

EXPLAINING ENGLISH SURNAMES:
LINGUISTIC AMBIGUITY AND THE IMPORTANCE
OF CONTEXT*

PART ONE

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INTRODUCTION

I began researching medieval Nottinghamshire surnames in 1963. Research methodology in the surnames of any period was then seriously underdeveloped. This is less true today but there is still a long way to go in developing and spreading good practice. The nub of the problem and its solution are expressed in my sub-title: ‘linguistic ambiguity and the importance of context’. Context is essential for understanding any form of language but finding the relevant contexts for explaining surnames is exceptionally challenging. The primary function of a surname is to refer to an individual by a distinguishing label, but the original sense of the label is seldom defined in the linguistic context in which the name occurs. Surnames are plagued with linguistic ambiguity. They exhibit an

* This paper is a revised version of the 2013 Cameron Lecture given at the University of Nottingham at the invitation of the Institute for Name-Studies. I was one of Prof. Kenneth Cameron’s students at Nottingham between 1960 and 1965. It was he who suggested that for my postgraduate thesis I might research the surnames of medieval Nottinghamshire, and Part One of the paper is based largely on material collected for that project. I would like to dedicate Part One to him and to the late Prof. Ray Page, who encouraged me to focus on the largely unexplored area of methodology in surname research. My thinking on methodology also owes much to conversations with the late Cecily Clark and to her published work on medieval names and prosopography. In this paper I am using the term *surname* for all kinds of secondary name, including *byname*s, i.e. secondary names that may have been transitory and unstable rather than fixed and hereditary.

exceptional degree of homonymy, which can be disambiguated, if at all, only through paying attention to all the available contexts, not just the linguistic context but also the documentary, social, geographical and onomastic contexts in which surnames are recorded. Surnames identify people, who live in particular places at particular times and belong to particular social networks. As Cecily Clark argued in her many essays on personal names (reprinted in Jackson 1995), etymologists ignore information about the name-bearers at their peril. Contextual information can save us from inappropriate etymologies and point us to more plausible ones. It can help us identify references to the same person or to members of the same family. This gives us access to alternative forms or alternative spellings of the same name and therefore a much better chance of identifying and resolving any linguistic ambiguities.

These research principles may seem blindingly obvious, and they were brilliantly practised by Eilert Ekwall in a series of papers and monographs on names of medieval Londoners (Ekwall 1944–45; 1947; 1951; 1956). Nevertheless, many large-scale, etymological studies have disregarded them. Because of pressures of time, especially the practical demands of researching comparative local records, they rely largely on linguistic appearances, trawling records for names whose forms seem to fit recognisable etymological patterns. When names are divorced from their original onomastic contexts, it is inevitable that they are sometimes misinterpreted. This formal approach has nonetheless produced some immensely valuable monographs on occupational names, topographic names and nicknames, as well as Reaney's *Dictionary of British Surnames* (Reaney 1958), which is a tour de force of the formal method. Its explanations may often be unreliable, but this dictionary remains a unique and indispensable reference work. In the third edition (Reaney and Wilson 1991) its coverage of attested modern English surnames (nearly 25,000) is twice as large as any other dictionary at the time of writing.¹ It is also the only general dictionary of English surnames derived largely from personal research, apart from Bardsley's outdated dictionary of 1901 and the forthcoming *Dictionary of Family Names in Britain and Ireland* (FaNBI). Most of Reaney's etymologies, wrong ones

1. Tucker (2008, 23) estimates a total of 27,558 surnames, minus 2,972 that are not in the 1881 Census and which may be extinct names or ghost names. The forthcoming *Dictionary of Family Names in Britain and Ireland* (FaNBI) will run to about 45,000 names. This dictionary is the main outcome of the first phase of the Family Names of the United Kingdom project (2010–14), based at the University of the West of England (Bristol) under the direction of Richard Coates and Patrick Hanks, and funded by a grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

as well as right ones, are therefore repeated by default in later surname dictionaries, although, to be fair, all of them add something new and useful to Reaney's work. I am referring to the *Penguin Dictionary of Surnames* (Cottle 1978), the (Oxford) *Dictionary of Surnames* (Hanks and Hodges 1988), the *Dictionary of American Family Names* (Hanks 2003) and most recently the *Penguin Dictionary of British Surnames* (Titford 2009), a revision of Cottle (1978).²

