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LITERARY TERMS: LIMITATIONS OF NAMING

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The papers that have been given at the Literary Onomastics Conference and published in Literary Onomastics Studies over the years have told us many things about the processes and effects of naming. We have observed that authors select names for persons, places, and things for all sorts of reasons: symbolism, social class, location in time and place, comic effect, eroticism, evocativeness, rhythm, and biographical import, just to name a few. And we have seen that, while study of these names can open many avenues of understanding for the reader, the names themselves are delimiting. The names shape our perceptions and help us to structure the literary world we are dealing with, but structures require a certain amount of rigidity. Consequently, the names can say much and suggest more, but there will always be limitations to their ability to communicate. If one seeks to transcend those limitations too far, one risks complete chaos and meaninglessness. A source of names that can tell us more about both the processes of naming and the limitations of names is the body of terms used in the critical study of literature. In one sense, many of these are authentic names in
that they derive from the names of people, places, characters and the like. In another sense, even the terms we would call common nouns have the impact of names in that they are used side-by-side with proper nouns—and in fact are often properized themselves—in the study of literature. For example, is there an essential difference as to manner of usage in critical study between an alexandrine and an ode? Of course there is a difference in meaning, and the one derives from a proper noun whereas the other does not, but both are used at the same level of discourse. Or again, is there a difference in level of usage (of course there is in meaning) between Gongorism and Realism? This very shifting between common and proper noun is itself interesting and should help us expand our notions of what a name is, but instead of focusing on it I will merely note that the distinction is often blurry in the examples I propose to use.

Perhaps the most obvious source of names for literary types is that of the authors who invented or first used the form. And so we have, for instance, the Spenserian stanza, for no one before Edmund Spenser had thought to add an alexandrine line to ottava rima (and few thereafter, although Byron made effective use of it in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*). Skeltonics, that peculiar tumbling verse invented by John Skelton, have a naive charm, as in "The Tunning of Elinour Rumming":
Tell you I chill
If that you will
A while be still
Of a comely gill
That dwelt on a hill
But she was quite grill...
And her visage
It would assauage
A man's courage....

But I don't know of anyone else who used the form. The clerihew is named for its inventor, Edmund Clerihew Bentley, whose boredom in a chemistry lecture led him to write

Sir Humphry Davy
Abominated gravy.
He lived in the odium
Of having discovered sodium.

And thereby he formed a new literary type. It seems probable that Leonine rime, a particular form of internal rhyme split by the caesura, was first used by the medieval writer Leoninus, canon of St. Victor in Paris, in such a line as "Ex rex Edvardus, debacchans ut Leopardus," but certainty is impossible. The mists of time are also too thick for us to know for sure whether Alcaeus really invented alcaics, the verse form named after him, or if Sappho invented sapphics, Pindar invented the particular type of ode called Pindaric, or Horace the type known as Horatian, or Menippus the menippean form of satire, or Anacreon the erotic and Bacchanalian poetry that is called anacreontic. At this point we slide over into a second source of literary terms, the names of the most famous
practitioners of a particular form. (Before I leave the paragraph, however, I would call attention to the mixture of capitalized and uncapitalized terms in the above list; the names are sliding back and forth from proper to common.)

In this next category goes the Shakespearean sonnet, which seems to have actually been invented, at least in its English form, by Sir Thomas Wyatt a generation or so before Shakespeare, but Shakespeare gets the glory. The same is true for the Petrarchan sonnet, a form that Petrarch brought to high perfection but did not invent, and for Senecan tragedy, which is greatly imitative of Euripides. Gongorism and Marinism, named respectively after Luis de Gongóra y Argote and Giambattista Marini, are densely ornate poetic styles resembling the metaphysical verse of John Donne. As with the Petrarchan sonnet, the basic elements pre-existed Gongóra and Marini, but these authors developed them into full expression and influenced other writers. Thomas Bowdler was not the first literary expurgator, but we still know the practice of omitting offensive passages as bowdlerizing and Dr. W. A. Spooner was certainly not the first person to mix up words so as to speak of a blushing crow instead of a crushing blow, but spoonerisms still bear his name. Even the existence of Bishop Golias is dubious, but a type of lilting Latin verse satire that celebrates wine,
women and song is called goliardic. Not quite identical with this source of names and so forming a third category is the process of naming by association with a famous user of the form, especially one of noble birth. An example is rime royal, brought to excellence by Chaucer but named in connection with James I of Scotland, who later used it in his *King's Quhair*. Since there is no obvious way to distinguish between those sources who are originators and those who are famous practitioners, other than historical research, it seems evident that those who adopted these names for literary terms saw no significant difference between them. This should alert us to a significant item to be taken into consideration when analyzing names used within literary works. To what extent was the author concerned with historical realism and to what extent was he concerned with the popular interpretation of history?

