irresponsible, were legitimate devices for

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[1] Isidore (?–636) wrote or collected the *Etymologies* between 622 and 633;
an edition of it is contained in his *Complete Works* as edited in Migne *Patrologia
Latina* (Paris, 1844–64), Vols. 81–84.

[2] The phrase is that of Ernest Robert Curtius in *European Literature and the
Latin Middle Ages*, trans. W. Trask (New York, 1953); on Isidore's *Etymologies* see
esp. pp. 494–500.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 497.

approaching an adequate perception of the political, theological, or moral significance of words important in themselves (like "rex") or important by their involvement, so to speak, in crucial events or lives (whence the fondness for proposing appropriate etymologies for the names of saints and their parents, etc.).[4] Hence, also, given the complexity of central processes like the history of salvation, the more etymologies offered for a given word or name, the better, as each etymology represented a different insight into the intricacies of the subject under discussion.

In paying homage to Isidore, and seeking to comprehend his and his successors' ideas about names, it is most important to keep in mind the clerical, scholarly, and therefore Latin-writing stratum of medieval society in which these ideas lived and grew. In practice, such traditions and conventions could and did find expression in vernacular writings, especially translations of learned Latin works; it does not follow, however, that the transfer from Latin to vernacular was an automatic process. The sense of linguistic decorum which left the vernacular languages of medieval Europe largely ignored as vehicles for "serious" thought and expression before the fourteenth century is too complicated and removed from my present purpose to discuss here; suffice it to say that vernacular medieval literature, at least into the fourteenth century, described and came to terms with the world on a basis far different from that of Latin literature. Even self-consciously learned poets like Dante and Chaucer who introduced into their poetry so much of the Latin philosophical and theological world-view (and its literary terms and techniques)[5] did so with great freedom, combining learned systems with themes and techniques developed in vernacular literature,[6] or allowing subversive irony to probe the Latinate foundations for

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[4] See the examples drawn from Dante, *ibid.*, pp. 499–500; as a vernacular poet Dante was something of a special case in using learned etymologies, but he did so with great freedom and for his own artistic ends. See below, and the example quoted by Curtius, p. 499, on the etymologizing of Assisi, the birthplace of St. Francis.

[5] For a convenient summary of the worldview see C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image* (London, 1963), and for the literary techniques, E. Faral, *Les Arts Poétiques du XIIe et XIIIe Siècle* (Paris, 1924, repr. 1962), and Curtius.

[6] See, especially for Dante, E. Auerbach, *Literary Language and its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages*, trans. R. Manheim (New York, 1965), pp. 235–338.

weaknesses. So the use of names to score literary points does not confine itself in the vernacular to Isidorian methods. The present discussion will concern itself with both Latin and vernacular examples, but less to trace Isidorian influences than to show how various items drawn from the medieval onomasticon can help us to understand the development of medieval literary culture. First, however, I would like to establish the capacity of medieval vernacular literature at its best to exploit names for a variety of effects by looking at Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, after which the course of my remarks will be more determined by chronological considerations.

Every reader of the *Canterbury Tales* recalls the amused and gentle irony of Chaucer's portrait of the Prioress in the General Prologue. Madame Eglantyne, with her broad forehead and stylish habit, bears a name which would in Chaucer's day have had associations with beautiful and distinctly secular damsels – a name fitting (and often used) for the heroine of a romance or the protagonist of a love lyric, and therefore ironically apt for this sentimental lady with her overrefined air, delicate table manners, and large brooch ambiguously inscribed, "Amor vincit omnia."[7]

A more cutting irony motivates the use of the name Absolon for the "towny" clerk of the bawdy Miller's Tale who sues in vain for the favor of the desirable Alisoun, is disgraced by her, and finally revenges himself on the posterior of his rival with a hot coulter. The beauty of the biblical Absalom, David's son, and his disastrous attempt to attain a prize to which he is not entitled, lend spice to the Miller's ridicule of the light-headed, dandyish parish clerk.[8] Then there is Philostratus, the name assumed by Arcite, one of the two lovers in the Knight's Tale, when he returns to Theseus' court, disguised by the suffering he has endured for Emelye. This name, taken from Boccaccio's work of that title (the source for Chaucer's *Troilus*), was rendered by the Italian poet as "vanquished by love," and it is doubly apt for Arcite, since eventually he will be killed by Saturn after having won the tournament of which Emelye is the prize.

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[7] On the Prioress' name, see Chaucer's *Complete Works*, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Boston and London, 1957), p. 654, n. to 1.121, and the bibliography given there.