The first edition of Reaney's dictionary, with etymologies based on his own collection of dated name forms, has an etymological competence and originality that is unmatched anywhere else, and every competent researcher in English surname origins gratefully draws on it for evidence and for explanations. Yet everyone who researches surname origins in their local contexts ends up disagreeing with at least some of Reaney's explanations, and in some cases a great many of them. My guess is that at least sixty per cent of them are partly or wholly wrong, including many of the several thousand etymologies added by Wilson in the third edition. There are several reasons why so many of their explanations are unreliable, especially the failure to recognise linguistic ambiguity and the need for contextual evidence to resolve it. This applies both to the medieval data, which provides the etymological evidence, and also to the post-medieval development of surnames, which is far more complex than Reaney or Wilson realised. I am not blaming Reaney. If he had followed a more context-orientated methodology he would not have had the time or resources to produce an original general dictionary of the scope of the 1958 edition. With all its faults, his dictionary has provided an essential foundation for all subsequent English surname research. But if we are going to have more reliable dictionaries of English surnames in the future, we need a more contextually sensitive research methodology. The same requirement is equally necessary for what Cecily Clark termed *applied anthroponymics* (Clark 1979), that is the application of surname data to other historical enquiries, linguistic, topographic, economic and social. In this paper, the first of a series, I am going to discuss the medieval end of the problem and in the second (McClure forthcoming) the post-medieval.

2. This is also true to a degree of FaNBI, even though one of its major innovations is the correction of large numbers of erroneous explanations in Reaney and Wilson (1991). The main problem is shortage of research time and the inaccessibility of much of the relevant historical data. Some of the names that still need corrective research will receive attention in the second phase of the Family Names of the United Kingdom project (2014–16), through funding awarded to the University of the West of England by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

INTERPRETING THE MEDIEVAL DATA

With medieval names, potential ambiguities exist at every linguistic level: palaeographical, orthographical, phonological, morphological and semantic. I know from my own experience how easy it is, when one has a name-form with no defining context, to plump for an etymology based on first appearances, and to ask no more questions. But we must always ask questions, and I am going to give some examples of what I mean at each of the five levels, particularly from the Nottinghamshire records. It will become clear that the most powerful tools for raising and settling doubts about the linguistic identity of names are personal information about individual name-bearers and their families (*prosopography*) and variation in the name-forms that they bear (*prosoponymy*).

§1. Palaeographical ambiguity

Anyone working with medieval documents knows how difficult it can be to distinguish some of the letter shapes of court hand. No-one should embark on research in Middle English (ME) surnames without a copy of *English Court Hand* (Johnson and Jenkinson 1915) within easy reach. Many capital letters are confusable, as well as lower case letters like <u> and <n>, <in> and <ni> or <m>, reversed <e> and <o>, <t> and <c>, <lk> with ligatured <kk> and <w>, and <f> with long <s> (see Hector 1966, 130–31). Medieval scribes and modern editors can unwittingly deceive us and themselves. Many of the original documents we use are digests or copies of other documents, so medieval scribes with clear handwriting, and who went to some trouble to distinguish one letter shape from another similar one, may be copying the work of another scribe who did not. Editors of printed editions seldom tell the reader what difficulties they have encountered and often resolve ambiguous letter forms arbitrarily and silently; and rarely do they note changes in scribal hand. All surname scholars know these things but it is still tempting to take the written form at face value, especially when it fits in with a word or name you are familiar with or looking for. Here is an example of the <t>/<c> problem.

Reaney (1958) derives the modern surname **Roth** from Old English (OE) **roð* ‘clearing’, citing as evidence Adam *atte Rothe*, 1346, from the printed edition of the Colchester court rolls.³ His explanation of the surname **Roach**, from Old French (OF) *roche* ‘rock, cliff, promontory’, cites Roger *atte Roche* in the same court rolls seven years later. Do these

3. Surnames printed in bold will be found as head entries in Reaney 1958.

ME forms genuinely represent different names or are they two different readings of the same name? Without prosoponymic evidence it is impossible to be sure, but later prosopographic evidence suggests that *Roche* was probably much commoner than *Rothe*, in medieval Essex as well as other counties. **Roth** is rare across England in the 1881 census (Archer 2011). Most examples (83) occur in Middlesex and almost all the families with this name are of Germanic, not English origin (UK Census 1881). Archer maps only a single example in Essex (West Ham registration district), which refers to Fanny E. Roth, a 29-year-old servant born in Switzerland (UK Census 1881).

