Personal Names in the *Canterbury Tales*

NORMAN E. ELIASON

THE NAMES I SHALL CONSIDER here are only those of persons figuring prominently in the *Canterbury Tales* – the names of the pilgrims journeying toward Canterbury and telling tales along the way and of the major characters in the tales which they tell.[1] This limitation is justifiable, I think, since my purpose is not to provide a mere catalogue of the names in Chaucer's unfinished masterpiece but to try to see how and why he used names as he did there. Since it is reasonable to assume that he gave more careful attention to the names of the major figures than to those of the minor ones, it is to the former that we might best look to discover whatever principles or practices Chaucer followed in the selection and use of names.

In their selection he followed two quite different practices, either adopting the names found in his source or, when he was not relying upon a literary source, choosing common everyday names current in England at the time. Neither of these practices was odd, and neither involved any great effort on Chaucer's part. For the names of his characters, he evidently saw little need to expend much time or trouble. The opposite impression – that he gave free reign to his fancy and exercised considerable ingenuity in devising cunningly fitting ones – derives from ignoring Chaucer's general practice, concentrating instead upon the few examples which are clearly exceptional.

When adopting names from his source, Chaucer often modified them somewhat but did not radically change them. The nature and extent of his modifications are adequately revealed by the names of the main characters in the *Clerk's Tale*. For *Walter* Chaucer regularly employs the anglicized form rather than the Latin *Valterius* or the French *Wautier* of his sources, usually stressing it as *Wálter* but at least once as *Waltér* (612,[2] where it rimes with *yeer*). For *Grisilde*, however, he both retains the Latin form *Grisildis*[3] and also anglicizes it as *Grisild(e)*, the *-e* being fre-

[1] Excluded are the *Parson's Tale*, where there are no characters, and the *Monk's Tale*, where the various Biblical, legendary, and historical persons mentioned in the 17 tragedies which the Monk relates before he is stopped are hardly to be reckoned as major characters.

[2] The text cited throughout is F. N. Robinson's *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, Boston, 1957.

[3] And also *Griseldis*, the form regularly used in the French version as well. The persistence of the name in later English tradition is, I assume, due to the popularity of Chaucer's tale, but its spelling as *Griselda* is contrary to Chaucer's.

quently elided or for the sake of rime simply dropped (442, where it rimes with *child)*. He stresses it usually as *Grisílde* but sometimes as *Grísilde*. He likewise varies the stress of *Grisildis*, as either *Grisíldis* or *Grísildìs*, using the latter in rime (with *wonder is* 752, and *al this* 948). For *Janicula* also he retains the Latin form, stressing it as *Janículà*, or anglicizes it as *Janicle*, stressing it as *Jánicle*.

When retaining the name forms of his source, which in this instance was both a Latin and a French version, Chaucer here gave preference to the Latin, probably merely to reinforce his claim that the source he was using was the Latin one. At any rate, Chaucer uses neither of the French forms *Janicol(l)e* and *Wautier*. *Walter* is the only name which he here completely and consistently anglicizes, undoubtedly because this form was well established as an English name and was a very common one at the time. Common also, however, were variants such as *Wauter*, *Water*, and *Watt(e)*,[4] none of which Chaucer employs. His avoidance of these variant English forms might be attributed to the fact that he rarely uses the name in rime – only once, as a matter of fact – but this merely raises the further question why, with such variants readily available, he did not exploit them freely for both rime and meter, as was his usual practice.

Chaucer's modification of the names, consisting mainly in substituting sounds or spellings like *W* for *V* (as in *Walter* for *Valterius)* and in dropping or weakening the endings (as in *Grisild(e)* for *Grisildis*), makes them seem more English or less foreign. But this effect was evidently not his primary concern, for his handling of the names clearly indicates a desire on his part to have both unmodified forms like *Grisildis* and modified forms like *Grisilde* which, as we have seen above, were useful for both meter and rime.

How useful such variants thus were becomes manifest only if we look at other tales. In the *Knight's Tale*, two of the four main characters have name variants which are used for the sake of rime: *Emelye* to rime with *melodye* and *Emelya* to rime with *and cride A*, and *Palamon* to rime with *that oon* and *Palamoun* to rime with *up and doun*. For *Arcite*, which rimes with *to write*, the variant *Arcita* is not used in rime. For *Thésĕùs*, which rimes with *tellen us*, there are neither spelling- nor stress- variants, and for *Pálămòn* as well as *Pálămòun* the stress is also unvaried. The other two names have stress-variants: *Émélўà* as well as *Émĕlўĕ* or *Émĕlў(e)*, -e being elided both before vowels and before unstressed *have, the*, etc.; *Árcítĕ* as well as *Árcítă*, *Árcít(e)*, and *Árcĭtè*. The main difference between the *Knight's Tale* and the *Clerk's Tale* in the use of names is that in the former they are used much more frequently in rime.

[4] P. H. Reaney, *The Origin of English Surnames*, (London, 1967), p. 138.