[8] See Robinson, p. 685, n. to 1.3312.

The names of several characters in the Merchant's Tale, one of the most bitter of the *Tales,* allow Chaucer to utilize a learned, allegorical technique both straightforwardly and ironically. That the foolish and repulsive old man who decides to take a young bride should be called January is fitting in its double evocation of beginnings and frosty bleakness or sterility. The allegorical names of his two advisers, Justinus and Placebo, who respectively attack and support January's outrageous notion of marrying a young girl, hold no surprises. But "fresshe May," the bride, while springlike in her youth and beauty, is as hard and cold as winter in her calculated infidelity and easy defense of it when January apprehends her *in flagrante delicto.* The joke here is on both the convention and the Merchant, whose display of learning in naming his characters proves inadequate.

The most straightforwardly clerical approach to names in the *Canterbury Tales* occurs in the Prologue to the Second Nun's Tale, a hagiographical Life of St. Cecilia. The last part of the prologue is a multiple etymology of the saint's name, translated from the *Legenda Aurea* of Jacobus de Voragine and illustrative of the technique, previously mentioned, of approaching a spiritual truth (in this case, sanctity) from several angles. At the opposite extreme from this learned example is an interesting case of how Chaucer innovated in using the very structure of his masterpiece to support name-play, and vice versa. The Wife of Bath is named Alisoun, and thus shares her name with the sensual and amoral heroine of the Miller's Tale. Furthermore, the Wife tells us, her fifth and most provocative husband was an Oxford Clerk, as was the other Alisoun's lover. These coincidences allow the reader to discover resonances, at once wholly unwarranted and almost certainly intended, between the two heroines, and tempt him to take part in the creative process so constantly explored in the *Canterbury Tales* by imagining connections between the various levels of Chaucer's complicated literary universe.

Chaucer's control over names in his work is too consummate to be typical, and his mixing of learned, courtly, and bourgeois literary conventions is also unique. In turning away from his art and age to the early medieval period, we find imaginative literature (under which rubric can be included history during this period) more determined by a few main cultural facts: the looser political structure of

European society, the as yet incomplete fusion of Christian, classical
and barbarian traditions, or (especially for Latin works) the prima-
rily historical sense of human existence, in conformity with a lively
appreciation of the unfolding system of divine providence. The
composite, late eighth- or early ninth-century *Historia Brittonum*
provides a good example of learned etymologizing in its various
derivations of the name "Britons." The several explanations offered
are in all probability from different sources,[9] but their juxtaposition
in the *Historia*'s main recension is analogous to the offering of
several complementary etymologies for the name of an individual,
having as its purpose the explanation of national history in terms
of the various historical processes considered normative by the
compiler.

The "national etymologies" of the *Historia Brittonum* all trace
the nation back to a single, eponymous founder called Brito, Brittus,
or Brutus. In the best Isidorian tradition, the *origo* of the nation is
linked to the *vis* of its eponym, and in this case the *vis* defines itself
by its contact with what the early Middle Ages considered historical
foci: the Roman Empire, the Trojans, the genealogy of Noah. Two
genealogies connect Brito with the descendants of Noah (among
them the eponyms of other nations: Alemanus, Francus, etc.) and
the founders of Troy and Rome; a slightly more expansive third
alternative makes Brutus a victorious Roman consul, thus establish-
ing an honorable connection between the Britons and the Roman
empire. The most articulate version makes Brito a descendant of
Aeneas who flees Italy after accidentally killing his father, and,
finding no asylum among the Greeks who hold against him his
famous ancestor's slaughter of Turnus, turns westward, first found-
ing the city of Tours and then establishing himself in Britain, which
he peoples with his descendants.[10]

A noteworthy feature of this last account is its learned pun on
Turnus and *Turnis*, the city of Tours, which deepens the impres-
sion, left by the whole passage, of the hero's turning away from the

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[9] See F. Lot, *Nennius et L'Historia Brittonum* (Paris, 1934), pp. 37–39, 49–53,
etc.

[10] The text reads, " . . . et expulsus est a Graecis causa occisionis Turni, quem
Aeneas occiderat. Et pervenit ad Gallos usque et ibi condidit civitatem Turonorum,
quae vocatur Turnis. Et postea ad istam pervenit insulam quae a nomine suo
accepit nomen, id est Brittanniam, et implevit eam cum suo genere et habitavit
ibi" (Lot, p. 155).

