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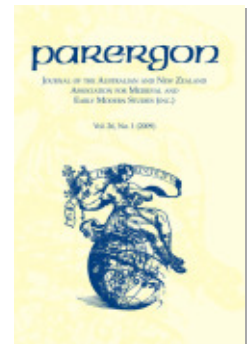
Naming & Namelessness in Medieval Romance (review)

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Parergon, Volume 26, Number 1, 2009, pp. 291-292 (Review)

Published by Australian and New Zealand Association of Medieval and
Early Modern Studies (Inc.)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/pgn.0.0116>



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Short Notices

Bliss, Jane, *Naming & Namelessness in Medieval Romance* (Studies in Medieval Romance 7), Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 2008; hardback; pp. 253; R.R.P. US\$95.00; ISBN 9781843841593.

Naming and namelessness, maintains Jane Bliss, are among the major themes of medieval romance. While they are indeed an important element in medieval romance, they are much more an aspect of characterisation than of theme: names have always been regarded as a quick, conspicuous way of attributing certain qualities to a figure, especially in the Middle Ages, when the art of characterisation was not as refined as it became later in the novel. To treat naming as a major theme in medieval romance, it seems to this reviewer, is to distort its overall role.

Bliss's book is a work of broad scope, but it is probably *too* broad. Having an extensive knowledge of Old French and Middle English literature, Bliss seems determined to include it all in the one book. There is so much material that it militates against a clear system of organization. While the two major categories of Bliss's Table of Contents ('Context and Content' and 'Themes and Meanings') are straightforward enough, the subsequent lists of disparate sub-categories are confusing and unclear.

Part I begins well with a discussion of 'The Context of Medieval Romance', which defines romance against other genres. But this is followed with a long section on 'Naming Patterns and Tendencies', which has sixteen sub-categories with titles like 'Meaning of name, and of Name', 'Introduction-Ritual', 'Disguise or Incognito', 'Doubles', 'Not-Names', 'Anonymous Women', 'Love-Madness', 'Intertextual References', and 'Local Effects'. The meaning and significance of some of these titles are far from obvious. Part II, 'Themes and Meanings', discusses twenty-one romances in detail, but they too are grouped under disparate headings similar to those in Part I: 'The Fair Unknown', 'Unknown Women', 'Women's Power of Name'.

This confusing situation could have been alleviated if a succinct statement of its main thesis and a highlighting of its main points had been placed at the beginning of the book. But there is no such statement and no such highlighting. There are too many points, one after the other, and they tend to have their force sapped by distracting asides.

Indeed, Bliss's style makes it difficult for her to communicate her extensive

knowledge effectively. Clarity struggles under the weight of unclear sentences, constant qualifications, and shifts in focus; passages frequently have to be re-read for their meaning. She is prone to overload her sentences with detail, as for example when speaking of pseudonyms: ‘Some (alias, incognito) are taken by characters themselves; namelessness imposed within the text (by self or by others) tends to attract a pseudonym or nickname very quickly, unlike the Anonymity imposed as if directly by the writer’ (pp. 22-23). Abstraction rules; this reviewer longed for the reassurance of a concrete noun.

Bliss has much to say that is insightful, but her contribution to scholarship would have been more effective if she had written a series of chapters focussed on quite specific, limited topics, avoided such extensive use of asides, and resisted the desire to convey the whole reach of her thoughts in a single volume.

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Bredehoft, Thomas A., *Early English Metre* (Toronto Old English Studies 15), Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2005; cloth; pp. 225; R.R.P. CA\$71.95; ISBN 9780802038319.

Thomas Bredehoft sets out ambitiously to establish a new system of metrical classification for Old English poetry. He also sets out to demonstrate that the rules which make up this metrical system, with minor developments over time, were in use from classical Old English through late Old English and into Middle English poetry. His attempt occupies a mere 120 pages – accompanied by 51 pages of notes. It soon becomes tiresome flicking back and forth to the notes, which are more or less necessary if one is to follow and, more importantly, to assess the argument.

Bredehoft’s opening summary of the problems posed by Sieversian formalism is clear and unarguable: Sievers’ system leaves too many examples of poetry unexplained, requiring recourse to the label ‘bad’ poetry; and it requires the evidence to be massaged to fit the rules. Unfortunately, Bredehoft’s own metrical formalism, resting on three sensible and clear principles, gradually unfolds as having so many rules, exceptions and complications that it is difficult to see where it improves on Sievers’. This new formalism is perhaps no less satisfactory than the Sieversian (and as such deserves consideration) but it is hardly more so. A discussion of classical Old English poetics comprising a