In the *Man of Law's Tale* there are only two instances of variants used for rime: *Alle* instead of the usual *Alla* to rime with *bifalle* and *Maurice* instead of *Mauricius* to rime with *so nyce*. *Custance*, usually stressed *Cŭstáncĕ* and always thus in rime, is sometimes stressed *Cúst-ăanc(e)*. Chaucer's use of *Custance* rather than *Constaunce* or *Constance* – the name forms in his sources and the forms which he regularly uses for the noun – is rather odd, for they would more readily have indicated that the heroine of the tale is to be regarded as a symbol of constancy. The fact that *Custance* was a common variant of the name *Constance*[5] hardly explains Chaucer's choice.

In the other tales where Chaucer was relying upon a literary source, I see no point in merely citing further examples of his practice of retaining or slightly modifying the names and of utilizing the variants for meter and rime. I shall instead call attention to any departures from this practice and to any other oddities I have noted there.

In the *Manciple's Tale*, Chaucer uses only one name, *Phebus*, retained from his sources and invariably stressed as *Phébus*. Though repeatedly used (13 times here and frequently elsewhere), it never occurs in rime. Phebus' wife, though named in the sources, is unnamed here, as is also the tattle-tale crow.

The names in the *Second Nun's Tale* are notable only for the fact that, whatever their variants, the stress is not shifted. Thus *Cecilie*, the name of the martyred virgin, has both tri- and dissyllabic forms but with the stress always on the second syllable. Likewise *Almachius*, the name of the virgin's persecutor, occurs also as *Almache*, and in both the stress is on the second syllable.

The names in the *Physician's Tale* are notable in that their Latin forms are retained intact, except for *Virginius*, where the two final syllables are sometimes telescoped together as one.

In *Melibee* Chaucer retains the palpably allegoric name *Prudence* for the wife and devises the equally palpable name *Sophie* for the daughter, who is nameless in the source. Both in retaining the rather senseless name of *Melibee* for the husband and in explaining its significance, Chaucer follows his source. Why he alters *Melibee* to *Melibeus*, using it 35 times as against 14 times for *Melibee*, is inexplicable since there was no warrant for the variation in his source nor any need for it in his prose rendering.

Though not based upon a specific source, the *Merchant's Tale* is best considered here in connection with *Melibee*, from which Chaucer took some of the material for this tale and probably also his cue for the names he devised for its characters. At any rate, *Placebo* and *Justinus*, the names of the sycophantic and the trustworthy advisers, are like the

[5] *Ibid*, p. 135.

names in *Melibee* in that their meaning is palpable. This is also true of *January* and *May*, for the metaphor involved in applying these month names to the old husband and his young wife is anything but obscure nor one which demanded much ingenuity of Chaucer. If as the MED entry suggests, this use of *January* was indeed an innovation on Chaucer's part it might well have been prompted by his prior choice of *May*, a natural choice since it was a common name for a girl and a particularly apt one if the girl was as young and fresh as January's wife and if, as was true of Chaucer, "fresh as May" was a favorite simile.[6]

For her he also provided the variant *Mayus*, just as he did for *Justinus*, merely reversing the procedure to produce *Justin*, and in both instances he utilized the variants for the sake of meter. And since this was, as we have seen, Chaucer's customary practice, the form *Mayus* would seem to require no further explanation.

Damyan, the name of May's seducer, is unlike the other names in the tale. In thus breaking the name-pattern there, Chaucer may well have sensed that another palpably meaningful name would prove wearisome and that *Damyan* would therefore provide a welcome relief – as indeed it does. The selection of this particular name, however, seems rather curious, for *Damyan*, though in use at the time, was not very common. The simplest explanation is that it was convenient for both rime and meter. Of its 25 occurrences, ten in rime, there are none requiring variation of any kind. The alternative explanation depends on the assumption that Chaucer was aware of the fact that *Damyan* was the name of an obscure saint and used it as well as *Mayus* in an elaborate bit of wordplay[7] – which, to my mind however, seems pointless, for I should think it would have escaped both the notice and the comprehension of his audience.

The tales of the Squire, the Franklin, and the Nun's Priest are like the *Merchant's Tale* in that, though their source is undetermined, the names used there are like those which Chaucer took over from a source. In the *Squire's Tale*, the names of the Tartar king *Cambyuskan*, of his wife *Elpheta*, of his daughter *Canacee*, and of his two sons *Algarsyf* and *Cambalo* have defied the efforts of scholars to identify them or to discover where Chaucer found them. As befits a tale of wonder set in the mysterious East, all the names are strange and, by refraining from anglicizing them in any way at all, Chaucer kept them strange. The only variant, *Cambalus* for *Cambalo*, is quite obviously employed solely for the sake of rime. The one name problem which continues to vex scholars is whether

[6] He used it a number of times, most notably in his description of the Squire: "He was as fressh as is the month of May." Of the 25 occurrences of the name in this tale, it is preceded by *fresh* 12 times.

[7] See Emerson Brown, Jr., *Chaucer Review*, 2 (1968), 273–7.