Old World which has rebuffed and inculpated him to create a New World for his progeny. Turnus represents the legacy of the past to Brutus: violence and rejection. Turnis represents his own legacy to the future: the creation of cities, the building of a new homeland. Behind the word-play, then, lurks patriotism, a political affirmation of the superior worth of non-Roman Europe,[11] finding expression within an eponymous origin story.

Outside the clerical tradition, the use of names in vernacular literature betrays different assumptions about history. In a heroic epic like *Beowulf* names do not link nations to salvation history or to Rome; rather the patronymic form links wariors and kings to their families and tribes; that is, to less abstract historical units. The pervasiveness of this more intimate and concrete historical sense is demonstrated by the patronymic names of inanimate objects like swords (Beowulf's borrowed *Hrunting*, and, apparently, the *Hunlafing* of Hengest in the Finn episode). The other pronounced tendency of Old English nomenclature is metaphorical, with names reflecting the activities or characteristics of a hero. Thus Beowulf apparently recalls a kenning for "bear" (bee-wolf), and expresses his strength in battle; the legendary *scop*, Widsith, who recounts his travels among many nations of the Heroic Age in an early poem, bears a name meaning "a far journey." A different tendency, one betraying clerical, allegorical interests, may underline some of the names in *Beowulf*: Unferth, Hrothgar's trouble-making courtier, implies strife by his (un- and OE *ferth*, peace); Hygelac, Beowulf's uncle and King of the Geats, and his wife Hygd represent, it has been suggested, the positive and negative aspects of wisdom (OE *hyge*) in their conduct.[12] By contrast, the eponymous founder of Hrothgar's Scylding dynasty, Scyld Scefing, may recall in his name an ancient Germanic recognition of the connection between a tribe's success in battle and agricultural prosperity: he is perhaps Shield the son of Sheaf (of grain). The most striking name in *Beowulf* is that of Hrothgar's noble yet pathetic Queen, Wealhtheow, who pleads with the triumphant Beowulf to protect her young sons after

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[11] A similar attitude appears in Carolingian Frankish references to the Eastern (i.e., Byzantine) Roman Empire in the eighth and ninth centuries. See Hanning, *The Vision of History in Early Britain* (New York and London, 1966), pp. 104–105.

[12] See R. E. Kaske, "Hygelac and Hygd," in *Studies in Old English Literature Presented to Arthur G. Brodeur*, ed. S. Greenfield (Medford, Oregon, 1963), pp. 200–206.

their father dies. At a point of major epic rejoicing, the Queen introduces a sobering note of strife to come, a strife which she is helpless to prevent in a masculine, heroic world. In this light, her name, which means "foreign slave," acquires an ironic hue, as her powerlessness is more that of a slave than a sovereign. But this effective, purely literary device is exceptional in *Beowulf*.

The overriding sense of man as a creature defined by his relationship to temporal or historical developments underwent dramatic changes during the so-called Renaissance of the (eleventh and) twelfth century. A concept of individuality began to emerge in the West, bringing with it a primarily symbolic rather than typological view of human experience. The thirteenth century was to be an age of new systematization, in philosophy and in literature; its fruits were *summae*, carefully planned allegorical romances, imagined civilizations, both Grail and Arthurian. But the twelfth century, while first articulating some of these new systems, kept them in balance with its heroes, whom it endowed with freedom and flexibility. Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* is a pioneer work in many respects, albeit a Latin and clerical one; its uses of names shed light on its changing intellectual milieu. Borrowing Brutus from the *Historia Brittonum*, Geoffrey makes him a different kind of eponymous hero, one who leads a captured nation to a new land with valor and intelligence. The eponym for Geoffrey is not a link with a normative past as much as the individual representation of human virtues which result in national strength and freedom. Geoffrey is not averse to Isidorian etymological technique: Cornwall, he tells us, is named either from Brutus' follower Corineus, or from the fact that it is the horn, *cornu*, of Britain.[13] It must be admitted, however, that these etymologies are less mutually supporting than exclusive; as in so many other places in his work, Geoffrey is here waving the flag of intellectual orthodoxy with subversive intent. His own system is a novel one: he sees history as a cyclical process, with nations rising and falling in accord with certain unchanging principles of human behavior rather than divine providence.[14] At one point in his *Historia* he illustrates his theory by using names to remind the reader of the principle, *Plus ça change*, etc. Brutus

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[13] See Geoffrey's *History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (Harmondsworth and Baltimore, 1966), p. 72.

