

## Names and Real Names in *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe*: A Response to Maurice Hunt\*

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Maurice Hunt's study of the difficulty of successful naming in *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe* considers issues that would be familiar to the White Knight of Lewis Carroll's Looking Glass Land.<sup>1</sup> For example, if someone is named, but they are called by a name that is not really their name, have they then been *really* named? What if you strongly imply their name but never say it? Does that count as naming? Hunt is on to something important in this article: names and naming are very much at stake here, and his discussion gets at the structural importance of this theme to the poem as a whole. I do, however, want to offer some questions, objections, and provocations in response to some of Hunt's conclusions and arguments with the hope of stimulating further discussion of this poem.

In addition to names already familiar to readers of *The Shepheardes Calendar*, like Colin Clout, Cuddie, Rosalind, Hobbinol, as well as "Sir Walter Raleigh" and "Ed. Sp." from the dedication, *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe* offers the reader a riot of names introduced for our delectation in the description of court, including Harpalus, Corydon, Alcyon, Daphne, Merifleure, Palin, Alcon, Palemon, Alabaster, Daniell, Amyntas, Amaryllis, Aetion, Astrofell, Urania, Theana, Marian, Mansilia, Galathea, Maa, Neaera, Stella, Phyllis, Charillis, Flavia, and Candida. The traditional reading of these names is that they refer to contemporaries who Spenser wished to discuss under pastoral pseu-

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\*Reference: Maurice Hunt, "Naming and Unnaming in Spenser's *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe*," *Connotations* 22.2 (2012/2013): 235-59.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debhunt0222.htm>>.

donyms. In some cases, the riddle is easy: we can without difficulty discern that “Astrofell” is meant to be Philip Sidney; in other cases, there are only reasonable guesses, like Thomas Lodge for “Alcon.” But some names are totally obscure (“Flavia” and “Candida”) and may never have been intended to indicate anyone specific; and two names are wholly undisguised: “Alabaster” and “Daniell” for William Alabaster and Samuel Daniel (see Hunt 247). One thing is for sure: this list has no easy one-for-one translation of person-for-pseudonym.

Hunt’s primary argument, then, begins with the recognition that naming is not always a straightforward process in *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe*, and, as he suggests, this uncertainty about whether someone is named or not, is thematically at the core of the poem. Hunt’s title is witty—he is not implying that people get named and then get unnamed—he is implying that naming and unnamings are difficult to distinguish, and melt into each other.

The story of Bregog and Mulla is a good test case for Hunt’s thesis. Bregog the river, in seeking to secretly possess his love Mulla without the permission of Father Mole, is punished by being “scattered all to nought, / And lost among those rocks into him rold,” and thus “Did lose his name” (153-55). Hunt notes that the story serves also to allegorize Raleigh’s loss of status at court (which Hunt equates to “equivalent to the erasure of his name”), where Elizabeth Throckmorton equates to Mulla and Queen Elizabeth to Father Mole. Hunt offers this reading as an example of the poem’s “focus on the loss of identity” (240-41). Hunt’s example here is a good one for his claim (though I would question whether Elizabeth “regularly” [Hunt 240] referred to herself with a masculine pronoun—Elizabeth as Mole seems a shaky analogy). I wonder whether Bregog’s identity is as lost as we might first think, considering that the name *wasn’t* at all lost: surely we can see that the sentence “the name Bregog has been lost” is a paradox. But the interesting ambiguity goes even deeper. As Hunt notes, “Bregog” means “deceitful” according to Colin Clout (118, see Hunt 238). But he is called “Bregog” *because* of his deceit that got his name destroyed—so what was he called before?

Full faine she lov'd, and was belov'd full faine,  
 Of her owne brother river, *Bregog* hight,  
 So hight because of this deceitfull traine (116-18)

Hunt translates “hight” as “named”; I would prefer to take the etymological ambiguity of “hight” from *OE* *hatan*, “to be called.” That is, *Bregog* is called *Bregog*, called “deceitful,” after his scheme is committed, while his real, previous name is lost forever or morphed into his new name. So there is a plausible reading of this episode as one not only of unnamings, but renamings. This serves to underscore Hunt’s central point: names are fragile in this poem.