Cambalo is the name of both Cancee's brother and her lover. The solution, it seems to me, is not to be sought by speculating about whether the tale, if allowed to continue, was to involve incest but by recognizing that Chaucer deliberately botched the tale, intending to do so from the start and revealing this clearly when his intention had been fulfilled – just before the Squire was stopped at the point where his confusion about *Cambalo* exposes his utter confusion about the whole plot.[8]

In the *Franklin's Tale*, the names of the trustful *Arveragus*, of his faithful wife *Dorigen*, and of the amorous young squire *Aurelius* are also rather strange, as might be expected of a purportedly "Breton lay." The only problem which they pose, however, is their pronunciation, more particularly whether the *g* in *Dorigen* and *Arveragus* is hard or soft. Since *Arveragus*, like *Aurelius*, was a Latin name, the *g* there was presumably hard, as it may also have been in *Dorigen*.[9]

In the *Nun's Priest's Tale* Chaucer took the name of the cock *Chauntecleer* from whatever source he was using and probably also the name of the fox *daun Russell*, which occurs only once in the tale. But for the hen, called *Pinte* in the closest analogues to Chaucer's version, he evidently devised the name *Pertelote*. Why he did so has never been satisfactorily explained.[10] Possibly it was an onomatopoetic coinage.

Concerning the names considered up to this point, it is clear that most of those which Chaucer adopted from his source had variant forms, already in existence there or produced by his modifications of the names, and that he used these variants for the sake of rime and meter. The question then arises whether, in doing so, Chaucer was not simply fudging, playing fast and loose with the names merely to satisfy the requirements

[8] As I explain more fully in *The Language of Chaucer's Poetry: An Appraisal of the Verse, Style, and Structure* (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1972), pp. 145–6.

[9] See Robinson's notes on lines 808 and 815. Chaucerians today pronounce these two names variously. Their pronunciation of other names follows no set pattern. For those which survive, like *Virginia*, *Emily*, etc., the pronunciation is usually modernized, but for those which do not survive, practice varies, the Chaucerian pronunciation being sometimes retained and sometimes not, e. g., *Arcite*, either [arˈsitə] or [ˈarsajt]. Chaucer's *Custance* is nearly always changed to *Constance* and his *Grisilde* to *Griselda*. Chaucerian scholars might thus be said to be following Chaucer's lead except for the fact that there is neither rime nor reason to account for many of their variant pronunciations.

[10] The latest attempt is that of Clarence Steinberg contained in a paper read at the Kalamazoo Conference, 1972, entitled "The Clever Name Game on the Way to Canterbury and Beyond: *Onomastica dramatica Chauceriana*," a copy of which Mr. Steinberg kindly sent me. The sources of the *N's P's Tale* and Chaucer's handling of them have recently been carefully reassessed by Robert A. Pratt in *Speculum*, 47 (1972), 422–44 and 646–68. His explanation (pp. 651–53) of why Chaucer rejected *Renart*, the traditional name for the fox, in favor of *daun Russell* is completely convincing. His explanation (p. 655) of why Chaucer substituted *Pertelote for Pinte*, however, is unconvincing, for the meaning or etymology of both names is, as he indicates, doubtful.

of his versification. The question is at least partly answered when we note the variants Chaucer used for names not derived from a source but selected from the stock of names current among his countrymen. Variants like *Alice* / *Alison*, *Nicholas* / *Nicholay*, *Simon* / *Simkin*, and *Roger* / *Hodge*, were, as we know, in common use at the time, and in utilizing them, as Chaucer did, for the sake of meter or rime,[11] he cannot be accused of fudging. Instead of raising unwarranted suspicions about the regularity of Chaucer's versification or the legitimacy of his means of attaining it, his handling of names, both English and foreign, provides singularly convincing evidence showing that his riming is uncommonly true and his meter uncommonly regular.[12]

Chaucer indeed might have made more use than he did of established variants like *Alice* and *Alison*. Although using both of these variants for the *Wife of Bath* and for her friend, mentioning each of them thus only twice, he used only *Alisoun* for the heroine of the *Miller's Tale*, repeating the name 13 times. For the hero of the tale, he used the variants *Nicholas* and *Nicholay* but not *Nick* or *Colle*, common shortened forms of the name,[13] and he likewise refrained from using the common shortening *Tom* for the sick old man in the *Summoner's Tale*, repeatedly and invariably calling him *Thomas*. For the foolish old husband in the *Miller's Tale* and also for one of the two heroes in the *Reeve's Tale*, Chaucer used only *John*, not its common variants *Jack* and *Jankin*, which he employed otherwise, using *Jack* as a generic name or as a term of contempt[14] and *Jankin* as the name only of clever fellows or as a derogatory designation for priests. For both the Miller and the sturdy young servant in his tale Chaucer used the same name *Robyn*, one of many common variants of *Robert* which he might have employed to differentiate the two persons but did not. And for the Host, Chaucer likewise used the variant *Harry* rather than *Henry*.

Chaucer's use of name variants is thus remarkable for its restraint, for he employed only a few of those which were available and utilized them more sparingly than he might well have. In using such variants he was, as we have seen, following a common practice of the time. This also holds true of his selection of names. Nearly all of those for which he rather than his source was responsible are names which were then in

[11] He uses *Alys* / *Alisoun* for both meter and rime, *Nicholas* / *Nicholay* as well as *Symond* / *Symkyn* only for rime, and *Roger* / *Hogge* only for meter.

[12] This view, long the accepted one but now apparently losing favor, is reexamined and defended in Chapter I of *The Language of Chaucer's Poetry*.