Certain literary terms, forming a fourth category, come from well-known fictional characters. Malapropism, from Mrs. Malaprop of Sheridan's *The Rivals*, gives a name to a comic mistaking of words that is actually at least as old as Aristophanes. Similarly, Homer's Ajax and Plautus' braggart soldier were engaging in rodomontade long before the term acquired its name from Ariosto's bragging king Rodomonte in *Orlando Furioso*. There is really no answer to the question why these terms were named after characters centuries later than their first appearance in literature.
Plautus' braggart soldier did give a name to a character type, however, the *miles gloriosus*, but since that is also the title of the play in which he appears we have a fifth related category, that deriving from titles of literary works. Other title characters who gave us literary terms are Euphues, appearing in John Lyly's *Euphues: An Anatomy of Wit*, after whom is named that elaborate prose style known as euphuism, and Samuel Butler's *Hudibras*, after whom the satiric poem in octosyllabic couplets with outrageous rhymes is called hudibrastic verse. Familiar terms like utopia, essay, aphorism, geste, and apocryphal were also originally titles of books by, respectively, Sir Thomas More, Montaigne, Hippocrates, the anonymous compilers of the *Gesta Romanorum* (ca. 1250), and the scholars who named those books of the Bible called the Apocrypha. Macaronic verse gets its name from the *Liber Macaronicus* of Teofilo Folengo, and the Imagist poets are so called after the title of the first anthology of their work, *Des Imagistes* (1914). What seems to have happened in still another case is a conflation of titles. Robert Blair's *The Grave* (1743) and Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1751) combine to give us a name to characterize this school of poetry, the graveyard school.

A considerable amount of early literature was written in celebration of a particular god or demigod. Such literature was named after the deity being celebrated, giving us a sixth category that includes adonic verse,
that particular combination of dactyl and spondee named after Adonis or his festival the Adonia; bacchius, the three-syllable foot of short-long-long named after Bacchus; and erotic literature, celebrating Aphrodite's naughty son Eros.

It is also convenient to distinguish literature according to the era in which it was written, and many eras have been named after the reigning monarch. So we have Elizabethan, Jacobean, Caroline, Georgian, Victorian, and Edwardian periods in literature, but more particularly what we identify as Jacobean drama or Caroline verse or Victorian novel or Edwardian poetry has specific characteristics that seem to transcend the era. The baroque structures, sinister intrigue, and sardonic wit of Jacobean drama, for instance, can be identified in varying degrees in earlier drama (The Spanish Tragedy, for example) and later literature (some of Browning's dramatic monologues and even Pinter's plays). So the name takes on characteristics certainly not shared by the monarch (James I was not the ironic intriguer of the plays) nor by all of the literature produced in the era (George Herbert's gentle poems of devotion bear little resemblance to The Duchess of Malfi), but that can be seen in work not of the era. Names of this class I would designate a seventh category, that of naming by association with an important, nonliterary person or group. Also in this category might be included
the term Augustan, describing the characteristics of English literature of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Writers of the era strove to emulate the classical grace and rationality that they perceived in the writing created under the Emperor Augustus. Writing of less sophistication might be called gothic, after those rude barbarians or "bearded ones" the Goths, or even philistine, after the supposedly insensitive inhabitants of Philistia. Pre-Raphaelite writers and artists attempted to recreate the primitive simplicity of the era before the artist Raphael, and so this term also derives from association with a prominent person. The savage invective known as philippics is named by association with the orations of Demosthenes berating Philip II of Macedon. Finally, the hexameter alexandrine might get its name from the many poems about Alexander the Great written in this meter during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, or possibly, as an alternate source, from the poet Alexandre Paris, who was an eminent user of the meter.

Still another source of literary terms, an eighth category, is place names associated with particular forms or styles. We hear of Attic, Doric, and Ionic styles, associated with those various places. Arcadian pastoral and areopagite classicism are also rooted in Greek place names. Association with the ancestral home of the
language of early fiction gives us Romanticism and the roman. From France we have the blustering gasconade from the supposed manner of speech in Gascony; the villanelle or poem appropriate for a little country house or villa; and two forms named for the single Norman village of Vau-de-Vire: vaudeville, supposedly originated there, and virelay, a narrative poem of indefinite length in tercets, distinguished from the more familiar Breton lay. In England, Grub Street hacks might sling billingsgate, but the Lake Poets (Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey) were above such scurrilous language. No one seems to know why the limerick is named after that Irish county, but the homely subject matter and dialectical style of such Scottish writers as J. M. Barrie and "Ian Maclaren" seem to justify the term Kailyard School. Kailyard is Scottish for a cabbage garden, and might be intended as a criticism, since anyone driving past rotting cabbage fields in the early spring knows how offensively they smell.