The moment where Colin Clout most explicitly grapples with naming is his attempt to describe his queen:

For when I thinke of her, as oft I ought,  
 Then want I words to speake it fitly forth:  
 And when I speake of her what I have thought,  
 I cannot thinke according to her worth.  
 Yet will I thinke of her, yet will I speake,  
 So long as life my limbs doth hold together,  
 And when as death these vitall bands shall breake,  
 Her name recorded will I leave for ever.  
 Her name in every tree I will endosse,  
 That as the trees do grow, her name may grow:  
 And in the ground each where will it engrosse,  
 And fill it with stones, that all men may it know.  
 The speaking woods and murmuring waters fall,  
 Her name Ile teach in knowen termes to frame:  
 And eke my lambs when for their dams they call,  
 Ile teach to call for *Cynthia* by name.  
 And long while after I am dead and rotten:  
 Amongst the shepheards daughters dancing rownd,  
 My layes made of her shall not be forgotten,  
 But sung by them with flowry gyrlonds crownd.  
 (Hunt 243; *Colin Clouts* 624-43)

Hunt notes that, in this passage, “[f]ive times Colin names the never-named name of the queen, which is Elizabeth—not *Cynthia*” (243). This reading of Colin’s speech is central to Hunt’s argument, as he

uses it to demonstrate the contrast between this failed naming of the queen and the later, more successful, paean to Elizabeth Boyle. Hunt's point is that this Cynthia-focused section is a failed bit of naming—that the naming does not work, because “Cynthia” is not the queen's real name. However, Hunt's reading of this passage brings up a number of questions. I would argue that, if we are playing with names in the way an allegory asks us to do, then “Cynthia” is indeed the name of the woman Colin is speaking of. Hunt continues, “(If Cynthia were in fact the queen's name, Colin—Spenser—would not in this passage express such frustration about naming her. He would have named her five or six times, not simply once as Cynthia)” (243-44).<sup>2</sup> If we can perform the dash-mediated hop of “Colin—Spenser,” from pseudonym to real name, then “Cynthia—Elizabeth” seems a reasonable jump to make as well. This is not an isolated moment, as the name “Cynthia” or a form of it appears twenty-five times in the poem; further, Colin speaks his words in response to the request of his fellow shepherd, Aglaura, who specifically requests “the storie” “of great *Cynthiaes* goodnesse and high grace” (588-89).<sup>3</sup>

Hunt calls this passage a “remarkably sustained emphasis upon the indistinctiveness or loss of name” (245) in the poem. He offers additional evidence for this emphasis by observing how the Cynthia passage is “focused” by other figures like Aetion, briefly mentioned in the list of names at court, but not positively identified in the way “Astrofell” can be. Hunt notes that “[t]he point is not whether *Aetion* is Michael Drayton, or William Shakespeare, or someone else, but that knowing who he represents died with Spenser and those court readers in the know, so to say” (246). It is here that I find it most difficult to travel along with Hunt, as, far from focusing, Aetion makes Hunt's definition more fuzzy: if the *point* of Aetion is that his real identity is dead (an assertion that I think we could argue about as well) it is not clear how that operates as an analogue or focusing lens for the Cynthia passage, whose referent is perfectly clear.<sup>4</sup> Hunt, I suspect, would respond by noting that he is pointing to poetic frustration over *both* indistinct names and lost names—that Cynthia is an indistinct name

and Aetion is a lost name (or, rather, who “Aetion” stands for is lost). It seems to me that Colin’s—Spenser’s—frustration about failure to successfully name the queen is a different sort of frustration, a different frame of meaning, than contemporary scholars’ frustration in being unable to identify Aetion.

Finally, Hunt comes to the numerical and aesthetic center of the poem, Colin’s paean to his beloved:

The beame of beautie sparkled from above,  
 The floure of vertue and pure chastitie,  
 The blossome of sweet joy and perfect love,  
 The pearle of peerlesse grace and modestie:  
 To her my thoughts I daily dedicate,  
 To her my heart I nightly martyrize:  
 To her my love I lowly do prostrate,  
 To her my life I wholly sacrifice:  
 My thought, my heart, my love, my life is shee,  
 And I hers ever onely, ever one:  
 One ever I all vowed hers to bee,  
 One ever I, and others never none. (468-79)

Hunt introduces this passage by observing that “[s]ome commentators on *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe* believe that Spenser’s beloved [...] is the Rosalind of *The Shepheardes Calender*” while “others believe that she is his second wife Elizabeth Boyle, or that she is the queen herself” (248).<sup>5</sup> Hunt accepts Elizabeth Boyle as the subject of the passage, stating that “Spenser’s beloved, described in *Colin Clout*, is not Rosalind” (248).<sup>6</sup> Hunt says of the passage as a whole: “Carefully, beautifully, Spenser never names his beloved, but intimately, privately, names her forever in his heart in the twelve-verse passage quoted above” (249).