[13] Reaney, pp. 153–4. In the *N's P's Tale* (3383), *Colle* is used as the name of a dog. Though clear about this, Chaucer is not clear about *Talbot* and *Gerland*, whom editors variously identify.

[14] Alisoun, though well aware of Absalon's name, calls him *Jakke fool* (I 3708). The generic application is cited below.

common use. Of the most common ones – *Henry*, *John*, *Richard*, *Robert*, and *William*,[15] – Chaucer, for some reason or other, avoided both *Richard* and *William* or any of their numerous variants. Among the personal names which he chose, only two were so uncommon as to raise the legitimate suspicion that they were devised solely to suit their persons – the flowery name *Eglentyne*[16] applied with gentle irony to the Prioress and *Thopas* to the hero of a burlesque romance to suggest with less gentle irony that he is anything but a gem of a knight.[17] In derivation also, the names which Chaucer selected were in accord with the common practice of adopting as given names the names of flowers *(Eglentyne)*, gems *(Thopas)*, months *(May* and *January)*, and especially the names of saints and Biblical characters *(Thomas*, *Oswald*, *Absalon*, and many more).

Chaucer's use of given names rather than surnames was also in accord with common practice, for, although surnames had become well established, they were regularly used only in official documents where they were appended to given names as a necessary means of identification. In ordinary usage, including Chaucer's, calling someone by his given name alone did not imply familiarity or contempt. The most common types of surnames were those indicating a person's residence, his occupation, or his familial connection; fairly common also were nicknames, descriptive or otherwise. Chaucer might readily have availed himself of all of these types and indeed comes close to doing so but, with two exceptions, did not. He might have given the Cook a surname – calling him either Roger *Cook* or Roger *Ware* but instead refers to him as *the* Cook or as *of* Ware[18] – and so also many of the other pilgrims.[19] In several instances Chaucer might well have used surnames, thus differentiating the two

[15] Which accounts for 64 percent of recorded names in the fourteenth century – a figure which, however, as Reaney points out (p. 130), "seriously underrates the variety and number of christian names in use."

[16] For the remote possibility that *Eglentyne* was suggested by the name of an actual nun, see A. C. Baugh, *Chaucer's Major Poetry* (New York, 1963), p. 240.

[17] Attempts to find deeper and subtler significance for *Thopas* (as noted in *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, Chicago, 1941, p. 493) seem unnecessary. At any rate, the only other name in the tale, that of the giant called *Olifaunt*, hardly suggests that Chaucer was exercising his fancy or wit unduly on names there.

[18] Why the London Cook says he is *of Ware* (I 4336), 30 miles distant from the city, is regularly left unexplained. Perhaps it was simply for the sake of the rime with *care*.

[19] On the difficulty of distinguishing between surnames and designation of place, occupation, etc., in official documents, see Reaney, p. 296ff. In Chaucer the distinction is plain, being regularly marked, as here, by a preceding article or preposition which prevents such designations from being construed as surnames. One notable exception is the hero of the *Cook's Tale*, who "was cleped Perkyn Revelour" (I 4371). By capitalizing it, as editors regularly do, they seem to imply that *Revelour* is his surname or nickname, when in fact it is simply an adjective placed after the noun as it is 20 lines later "a prentys revelour."

Robyns, for example, as *Robin Miller* and *Robin Young*, the two Alices as *Alice Weaver* and *Alice Friend*, and the two Alisons (the Wife of Bath and the heroine of the *Miller's Tale)* as *Alison Pryketayle* and *Alison Letcher*.[20]

Among the pilgrims, only two have surnames – the Host, referred to as *Herry Bailly* but only once and then by the Cook who certainly did not employ the surname as a mark of respect, and Chaucer himself, referred to as *Chaucer* only once in the text[21] and then not specifically either as one of the pilgrims or as the author of the work. Obviously the poet was not given to flaunting his name. Concerning the Host, whom Chaucer describes as a Southwark innkeeper, it has long been known that he had a counterpart in real life, a Southwark innkeeper named *Henri Bayliff* in official records and a man of some prominence, serving twice as a member of parliament. It is inconceivable that Chaucer did not know of him and quite conceivable that he knew him very well. Why Chaucer decided to use his true name[22] but to distort his true character remains unexplained. Presumably Chaucer was either having fun with an old friend or scoring off an old enemy.

If Chaucer's failure to employ surnames gives rise sometimes to confusion, his reliance upon another common practice, that of using names generically rather than specifically, often gives rise to doubt – doubt as to whether the name is actually that of the person to whom it is applied and also doubt about its possible implications. The fact that names were often generically applied in Chaucer's day, especially to designate scamps, monks, priests, or other clerics is amply attested. In the *Canterbury Tales* there are two very clear instances. One occurs in the *Friar's Tale* (1355ff.) telling about a crooked summoner who had

> wenches at his retenue,
> That, wheither that sir Robert or sir Huwe,
> Or Jakke, or Rauf, or whoso that it were
> That lay be hem, they tolde it in his ere.