Up to this point we have been considering terms that come directly from proper names of persons and places, names ordinarily converted into common nouns to describe characteristics of literature. The process is also reversed as common parts of speech are elevated into proper nouns, as in the cases of Realism, Naturalism, and Classicism, or Restoration drama and Revolutionary Age literature. The distinction between proper names and common nouns
becomes blurred, but this very blurring helps to identify the process by which names are created. After all, if Sextus Empiricus could be named after the number six and Publius Ovidius Naso got part of his name from the word for nose, then it isn't surprising if literary forms like the triolet and sestina are named after numbers or if costuming terms like masque and bombast become adopted as critical terms.

Instead of taking you tediously through the remaining twenty-two categories of name sources I have identified, I will simply refer you to the appendix and comment only on those that seem to need additional explanation. For example, one source of literary names that also operates in the formation of ordinary words as well as in the names of persons and places is metaphor. A cliché was originally a stereotype plate used in printing, an anthology was a collection of flowers, and a trope was a physical turning (still retained in tropism). A satire (from satura) was originally a bowl of mixed fruit to signify its medley of metrical forms, but the word became conflated with satyr to suggest a message appropriate to such a mocking beastman. Anatomy, a separation into little bits, added a literary meaning to its medical senses in such titles as Anatomy of Wit, Anatomy of Melancholy, and Anatomy of Criticism. A symposium was a drinking together, and then the word was applied to meetings and talk of a more serious but equally convivial manner. Farce meant "stuff" (it is
still possible, I think, to find sausage called "farce meat" in parts of England), referring to the extra jokes and gags that comic actors tended to add to their written parts. (Remember Hamlet telling the clown not to speak more than is set down for him.) Similarly negative connotations are conveyed in poulter's measure, a meter of alternating 12- and 14-syllable lines, based on Elizabethan eggsellers' practice of including 12 eggs in the first dozen sold and adding two eggs to the second dozen. Writers who used this measure were thought to be better farmers than poets. Metaphor (or perhaps chauvinism) also seems to be present in distinguishing between firmly monosyllabic masculine endings and drooping disyllabic feminine endings.

Another category that provides interesting terms is that deriving from physical movement. Parts of an ode or a drama are derived from the movements of the chorus or dancers in performance: the strophe or turn, the antistrope or counter-turn, and catastrophe or down-turn. A jig as a name for a short, sprightly comedy as in Attowell's Jig is still a dance term as well, and a ballad, related to the word "ball" (dance), was originally any song appropriate for dancing. Ballad presents an interesting example of a term both narrowing—to mean a narrative poem in quatrains of alternating tetrameter and trimeter lines—and broadening—to mean any melodic or lyrical verse, as in Tinpan Alley ballads. The envoy
or final stanza of several poetic classifications was originally a literal sending-off, and an epithalamium or wedding song was originally sung, as its derivation tells us, outside the bridal bedroom. Repartee, that exchange of wit, was originally a fencing term for a more literal kind of combat. Irony takes its name from the eiron, the character who stood aloof and commented on the action of the other characters. The protagonist, or first doer in a play, was literally the one who began the action; he could be either hero or villain. In fact, identifying the one who begins the action helps to determine the structure of a play and is a useful critical tool. The antagonist, of course, is the one who moves in opposition to the protagonist.

Those names derived from the relationship of one literary form or style to an earlier one also deserve explanation. Mimes were among the earliest dramatic forms, but in the later Roman theatre they began to be amplified by speech. Consequently the term pantomime—entirely mime—was devised to refer to those performances from which speech was absent. The term "novel," like its Italian source "novelle," indicated that this was a new way of writing, despite the fact that the prose tale was of much older vintage. Now, of course, we have second-generation derivatives for the convenience of publishers, diminutives such as novelette and novella.
Neo-Classicism was an attempt to revive classical regularity and polish, but the manner of thinking and the classical meters were impossible to recreate. Adding the prefixes "neo-" and "post-" to almost any term is a practice that is both popular and distorting. Neo-Platonists are no more Platonic than Neo-Classicists are classical, and Post-Romantics and Post-Impressionists bear little resemblance to the respective originals. One wonders what is gained by such prefixes when so much precision is lost.