I, too, feel the tremendous power of this passage, but Hunt’s argument here seems like special pleading. Why, when the absence of “Elizabeth” or “Aetion” is problematic, is this name’s absence not felt as a loss, a hole in the poem? “She, too, will one day die, but she will remain alive as long as printers reproduce *Colin Clout* and readers exist who can infer her name” (249). Why is this inference relatively

unproblematic, while the far easier connection between Elizabeth and Cynthia is vexed? Hunt makes the good point that the ubiquity of the name “Elizabeth” in the sixteenth-century would make it difficult to name Elizabeth Boyle with the loving precision and adoration that the poet might desire (235). However, I am less certain that we can clearly call this *absence* of name an “indistinct” name, an “unorthodox naming” and most surprisingly, “this central process of successful naming” (235-36).

In other words, to sum up my objection, in the Elizabeth/Cynthia section of Hunt’s argument, the presence of pseudonym points to the *absence* of name, to the hole in the poem; in the case of Colin’s beloved, the absence of any name at all (even a pseudonym), far from suggesting absence, indicates a transcendent *presence*. As I noted earlier, Hunt does say that naming and unnamings are difficult to distinguish. I would argue that this looseness of definition, however, makes it more difficult to accept Hunt’s thesis that we are to read a sharp distinction between the beloved’s successful naming at the center of the poem, and the problematized unnamings and failed naming of figures like Bregog and Queen Elizabeth.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Carroll’s White Knight and Alice consider the distinctions between “the song”; “what the song is called”; “the name of the song”; and “what the name of the song is called” (*Through the Looking-Glass* ch. 8).

<sup>2</sup>If one wanted to, one could then object that “Elizabeth” is not really any nearer the essence of the queen than “Cynthia”—that essence could only be achieved if the queen in the flesh could somehow be produced by Colin’s song. In language we are always at a remove from the thing.

<sup>3</sup>Spenser’s own words on the various names of his queen in “A Letter of the Authors,” prefatory to the 1590 *The Faerie Queene*, read: “In that Faery Queene I meane glory in my generall intention, but in my particular I conceiue the most excellent and glorious person of our soueraine the Queene, and her kingdome in

Faery Land. And yet, in some places els, I doe otherwise shadow her. For considering she beareth two persons, the one of a most royall queene or empresse, the other of a most vertuous and beautifull Lady, this latter part in some places I doe expresse in Belphœbe, fashioning her name according to your owne excellent concept of Cynthia, (Phæbe and Cynthia being both names of Diana)." I would offer this passage as at least a slightly analogous praising-without-naming moment, as his queen is only named "Elizabeth" in the dedication and never in the Letter proper.

<sup>4</sup>My main objection to this argument about Aetion is that it makes the poem's theme of indistinctiveness contingent on the reader's ignorance. If, in some dreadful future, the knowledge that Astrofell is a name for Sidney becomes lost, I would be hard pressed to agree that this loss of knowledge would enhance the thematic work of the passage.

<sup>5</sup>Hunt's primary source for this claim is Hadfield, *Edmund Spenser: A Life*; also see Hadfield's "Spenser's Rosalind."

<sup>6</sup>Hunt notes, rightly, that this passage is at the mathematical center of the poem, and, following David Burchmore, argues that "Spenser's verses create a symmetrical balance throughout *Colin Clout*" (248). However, in discussing the hypothesis that Colin's "gentle mayd" may be Rosalind and not Elizabeth Boyle, Hunt dismisses Rosalind, "who most likely represents the woman Spenser loved in *The Shepherdes Calender* (and who remains possibly in a latter part of *Colin Clout* composed at a time different from the writing of the poetry under analysis)" (249). These arguments seem at cross-purposes; if the poem is a carefully crafted, symmetrical whole, surely we cannot dismiss the evidence of "a latter part" of the poem.

#### WORKS CITED

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