Here the names designate anyone or everyone, of high rank or not, who slept with such women. The other occurs when the Host calls upon the Monk for a tale (VII 1928 ff.), adding that

---

[20] Obscene by-names or surnames were, as Reaney (pp. 289-95) points out, not uncommon at the time. He cites both of these.

[21] All other specific mentions of Chaucer, in the *CTs* or his other works, are in rubrics, inserted most likely by scribes. The only textual mention of *Geoffrey* is in the *House of Fame*.

[22] But not that of his wife, which was *Christian*. The Host's reference to her as *Goodelief* (VII 1894), now usually construed as her name, is most likely merely a term of endearment "good dear," just as it clearly is when the Wife of Bath refers to one of her old husbands thus (III 431).

I knowe nat youre name.
Wher shal I calle yow my lord daun John,
Or daun Thomas, or elles daun Albon ?

Pretty clearly the Host is not asking the Monk to tell him his name but is simply registering his uncertainty as to which of these generic names for monks would be the most appropriate.[23]

Doubt about this enters in a little later (VII 2792–3), however, when the Host, unhappy about the *Monk's Tale*, declares,

Wherfore, sire Monk, or daun Piers by youre name,
I pray yow hertely telle us somwhat elles.

Since *by youre name* seems quite explicit, Baugh (p. 353) and others conclude that *Piers* is the Monk's actual name, evidently thinking that the Host had somehow or other learned it in the meantime or feeling loath simply to accept the apparent discrepancy involved. Another and, I think, better way of resolving the discrepancy is to construe *by youre name* as meaning "to assign you a name," the Host having finally overcome his earlier uncertainty and settled upon another generic name as even more appropriate for the Monk.

Similar doubt arises about the name of the Nun's Priest, who in the same passage (VII 2810 and 2820), though nowhere else, is referred to as *Sir John*, which Robinson believes was "apparently the Nun's Priest's actual name" (note on 2810). Both *John* and *Piers* were often generically applied to priests, however, and in both of these instances the names are prefixed by the titles *sir* and *daun*, which were commonly employed for such generic usages. Therefore it seems to me that neither the Monk nor the Nun's Priest is actually named.

By the same token I believe that neither the friar in the *Summoner's Tale* nor the monk in *Shipman's Tale* are referred to by their actual names, *frere John* for the former and *daun John* for the latter being applied generically rather than individually. The friar, it should be noted, remains nameless until near the end of the tale (III 2171), when he is merely greeted as *frere John*, the only occurrence of the name. The monk however is repeatedly called *daun John* in the *Shipman's Tale* – 20 times all told – but never without the prefixed title, even by his good friends, the wife and her husband; and both of them, it is significant to note, are nameless.

[23] Lines 1929–30 are regularly construed as a question — a rhetorical question obviously — and punctuated accordingly. But there is ample warrant (many manuscripts have *I shal* rather than *shal I)* for construing the lines as a continuation of the sentence, which then would mean, "I don't know your name or whether I should call you John, Thomas, or Albon." The following line (1931), "Of what hous be ye ... ?" seems to indicate that the choice of names depended upon the particular establishment or order a monk belonged to.

The name *Jankin* is clearly used generically in one instance – i. e., when the Host, rebuked by the Parson for swearing, replies, "O Jankin, be ye there ? I smelle a Lollere . . ." (II 1172–3), a remark indicating that the name is applied both generically and contemptuously. When applied to the clever Oxford clerk who became the Wife of Bath's fifth husband, however, *Jankin* is evidently his actual name. The third use of the name, for the clever squire in the *Summoner's Tale* who is referred to twice there as *Jankyn*, is doubtful. But in view of the namelessness of the other characters there except old Thomas, *Jankyn* should probably be regarded as a generic name.

Other doubtful usages[24] are *Mabely*, applied once to the old widow in the *Friar's Tale*, and *Malkyn*, referred to in the link preceding the *Man of Law's Tale* (II 29–31), which raises another kind of doubt. Here the Host, eager to get on to another tale, reminds the pilgrims that time

> wol nat come agayn, withouten drede,
> Namoore than wole Malkynes maydenhede,
> Whan she hath lost it in hir wantownesse.

In this instance the connotation of the name as well as its generic application, when inferred from its immediate context, prompts the kind of explanation Robinson provides: "Malkyn, a wanton woman (proverbial)." Its broader context, however, suggests that the *Malkyn* mentioned by the Host is the *Malyne* of the *Reeve's Tale*, who also lost her "maydenhede" – an identification which is likely enough in view of Chaucer's frequent use of name variants for the same person and is both textually supported and textually gratifying.[25]

Determining the connotation of a Chaucerian name is difficult, requiring more than consideration of its context. The form as well as its status must also be taken into account. We tend to assume that forms like *Malkyn* or *Malyne*, with a hypocoristic suffix, or *Hodge*, shortened from *Roger*, are pejorative. But neither of these forms, it seems to me, is thus used by Chaucer. The Host, who has so little respect for the Cook that he might be expected to refer to him by the pejorative form of his name or even by a vulgar by-name, calls him *Roger*. It is the Cook himself who says his name is *Hodge*. Chaucer applies the form *Jankyn*, it is true, to rather scamp-like persons, but to the rascally miller of the *Reeve's Tale* he applies indiscriminately both *Simkyn* and *Simon*.