This brings me to my final point. It is astonishing that, with so much fertility of imagination in creating names for literary genres, styles, eras, and types, so that it is possible to identify at least thirty different sources of such names, there should be so little precision in these terms. Literary critics are constantly saying things like "such-and-such a poem is ballad-like in narrative effect but the stanzaic pattern varies from quatrains to quintains with occasional couplets" or "The meter is predominantly iambic pentameter" when the accentual verse is not precisely iambic at all, since iambs are feet of short and long syllables, not stressed and unstressed. Free verse is not really free except by comparison with regularized forms, serenades are no longer sung in the evening, and terms such as expressionism, impressionism, realism, and romanticism may never be precisely defined. Possibly such frustration is part of any attempt to communicate. Words and names never seem to be adequate to transmit
all the nuances of thought and imagination. Without words as message units, we could never communicate, but the words themselves limit us in what we can say. In frustration we bend old words and invent new ones, but we will never be satisfied and so the process continues as long as language lives.

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NOTE

1 Terms in the paper and appendix are primarily from William Flint Thrall and Addison Hibbard, A Handbook to Literature, rev. and enlarged by C. Hugh Holman (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1960), supplemented by suggestions from my colleagues Dr. Walter P. Bowman and Dr. Wayne Finke.
### NAME-SOURCE CATEGORIES OF LITERARY TERMS

1. **From name of original user**
   - Spenserian stanza (f. Edmund Spenser),
   - Skeltonics (f. John Skelton),
   - Leonine rime (f. Leoninus),
   - clerihew (f. Edmund Clerihew Bentley),
   - ? alcaics (f. Alcaeus),
   - sapphics (f. Sappho),
   - Pindaric ode (f. Pindar),
   - Horatian ode (f. Horace),
   - menippean satire (f. Menippus),
   - anacreontic verse (f. Anacreon),
   - Queredan satire (f. Francisco de Queredo),
   - Cervantine humor (f. Miguel de Cervantes).

2. **From name of most famous user**
   - Shakespearean and Petrarchan sonnets,
   - Seneca tragedy (f. Seneca),
   - bowdlerizing (f. Thomas Bowdler),
   - spoonerism (f. Dr. W. A. Spooner),
   - goliardic verse (f. Bishop Gelas),
   - Gongorism (f. Luis de Gongora y Argote),
   - Marinism (f. Giambattista Marini).

3. **From association with noble user**
   - Rime royal (f. King James I of Scotland).

4. **From name of fictional character**
   - malapropism (Mrs. Malaprop, The Rivals),
   - rodomontade (King Roderick, Orlando Furioso).

5. **From book title**
   - miles gloriosus (f. Plautus),
   - euphuism (f. John Lyly's Euphues),
   - hudibrastic verse (f. Samuel Butler's Hudibras),
   - utopia (f. Sir Thomas More's Utopia),
   - essay (f. Montaigne's Essais),
   - aphorism (f. Hippocrates' Aphorisms),
   - geste (f. Gesta Romanorum),
   - apocrypha (f. Apocrypha),
   - macaronic (f. Teofilo Folengo's Liber Macaronicus),
   - imagism (f. Des Imagistes),

6. **From name of deity or festival**
   - adonic verse (f. Adonis or Adonia),
   - bacchius (f. Bacchus),
   - erotic (f. Eros).
7. From name-association
with person or group
- Elizabethan, Jacobean, Caroline, Georgian, Victorian, Edwardian (f. English monarchs Elizabeth I, James I, Charles I, George I and II, Victoria, and Edward VII)
- Augustan (f. Emperor Augustus)
- gothic (f. Goths)
- Philistine (f. Philistia)
- pre-Raphaelite (f. Raphael)
- philippics (f. Philip II of Macedon)
- alexandrine (f. Alexander the Great or Alexandre Paris)

8. From place-name
- Attic, Doric, Ionic (f. Attica, Doria, Ionia)
- Arcadian (f. Arcadia)
- areopagite (f. areopagus)
- Romanticism, roman (f. Rome)
- gasconade (f. Gascony)
- vaudeville and virelay (f. Vau-de-Vire)
- villanelle (f. villa)
- Grub Street, billingsgate, Cockney school
- Lake Poets (f. Lake District)
- limerick (f. Limerick, Ireland)
- Kailyard school (f. kail-cabbage)
- Aldwych farce (f. Aldwych)
- Byzantine novel (f. Byzantium)
- English and Italian sonnet forms

9. From political event
- Restoration drama (f. the Restoration of Charles II of England)
- Revolutionary age (f. the American Revolution)
- Generation of 1898 (f. Spanish defeat of Spanish-American War)

10. From appropriate subject
- heroic couplet
- cavalier lyric
- chant royal
- chivalric romance
- cup and saucer or teacup comedy
- character (prose sketch of character type)

