

The Structural Function of Names in the Works of Chrétien de Troyes*

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IT HAS LONG BEEN RECOGNIZED that Chrétien de Troyes often does not allow a hero to announce his name until some strategic moment in the tale.** This ancient practice is by no means peculiar to Chrétien de Troyes, of course. Readers of English literature, for example, will easily think of instances of name withholding in works ranging from *Beowulf* (in which the hero withholds his name from the coastguard but announces it to Hrothgar) to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (in which the Green Knight reveals his name only after the return blow). Arthurians will just as easily recall other instances in the analogues to Chrétien's tales. But name withholding in Chrétien is especially important because it occurs so often and frequently has such important structural significance, both narratively and thematically.

In *Erec et Enide*, Chrétien's first extant romance, the hero withholds his name at two crucial times. He refuses to give his name to Yder until after he defeats him in the fight in which he defends Enide's beauty and wins her as a wife; then he announces his name only after learning that of the defeated opponent. Similarly, he gives his name to Mabonagrain after he has defeated him at the end of the eighth and last adventure, the *joie de la cort* episode, and then only after some hesitation. A peculiarity here is that the hero gives his name *before* demanding that of his defeated opponent. In both cases Erec's name is announced at major

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** James Douglas Bruce, for example, made the point in a general way in connection with Lancelot in 1928: *The Evolution of Arthurian Romance*, Vol. I, 2nd ed. (Gloucester, Mass., 1958), p. 208. More recently, name withholding has been treated by Reto Bezzola in *Le Sens de l'Aventure et de l'Amour* (Paris, 1947); by Robert W. Hanning, "Uses of Names in Medieval Literature," *Names* 16:4 (December, 1968), 325-338, and, especially, by Barbara Nelson Sargent, "L' 'autre' chez Chrétien de Troyes," *Cahiers de Civilisation Médiévale*, X (1967), 199-205. Professor Sargent points out that the name changes and name withholding emphasize the double nature of the protagonists' personalities.

climactic moments in the narrative. In the one case Erec wins a wife, and in the other he re-establishes definitively his prowess, which Enide had once questioned. In both cases he affirms his knightly identity in a world where such affirmation is from time to time necessary. In both cases, too, the direct contribution to the main love theme is obvious. Significantly, Enide's name is announced on both occasions shortly after Erec's is. The narrator first mentions Enide's name at the wedding, which follows the Yder fight, as though her identity depends both on Erec's prowess and on her new position as his wife. Again, after the Erec-Mabonagrain fight, Enide identifies herself to the mistress of Mabonagrain, after which it turns out that the two women are cousins.

In addition, after the fourth of Erec's eight adventures, that is, at the mid-point of the tale narratively, Erec and Guivret the Little exchange names after they fight, and immediately thereafter Erec withholds his name from Kay, but gives it to Gawain. This re-establishment of contact with Gawain and the Arthurian court in the midst of Erec's attempts to prove his knightly prowess seems crucial thematically, especially when close analysis shows that the first four adventures are concerned only with Erec's personal relationship with Enide, while the remaining four allow him to attend to his social duties as well. If he had once overtly devoted himself to his wife, his re-identification in the middle of the romance with Gawain allows him afterwards to perform deeds which benefit society. The *joie de la cort* adventure benefits an entire people, and the climactic revelation of Erec's name to Mabonagrain completes his social reinstatement.

Similarly, in *Cligès* the hero withholds his name at Arthur's court until he has fought with a variety of knights, the last of whom is Gawain. This plot feature was carefully prepared for much earlier, when Cligès' father Alexander charged him not to reveal his name until he had tested his strength and skill with the most excellent of Arthur's court, preferably Gawain. The name revelation marks the climax of the development of the prowess theme in the romance. Again there seems to be an equation between the hero's self-identification and his demonstration of knightly prowess, which underlines his full initiation into knighthood. All of this, in turn, is doubtless requisite for the hero's success in love, which comes about very soon thereafter. The Gawain episode, having separated the lovers, serves to make them yearn for one another all the more, makes us privy to their longing thoughts, and helps precipitate their mutual admission of love, which the romance has been leading up to.