[14] See Hanning, p. 139 ff.

names Britain's main city *Troia Nova*; by "a corruption of the word," this becomes *Trinovantum*; when King Lud refortifies and beautifies the town many years later, it is renamed *Kaerlud* (with the eponym again reflecting independent human virtue), whence, again by corruption (the cyclical reverse, as it were, of an eponym) to *Kaerlundein*. Finally, as other nations defeat and succeed the Britons, the city becomes *London* (Anglo-Saxons) and *Londres* (Normans). Geoffrey's paradoxical sense of a constantly changing but non-progressive history is nowhere clearer.

One final, suggestive name in *Historia Regum Britanniae* deserves mention. When the Trojans, soon to be the Britons, are battling to free themselves from their Greek captors so that they may journey to a new homeland, a Greek named Anacletus falls into their hands and to save his life betrays his countrymen, allowing the Trojans to escape to liberty. During the years 1130–38, an anti-Pope called Anacletus II created divisions throughout Christendom by his claim to the throne of Peter, and Goeffrey, writing during that period, wryly alluded to his own day in so naming the unwilling subverter of the Greek cause.[15]

By the second half of the twelfth century, the vernacular romance had established itself as a major literary genre in Europe, and the first medieval literature intended for a self-consciously refined and sophisticated lay audience. The greatest poet of romance, Chrétien de Troyes, found a new way to use names in his works – a technique congenial to his ahistorical vision of man in quest of happiness and to his symbolic bent in representing human experience. Chrétien simply withheld the names of some of his protagonists until the moment in which the revelation of them would have the maximum thematic import. Reto R. Bezzola has written valuably on this peculiarity of Chrétien's, especially with regard to the poet's last romance, the *Perceval* (or *Conte del Graal*).[16] In this work, neither the hero nor we know his name until 1.3575, and then he divines it at a moment of great stress. Chrétien prepares for this moment from the beginning, when the young hero meets five knights in the Waste Forest, where he has been raised, ignorant of the world and of chivalry. One of the knights asks Perceval his

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[15] See J. S. P. Tatlock, "Contemporaneous Matters in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*," *Speculum* VI (1931), 206–23.

[16] R. R. Bezzola, *Le Sens de l'Aventure et de l'Amour* (Paris, 1947), pp. 47–61.

name, and he can only reply with the names given him by those
who know him in the forest: fair son, fair brother, fair lord.[17]
These are not proper names at all, but statements of relationship;
the young Perceval has not yet gained an independent life and
personality – nor a specific destiny – and is therefore denied a
personal name by the poet. The importance of the name to Chrétien
becomes clear when Perceval's mother, reluctantly allowing him to
leave the forest to seek Arthur's court, advises him to discover the
names of all those he will meet, for "par le sornon conoist on l'ome"
(1.563). That this is no Polonious-like cliche becomes evident after
Perceval has been to the Grail Castle and failed to ask questions
concerning the mysterious happenings he has seen. He encounters
his unrecognized cousin, who questions him on his behavior at the
Castle and chastises him for his silence in the face of its rituals;
suddenly, she asks him his name, "and he who didn't know his
name guessed it and said that he was called Perceval "le Galois "
and didn't know if he told the truth or not; but he was correct and
didn't realize it" (3573–7). His cousin replies that his name is now
changed: it is Perceval the unfortunate ("Perceval li chaitis"). She
then reveals to him that if he had asked the proper questions at
the Grail Castle he would have healed the sick king and profited
himself; instead he and others will undergo great troubles, and all
because of his sin in causing his mother to die from grief when he
left to seek Arthur's court.

The significance of this packed passage is not easy to discern,
partly because *Perceval* is unfinished and partly because of a cer-
tain love for mysterious complications and sudden developments
which marks this, Chrétien's last work. For our purpose, it is signi-
ficant to realize, as Bezzola indicates,[18] that Perceval's sudden,
alogical divination of his name is related to his equally sudden access
to information about the disastrous consequences of his actions
until this point, consequences which he must spend the later part of
his career attempting to understand or compensate for. Knowledge
of one's identity and perception of the meaning of one's deeds (and
therefore of one's responsibility) are symbolically rather than logi-
cally linked here; Perceval, in keeping with his mother's dictum his
come to know the "name" and the "man" simultaneously, the man

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[17] See the edition of A. Hilka (Halle, 1932), 11. 343–60.
[18] Bezzola, p. 56.