11. From appropriate audience
and/or characters
- bourgeois drama
- city comedy
- pastoral poetry or elegy
- folk drama
- domestic tragedy
- bucolic fiction
- the Decadents

12. From basis of material
- sentimental novel
- revenge tragedy
- morality play
- novel of sensibility
- novel of manners
From character type
- fairy tale
- harlequinade
- picaresque novel (f. picaro)

From source of information
- chronicle play
- miracle play
- mystery play (f. mysteries of Christ and his Mother, but "mystery" could also be derived from "mastery," the special skill associated with the trade guild that sponsored the play)

From manner of creation
- expressionism
- impressionism
- personal essay

From method of composition
- epistolary novel
- shaped poetry
- free verse or vers libre
- rondeau, rondel, roundel, roundelay (their rhyme patterns are circular)

From method of presentation
- ode (f. oidein=to sing)
- comedy (f. comes=village or comos=festival)
- deus ex machina (f. a god-figure lowered to stage-level to unravel plot)
- dumb show
- mumming (f. mum=keep still)
- melodrama (f. melody)
- coronach (f. Irish word for wailing, dirge)
- montage (f. monter=to pile on)
- flashback (literal effect in films)

From physical movement
- strophe, antistrophe, catastrophe (turn, counter-turn, down-turn by dancers)
- jig
- ballad (f. Fr. bale=r to dance)
- envoy (lit. a "sending away")
- epithalamium (f. epi=outside + thalamos=bedchamber)
- repartee (orig. a fencing term)
- irony (f. eironia=distance, aloofness)
- agonist (f. agein=act, do)
- protagonist (f. proto=first + agein)
- antagonist (f. anti=against + agein)
19. From costume

- masque
- bombast (lit., stuffing)
- drama de capa y espada (capes and swords)

20. From place appropriate for performance/reading

- closet drama
- school plays
- kitchen comedy
- scene (f. skene=tent, referring to the tent-like structure of early stage scenery)

21. From purpose

- occasional verse (for specific occasions)
- tragedy (f. trago=goat, because a goat was awarded to the winning playwright, but possibly related to costume, since early tragic actors may have worn goat skins)

22. From period of time

- aubade, alba ("dawn" in French and Italian)
- nocturne, serenade ("evening" in French and Spanish)
- fin de siècle (specifically, end of the 19th century, but generally the weary end of any era)
- medieval (lit., "middle age" in Latin)

23. From relationship to an earlier style

- pantomime ("all mime" as distinguished from mimes employing some speech)
- novelle, novel, novella, novelette (f. novus=new)
- Neo-Classical
- Post-Romantic
- avant-garde

24. From metaphor

- cliché (lit. a stereotype plate)
- trope (lit. a turning)
- anthology (lit. a gathering of flowers)
- anatomy (lit. a breaking into bits)
- symposium (lit. a drinking-together)
- satire (f. satura=mixed fruit, conflated with satyr=beast-man)
- farce (lit. stuffed)
- esperpento (f. espantar=to scare; dramatic works of deformed vision)
- greguería (short aphoristic definitions)
- 'ouler's measure (f. egg-sellers' practice of adding two eggs to second dozen sold)
- engagée literature (lit. engaged, committed)
- masculine (strong) and feminine (weak) endings

25. From line of verse

- requiem (f. "Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine"--beginning prayer of the Mass)
- paternoster (f. "Pater noster...", first words of the Lord's Prayer)
26. From a sentence or phrase

Lost Generation (f. Gertrude Stein's remark "You are all a lost generation.")

metaphysical poetry (f. "[Donne] affects the metaphysics..." [John Dryden, A Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire, 1693] or "about the beginning of the seventeenth century appeared a race of writers that may be termed the metaphysical poets..." [Samuel Johnson, "Cowley," Lives of the Poets, 1779])

muckrakers (f. Theodore Roosevelt's criticism of Upton Sinclair et al., derived from a passage in Pilgrim's Progress by John Bunyan)

portmanteau words (f. Lewis Carroll's coinage in The History of the Snark)

27. From numbers
couplet, quatrain, terza rima, ottava rima, triolet, sestina, tetrameter, etc.

28. From publishing format

broadside ballad (published on a single sheet or side of paper)
libretto (lit. "little book")
folio (folded in two)
quarto (folded in fours)
duodecimo (folded in twelves)
octavo (folded in eights)

29. From price of publication

chapbook (lit. "cheap book")
dime novel
penny plain and twopence coloured

30. From college degree

scholasticism, scholia (f. "doctor scholasticus")