[24] In this respect the use of names in imprecation is akin to their use generically. The only instance which might cause doubt, however, occurs in the *Shipman's Tale* (214), when the wife, identifying herself as the knocker on her husband's door, impatiently says, "Peter! it am I." Here *Peter* is now usually and correctly construed as a mild oath rather than the husband's name.

[25] Gratifying because it provides linkage between Fragments I and II, and supported because *Malyne* in the *Reeve's Tale* is spelled *Malkyn* in several MSS.

Although some indication of the status of a name may be detected in contemporary records, it is especially in the works of other poets of the period where its status is best revealed.[26] But despite the status a name may have had in literary tradition, its status in Chaucer may be questionable, for in this respect fashion in literature, as well as in life, quickly changes, a name gaining or losing favour from one generation to the next or even sooner. The popularity of a name indicates something about its status but little about its connotation. The more popular a name is, the less likely it is to have any connotation at all.

A prime consideration is the way a writer selects names – whether, like Chaucer, he selects common everday names or instead chooses those which are odd or allow him to indulge in name-play. Name-play was a favorite device of writers in the Middle Ages, and the various kinds of play involved, as well as clear instances of each, have been pointed out repeatedly.[27] But whether Chaucer indulged in it freely and fancifully is highly doubtful. Apart from the instances already noted, like *Thopas*, *January*, or *Eglentyne* – where the name-play is anything but highly fanciful – there are very few certain examples.

Of one kind which was especially popular, etymological name-play, there is only one clear example. For *Cecilie*, the heroine's name in the *Second Nun's Tale*, Chaucer gives five different etymological interpretations – all of them palpably wrong, as such interpretations commonly were. But for this he deserves neither blame nor credit, since quite obviously he was merely following his source.[28] If he had any fondness for this kind of name-play, he missed a golden opportunity in the name of the Host, for if instead of *Harry* he had called him *Henry*, Chaucer might have exploited the etymological meaning of the name (deriving as it does from *Haimirich* "home-ruler") with delightful results when applied to this hen-pecked blusterer. With the thievish Miller he likewise let a chance slip, calling him *Robyn* rather than *Robert*, a name popularly thought to be derived from *robber* and often applied generically to thieves.[29]

---

[26] Hence the value of Tauno Mustanoja's "The Suggestive Use of Christian Names in Middle English Poetry," *Medieval Literature and Folklore Studies, Essays in Honor of Francis Lee Utley*, edited by Jerome Mandel and Bruce A. Rosenberg (New Brunswick, N. J., 1970), pp. 51–76. Concerning *Malkyn*, the evidence cited there (p. 71) about its connotation is conflicting.

[27] Most recently by Robert W. Hanning, "Uses of Names in Medieval Literature," *Names*, 16 (December, 1968), 325–38; Fred C. Robinson, "Appropriate Naming in English Literature," *Names*, 20 (June, 1972), 131–37; and Roberta Frank, "Some Uses of Paronomasia in Old English Scriptural Verse," *Speculum*, 47 (1972), 207–26. All three provide further bibliographical references.

[28] The passage occurs in VIII 85–119 and is adequately expounded in Robinson's notes.

[29] Mustanoja, pp. 62–3.

Throughout the Old English period, etymological name-play, serious as well as frivolous, had been popular, for the names then readily lent themselves to this since their etymological meaning was usually obvious (*Oswald*, for example, being clearly composed of *ōs* "a god" and *wald* "power"). But after the Conquest when Anglo-Saxon names had been superseded by names whose etymological meaning was far more obscure, such name-play became more difficult, and when indulged in at all the etymological explanation was usually false – like that of *Robert*. In using *Oswald* for the name of the Reeve, Chaucer was probably not aware of its etymological meaning and certainly gives no indication that he was.

The suitability of this name has been explained[30] as an instance of "onomastic verisimilitude," the Reeve, a Northerner, "being aptly provided with a name made famous by two Northumbrian saints of the Anglo-Saxon period." But *Oswald*, it seems to me, was far too common to have had so clear an allusive value. The use of names allusively – another kind of name-play, common throughout all periods of English – is claimed for Chaucer in several instances, most notably *Absolon*, bestowed on the foolish parish clerk in the *Miller's Tale*, it is generally maintained, in reminiscence of the Biblical *Absalom*. I remain doubtful, however, for though the two have some traits in common, the most notable traits of the clerk obviously do not hark back to Absalom or any other Biblical character. And like *Oswald*, *Absalon* was a common name at the time and therefore unlikely to have had the allusive force it has acquired now that the name is rare.

The other kind of name-play, involving punning, has been a favorite of some English writers from the time of Bede to the present. Chaucer employed it in an early work, the *Book of the Duchess*, where the pun on the name of the Duchess *Blanche*, referred to there as *White*, is palpable, and the pun on the name of her husband John, Duke of Lancaster, is less certain. But in the *Canterbury Tales* I find no instance of it. Others do, however, citing such names as *Damyan* and *Mayus* noted above, *Simkyn*, *Malyne*, *Gervase* (the smith in the *Miller's Tale)*, and *Huberd* (the Friar), and explaining the puns involved as being both very subtle and remarkably ingenious. But since in none of these instances does Chaucer indicate or even hint that he is indulging in name-play, the subtlety and ingenuity displayed there are to be credited to the explainers rather than the poet.