ironically being himself. The meaning of "li Galois" (the Welsh) is more than merely national; the Germanic word originally meant "foreigner" and obviously had pejorative connotations to Chrétien's audience. At the beginning of the romance, when Perceval encounters the five knights in the Waste Forest, one of them rebukes another, who is conversing with the boy, by saying that it is a waste of time to talk with a Welshman since "the Welsh are all by nature more stupid than beasts in the field, and this one is just like an animal."[19] So in divining his name at the moment of his disgrace, Perceval is in effect proposing an explanation for his behavior: he is the *dümmling*, the comic oaf from whom only blunders can be expected. Chrétien has indeed emphasized the comic elements of Perceval's adventures up to this point, but as soon as Perceval comes to realize his identity in this way, he can, paradoxically, no longer claim to be a *dümmling*, so that while Perceval correctly guesses his name, from the moment of guessing it can no longer be his. Instead, he becomes Perceval *li chaitis*, the unfortunate, wretched one who is, however, no longer just to be laughed at. His behavior has now become, both to him and to the reader, a matter of moral concern, and his subsequent actions in the romance will attempt to repudiate the name he had earlier earned. In short, for Chrétien a name has become a symbol at once of personal identity and personal values, in keeping with the preoccupations of the romance genre, in which the identity of the protagonist, often hidden from himself and others for years, is finally to be regained at the moment of a triumphant return to a status formerly lost, so that the recovery of one's name and one's fortune are respectively the symbolic and actual conclusions of the romance process.

A similar complicated and symbolic use of name, this time the name of an adventure, is to be found in Chrétien's *Erec*, his earliest romance (ca. 1170). Erec's last, climactic adventure is a fight in a symbolic, enchanted garden against a huge knight who has promised his mistress to remain there, challenging all who wish to enter, until he is liberated by losing a battle. Erec defeats the knight, named Mabonagrain, and in freeing him from his captivity in the garden also unleashes a tremendous joy among the inhabitants of the land in which the garden is found. Many had attempted this feat before Erec, but all lost their lives in fighting Mabonagrain, and their

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[19] *Perceval*, 11. 242–48; discussed by Bezzola, pp. 49, 59.

severed heads are placed on stakes within the garden, to mark it as a place of terrifying danger. The name of this adventure, Erec discovers, is the Joy of the Court – yet when he arrives to undertake it, all those who see him weep at his impending misfortune and plead with him to turn back. To this general grief must be added that of the captive Mabonagrain; and so the name of the adventure awaits Erec's prowess to align it with the reality. But Erec's victory is not simply an isolated act of prowess which triggers general rejoicing; the episode of the Joy of the Court, like the whole of *Erec*, is a comment on love and marriage. The enchanted garden which is a prison for the knight who has been tricked into a life of constant prowess within its beautiful confines, is a symbolic representation of a love relationship gone wrong; while the quest of Erec and Enide which occupies most of the romance is likewise an exploration of ways to overcome another marital crisis and to establish a perfect relationship.[20] So, coming when it does in the career of Erec (it is his last battle before his triumphant return to Arthur's court), the Joy of the Court means one thing to him, while for Mabonagrain it has quite another significance, and for the courtiers yet a third. To the reader, all three responses to the adventure are valid and illuminating, making the adventure into a capstone for the "joy of the court" (i.e., Chrétien's courtly audience for his romances) which is the successful marriage relationship, tested and evolved through the medium of chivalric adventure. In short, the name of Erec's last adventure is understandable only when seen from the perspective of the entire narrative which has preceded it. Chrétien's audacity in having a name carry so much symbolic weight, and actually serve as an element uniting the adventures and themes of his work and the response of his audience, is a fine example of the enthusiasm and self-confidence abroad among the artists of his day. As a yardstick for the novelty of Chrétien's use of names, we may employ a similar name in an earlier and epic work, the *Chanson de Roland*, which leans heavily on the imaginative vision of the early Middle Ages. Charlemagne's sword is called "Joieuse" because it contains a relic of the lance of Longinus, which pierced the side of Christ on the Cross;[21] it recalls and furthers the history of salvation as Charles

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[20] The explication of this quest is the main object of Bezzola's study. See, however, the reservations of J. Misrahi, in *RPh* IV (1951), 348–61.

[21] *Chanson de Roland*, ed. F. Whitehead (Oxford, 1957), 11. 2503–08.

uses it to help Christianity triumph over its Saracen enemies. Chrétien's "joy" refers back, not to history and providence, but to marriage, society, and the goals of human experience; it resonates outward from the particular adventure like waves from a pebble dropped in water, whereas the joy inherent in Charles' sword is a linear joy, looking backward and forward in time along the path of providence.