In *Lancelot*, or *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*, the hero's name is not given at all until the middle of the romance. In the first half of the tale, the hero is searching for Guinevere, whom he hopes to free by defeating her captor, Meleagant. The fight itself has been anticipated since the opening

scene, and it is at this central point that Lancelot is finally named by Guinevere, whom he at last sees, in a line very close indeed to the exact center of the tale. During the fight, a maid asks Guinevere who the knight is, and Guinevere responds, "Lancelot of the Lake." The maid then calls out his name so that all can hear it. The hero turns and beholds Guinevere.

We may think of the first half of the tale, then, as the quest for the highest recognition possible, that by a courtly lady, which is symbolized by calling the hero by his real name. For if "Knight of the Cart" carries shameful connotations in the first half of the romance, "Lancelot of the Lake" carries honorable connotations in the second half. We could even think of the rest of the tale as Lancelot's defense both of his name and of the recognition which courtesy has bestowed upon him in a sort of baptismal rite. While we should give great structural importance to the naming scene, we should not overstress it, however, for there is too much in the romance as a whole that is not intimately related to the naming scene for it alone to be the central focal point. But if we consider it as part of the larger battle scene, a substantial measure of structural importance can be allowed. Significantly, Gawain and the narrator himself call the hero by his real name for the rest of the romance, whereas neither had in the first half. This procedure is unique in Chrétien. The romance is usually referred to by two interchangeable titles, the one *Lancelot*, the other *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*, but these titles – these names – are in a way mutually incompatible. We should perhaps use either one or the other, or else call the tale "Lancelot and Le Chevalier de la Charrette."

Yvain is a story about a knight who is so busy performing deeds of knight errantry that he fails to return to his wife, the queen, is therefore accused of being a traitor, and spends a major part of the romance seeking to re-establish his identity and his place in a society which has banished him. Yvain thus engages in a number of adventures in which he behaves as a good knight should, presumably seeking to prove himself worthy of acceptance by society. In the animal world of the forest, he meets a lion, who accompanies him on his adventures, and he becomes known as "The Knight of the Lion." Once again, a hero's true identity is revealed only after he has performed the ultimate deed of prowess, that is, after he has fought Gawain to a draw. At this point, "The Knight of the Lion" becomes "Yvain" again, and shortly afterwards the hero's wife is compelled to take him back when she discovers who he really is. The name revealing again occurs, then, at the most crucial times in the romance and is closely related to the theme, the proper relationship between prowess and love.

Chrétien's *Perceval* is, of course, incomplete, but it is obvious that much of the tale as we have it centers around names. Near the beginning, we learn that the hero always asks both the name of anything he sees and what it is good for. A little later his mother tells him always to learn a

companion's name, for, she says, one knows a man by his name. Perceval then dutifully asks the names of people he meets, although ironically his own name is not known. He is known merely as the youth with the red weapons. When Perceval leaves the castle of the fisher king and a maiden asks him his name, we are told that although he has not known his name before, he now divines it and answers, "Perceval of Wales." (The maiden responds angrily that it is instead "Perceval the Wretched.") It is difficult to know the precise significance of the sudden awareness of his name, but it seems to mark a distinct step in his search for self-knowledge and toward the sort of accomplishment associated in the other tales with the assertion of knightly prowess. Here prowess becomes spiritual awareness, however, and the love of woman usually associated with prowess becomes love of God.

Perceval still refuses to give his name to the Proud Knight of the Glade, and Arthur himself remarks soon afterwards that he has failed to ask the youth his name. The next major step in establishing the hero's identity occurs when Perceval tells Gawain his real name. This detail seems somehow roughly analogous to the Gawain battle scenes which are so crucial in *Cligès* and in *Yvain*. The final step occurs when Perceval reveals his name to the hermit, to whom he has confessed his sins and expressed sorrow for not having asked questions of the fisher king. The degree to which the hero has acquired fame is made clear when the hermit recognizes his name. However, perhaps the recognition of his name by a holy man is meant to suggest that Perceval has gained "spiritual recognition" rather than mere earthly "fame."

Thus, an awareness of the use of names can help us as literary critics to perceive more clearly the organizational techniques of a major writer in that important genre of medieval narrative, the versified romance. Chrétien, no less than our greatest English writers – whether medieval or Renaissance – has used traditional materials, to be sure, but not only has he done so in apparently fresh and distinctive ways, he has also shaped the traditional material in each romance with the artistic whole in mind.

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