All told, the names which Chaucer selected are an unremarkable lot, most of them being ordinary names unlikely to have had any particular connotation or to have lent themselves to name-play of any sort and

[30] By Fred C. Robinson, "Personal Names in Medieval Narrative and the Name of Unferth in *Beowulf*," *Essays in Honor of Richebourg Gaillard McWilliams* (Birmingham, Ala., 1970), pp. 43–8.

being assigned to the various characters in the *Canterbury Tales* without much regard to their special suitability. It might therefore seem that Hanning (p. 328) is completely wrong in claiming that "Chaucer's control over names in his work is too consummate to be typical."

Hanning, however, is right, but to see how consummate Chaucer's control was we must look at the way he used names rather than the way he selected them. And here we are confronted with two striking oddities, both seeming to indicate that Chaucer's control, instead of consummate, was merely slipshod, for he failed to use names where he apparently should have and he used the same name where he apparently should not have. Both cause confusion – momentary confusion or nagging puzzlement as to why Chaucer assigned the same name to the Wife of Bath and to her friend and endless confusion or frustration resulting from Chaucer's failure to name the narrators and to employ their names to designate clearly and unmistakably who the narrator of each tale was.[31]

Both oddities – the anonymity of many of the characters in the *Canterbury Tales* and the homonymity of a few – have attracted notice, but only the latter has had specific though not very serious comment. Thus the fact that the Miller and also the old carpenter's servant in the *Miller's Tale* are both named *Robyn* has prompted the amusing suggestion that they are the same person, the young Robyn having witnessed the cuckolding of the carpenter which the old Robyn later narrates. And similarly the homonymity of the Wife of Bath and the frisky young wife who in the same tale cuckolds her old husband has given rise to the pleasant fancy that the old Alisoun and the young one have more in common than their name. Neither of these speculations stands up under close scrutiny of course, and other instances of homonymity in the *Canterbury Tales* and even in these two closely paired ones – the Miller's and the Reeve's, where both the carpenter and one of the Cambridge students bear the name John – discourage any further speculation like this. The remarkable homonymity of the Wife of Bath and her friend, underscored

[31] The most notorious instance is in the link after the *Man of Law's Tale*, where (II 1179), if Chaucer had designated the speaker by name rather than by title, much of our present doubt about the sequence of the tales would have been resolved. The title, variously recorded in the MSS as the *Squire*, the *Summoner*, or the *Shipman*, indicates that scribes felt no compunction about altering titles especially when, as here, alteration seemed necessary. With names, however, scribes did not feel free to take such liberties. The most recent discussion of the order of the tales and of the bearing which this link and the variant readings of line 1179 have on the problem is E. Talbot Donaldson's "The Ordering of the *Canterbury Tales*" in *Medieval Literature and Folklore Studies*, pp. 193–204.

Another instance, which has attracted little notice, is the identification of the Secound Nun and her tale, where as I have pointed out elsewhere (*Modern Language Quarterly*, 3 [1942], 9–16) the MS evidence raises doubts which Chaucer could readily have resolved by naming the narrator of the tale.

by the fact that they are named both *Alice* and *Alison*, has called forth only the unremarkable observation, "For some reason or other Chaucer seems to have been particularly fond of certain names or unwilling to think of another."[32] Clearly such homonymity, unless merely indicative of Chaucer's slipshod control of names, needs better explanation.

Only when we turn to the other striking oddity, the anonymity of Chaucerian characters, do we see that Chaucer's control over names is indeed consummate. This is best evident, I think, in the tales of the Pardoner, the Prioress, and the Canon's Yeoman, in each of which the anonymity of the characters is both effective and calculated. In the last of these, the anonymity of the two alchemists, both of whom are canons or clergymen, directs attention to the fraudulent activities of certain canons who, though not mentioned specifically by name, would have been readily identified by Chaucer's audience.[33] In the other two tales, which are two of the best in the Canterbury collection, the anonymity has a more significant function, for in the *Pardoner's Tale* the namelessness of the three young revelers helps to turn an inconsequential exposé of youthful viciousness into an ominous revelation of human depravity, and in the *Prioress' Tale* the namelessness of the characters – the little choir boy as well as his murderers – is one of the means whereby what might otherwise have been an insensate anti-Semitic diatribe is turned into a deeply moving legend of pious innocence.

Whether anonymity is as effective in some of the other tales and whether Chaucer deliberately employed it there may be questioned,[34] but there can surely be no doubt about Chaucer's awareness of the effect to be achieved by leaving characters nameless and that in some instances the effect thus achieved was deliberate.

The anonymity of the pilgrims, only eight of whom are named, is a different matter, however. Not only are the others unnamed, being designated instead by titles like the Knight, Squire, Cook, Wife of Bath, etc., but those who are named are also usually referred to by title, their names being rarely mentioned[35] – so rarely indeed that their names seem to matter very little. It therefore might seem that Rogers is right in declaring, "Since Chaucer usually did not use the pilgrims' names and

[32] *The Language of Chaucer's Poetry*, p. 33.