Chrétien used names in other ways, as for instance in his romance, *Cliges* (ca. 1176), where some characters bear ironic names.[22] Fenice, the heroine who, to avoid the adultery of Isolde, feigns death to escape from her husband into the arms of her lover, is like the Phoenix in her unique beauty, we are told – but she also shares with that legendary bird the ability to die and be reborn, albeit through deceit. The ironic use of the name squares with Chrétien's concern in this romance with the role of deception and illusion in shaping human reality. The wooing of Cliges' mother, Sordamors, by his father, Alexander, in the first section of the romance involves further irony: Sordamors' name, as she reveals in a love soliloquy, means "blonde of love" – all the more reason why she should accept Alexander's suit. But this "blonde of love" is reticent and comically so in her hesitancy, and is only united with her lover by the insistent intervention of King Arthur's Queen.

Finally, allegorical names of almost embarassing particularity dot Chrétien's romances: haughty knights called Orgeuilleux de la Lande, and evil castles called Pesme Aventure, etc. This occasional bow toward a learned, clerical mode of nomenclature had amusing results in some romance names, as in the story of Sir Libeaus Desconnus (i.e., the fair unknown), and it is surely correct to think that the authors and their first audiences smiled at them, too.

In passing from Chrétien's romances into the thirteenth century, we find a "hardening" of romance nomenclature which reflects the systematizing of concerns which Chrétien preferred to explore and represent in more open and symbolic ways. As the structures of the romance world assumed a more concrete shape (a Grail society and an Arthurian society, both with their own histories), the taste for names representative of a more concrete function or characteristic

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[22] The rest of this paragraph is heavily indebted to Peter Haidu, *Aesthetic Distance in Chrétien de Troyes* (Geneva 1968).

within the system became more marked.[23] The names in Wolfram
von Eschenbach's *Parzival* (an adaptation of Chrétien's *Perceval*),
for instance, are often allegorical, and even the name Perceval/
Parzival is allegorized, to mean "pierce through" (*Perce à val*) –
a reference to how love for Perceval's father attacked his mother!
The mother herself, nameless in Chrétien, becomes Herzeloyde,
implicitly allegorized as "heart's sorrow" (*Herz* and *Leide*).[24] Perce-
val's wife, from Chrétien's unexceptionable Blanche-flor, becomes
the allegorical Condwiramurs (i.e., *conduire à amour*). And so on.
The allegorical tendency finally issued in a new romance subgenre,
the allegorical romance, of which the first and most famous example
was the *Roman de la Rose* of Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun,
in which (at least in Guillaume's portion) all names are allegorical
and represent the qualities and forces involved in a young man's
quest for the love of his lady. Here the name has indeed become a
complete representation of the thing named, in a manner far stricter
than any attempted by Chrétien. As opposed to the early medieval
use of names, the thirteenth century's allegorical preoccupations
fragmented human experience in the cause of clarity and analysis
rather than presenting it as a phenomenon linked with the past and
gaining significance from historical associations.

It may be well to close this brief summary with an instance in
which a poetess makes an open choice between methods of finding
significance in names as part of her narrative. In Marie de France's
lai, Le Fresne, the heroine is abandoned as an infant and brought
up by surrogate parents. When she has grown into a beautiful
damsel a rich knight falls in love with her and makes her his mistress.
But his feudal vassals insist that he, too, abandon her and take a
wife in order to have a legitimate heir. They propose a neighboring
heiress named La Codre (Hazel), who, they say, will give both fruit
and pleasure, whereas Le Fresne (Ash; the protagonist has been so
named from having been found abandoned in the branches of an
ash tree) bears no fruit.[25] This allegorizing, arboreal name play
seems to carry the day, and the knight is only saved from marrying

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[23] See Bezzola, p. 60.

[24] See *Parzival*, trans. H. Mustard and C. Passage (New York, 1961), p. 78, n.
8 and 9.

[25] *Le Fresne*, 11. 335–40 (in Marie de France, *Lais*, ed. A. Ewert Oxford, 1947,
repr. 1952).

La Codre when the true, noble identity of Le Fresne (who turns out to be her sister) is discovered in the nick of time, and she who has been mistress becomes wife. Thus are the strict etymologists routed and the symbolic sense of the heroine's name – one who has been saved and protected by benevolent nature, as represented by the shade-giving Ash tree – is vindicated.[26] If Isidore would have frowned at this, Chaucer would surely have smiled.

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[26] See *Le Fresne*, 11. 167—70 for the description of the tree,