[33] A common device and a cunning one, as the Pardoner well knew, for when telling how he publicly accuses a man of sin he declares, "For though I telle noght his propre name, Men shal wel knowe that it is the same" (VI 417–8).

[34] To my mind, it is both effective and deliberate in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, the *Friar's Tale*, and especially the *Shipman's Tale*. In the last the only character given a name is the amorous monk, called *daun John*, which, as I have explained above, should not be construed as his real name.

[35] *Oswald* and *Roger / Hodge* three times, *Alice / Alisoun* twice, and *Eglentyne*, *Huberd*, *Robyn*, *Harry Bailly* and *Chaucer* only once.

since he used most of the names given only once, it is clear that he considered naming the pilgrims of but little importance in his overall plan."[36] But if so, Chaucer's control over names – skilfully and delicately exhibited in leaving nameless the characters of some of the tales – was simply slipshod in the frame-story which holds the tales together. In this frame-story, consisting of the General Prologue and the links between the tales, Chaucer assumed two basic obligations – making us aware of who the pilgrims were and telling us when and how each narrated his tale. In the General Prologue, where he introduced the pilgrims, one of Chaucer's problems was to keep the long series of portraits from becoming tedious. If, instead of naming only the Prioress and the Friar there, he had named all the rest, pausing in each portrait to say what the particular pilgrim "was cleped," the result would have been a tedious sameness. He avoided this very simply, mentioning in one or another of the links the names of the other six pilgrims not destined for perpetual anonymity. But since he did not name the rest there, it seems clear that he had some other purpose in mind than merely the prevention of tediousness.

In the overall plan, the use of titles rather than names proved useful and, despite the confusion it later caused, effective. Certainly it proved useful to Chaucer whenever he decided to reassign a tale (from the Wife of Bath to the Shipman, for example) – or to reposition it (after the *Man of Law's Tale*, as is commonly conjectured[37]), for all that was then required was alteration of the narrator's title. With names, however, this would have been more difficult, especially if each narrator had been regularly and repeatedly referred to by name alone.

The use of titles is an effective means of connecting the tales to each other and connecting them with their narrators. The clearest instances of the first are to be found in the tales connected by a quarrel, like that of the Friar and Summoner, for example. Here the quarrel is not between two individuals – one named Hubert and the other unnamed, each intent on scoring off the other in his tale – but between representatives of two kinds of ecclesiastics, friars and summoners, whose long-standing enmity was so notorious that Chaucer could rely upon it alone[38] to establish the connection between their tales. The tales of the Clerk and the Wife of Bath are similarly connected, for the quarrel of the nameless clerk – as is revealed by his comments about her and in the tale which he tells – is not with Alice of Bath but with any or all wives who held views like hers. And similarly also the connection between the tales of the Miller and the

[36] P. Burwell Rogers, "The Names of the Canterbury Pilgrims," *Names*, 16 (December, 1968), 345.

[37] See fn. 31.

[38] In making the Friar and Summoner personal as well as professional antagonists, Chaucer was merely adding a dramatic touch to enliven the action.

Reeve depends upon a long-standing occupational quarrel, but in this instance the quarreling connection did not quite work out, for, though the *Reeve's Tale* is aimed at thieving millers, the *Miller's Tale* has as its butt a carpenter. This contretemps Chaucer nimbly avoided, however, by blithely declaring that the Reeve had once been a carpenter, thus managing to retain the traditional quarrel indicated by the titles of the narrators, the Reeve and the Miller.

For connecting tales and their narrators, designating the latter by title instead of name works very well in all the instances where the two are in accord, for it is then that the occupation or status of the narrator rather than his individuality which makes him and his tale seem mutually suitable. The nameless Knight and the tale he tells provide a good example, for it is the kind of tale any proper knight might tell and he is the kind of knight who might tell so proper a tale. This holds true of the nameless young Squire and his tale, of the narrators and the tales mentioned in the preceding paragraph, and of several others as well.

In the overall plan of the *Canterbury Tales*, however, the anonymity of the pilgrims – actual or virtual – is thus structurally defensible rather than fully justifiable. The main justification for naming only a few of the pilgrims and leaving the others nameless is, it seems to me, stylistic, for here the two oddities – anonymity and homonymity – join together. Instead of being two separate anomalies, utterly different save for the fact that both involve name-usage, they are of the same kind, at least in their effect and therefore, I believe, in their intent. In failing to use names where he should have and in using the same name where he should not have, Chaucer was not slipshod. What he apparently wanted and certainly achieved in the *Canterbury Tales* was a style suited to his overall plan – a style suggesting nonchalance on his part so that whatever he failed to tidy up properly would seem not to matter, a style engaging our attention from the start and promising that in the tales of *sentence* and *solaas* which were to follow we should find pleasure, not *hard langage* nor *argumentes tough* nor a finicky concern over trifles like names. The fact that the language does not always prove easy or the arguments invariably simple should alert us to the possibility that the trifles are not always trivial. Names are in fact almost never trivial, and in the *Canterbury Tales* the seemingly careless way Chaucer selected and used them conceals but also reveals the careful attention he gave them.

The University of North Carolina