By contrast **Roach** is far more numerous in 1881, especially in Lancashire (865 instances), Middlesex (564), Devon and Cornwall (572), and Gloucestershire (317). There are ninety-nine in Essex, clustered mainly in the West Ham and Romford districts. The origins of this name are partly local to England, including Roche in Cornwall, Roach Farm in Clyst Hydon, Devon, and perhaps also Roch(dale) in Lancashire, as well as minor topographic features elsewhere. Another probable source is one of the places in Normandy called (La) Roque or (La) Roche (Dauzat and Rostaing 1963, 569 ff.). This is not to say that OE **roð*, or rather its ME reflex *roth*, ‘clearing’ did not produce any ME surnames in Essex or elsewhere. *The Place-Names of Essex* (Reaney 1935, 503) records the surname *Rothe*, associated in 1274 with Rothend in Ashdon (*Roda* 1086, *Rothe* 1279). A John *Roth* was married in 1582 in Great Bromley (Essex), according to FamilySearch (2012), which records other persons with the same surname at around the same time in nearby Great Bentley, but since confusion of <t> with <c> is also common in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century handwriting, these instances could be ambiguous. If *Roth(e)* became established as a hereditary surname in Essex, it is possible that it died out before or during the modern period.

Ambiguities such as these have implications for applied anthroponymics. The lexicological value of ME surnames has long been recognised, beginning with Weekley and Pilkington (1921) and Mawer (1930), but we need to be alert to palaeographical and other ambiguities before drawing firm lexical inferences. Kristensson (1970, 39) cites *Rob’ de la Rothe* of Lenton, 1332 Lay Subsidy Rolls for Nottinghamshire (TNA, E179/159/5, m. 4), as sole evidence that OE **roð* was a topographic term in medieval Nottinghamshire. However, there are references in the Nottinghamshire *Inquisitiones post mortem* to a juror called Robert *de la Roche* of Lenton, 1326 (Blagg 1939, 9) and to a Robert *del Roche*, 1353–54, in an inquisition where the adjacent jurors are from Lenton

(Train 1952, 10).⁴ We cannot ignore the possibility that *de la Rothe* and *de la* or *del Roche* name the same man. In the original documents the <t> in the subsidy roll and the <c> in the inquisitions are clearly written, but each of these records was written up by a copyist, so the clarity of the handwriting does not guarantee either of the etymologies. Given that **roð* is otherwise unrecorded in Nottinghamshire, it would be prudent to allow more strongly than Kristensson does (Kristensson 1970, 15, n. 13) for a re-reading of the 1332 name as *de la Roche*.

Isolating names from their documentary and local contexts is no way to arrive at safe etymologies. *Will'o atte Shirresmilne* was assessed in Lowdham in the 1332 Nottinghamshire Lay Subsidy Rolls (TNA, E179/159/5, m. 8). Kristensson (1970, 86) glosses it as 'Mill of the shire', a compound of 'OE *scīr* in the gen. + *mylen*', but the *-rr-* spelling, which ought to indicate a short preceding vowel, and the Lowdham context point to a different etymology. Lowdham was the home of the *de Ludham* family, of whom Eustace was deputy sheriff of Nottingham in 1214 *Pipe Rolls* and sheriff of York in 1225 *Patent Rolls*. His great-grandson John *de Ludham* is said to have possessed half a watermill in Lowdham (1318 in Standish 1914, 287). I suggest that *Shirresmilne* is a scribal miscopying of *Shirrefmilne*, the first element being ME *shirref*, OE *scīr-gerēfa* 'sheriff'. Its sense 'the sheriff's mill' meaningfully distinguishes it from another water mill in Lowdham, 'the priest's mill', referred to in the surname of Richard *Atte prest mylne* of Lowdham (1308 in Standish 1914, 231).

Reaney (1958) derives the modern surname **Belk** from OE *bælc*, either a nickname 'stomach, pride', or a locative name 'dweller by the bank or ridge'. The latter sense is inferred from an isolated name-form in Standish (1914, 110), and Reaney has ignored an important piece of prosopographic evidence in the text itself. The Nottinghamshire inquisition states that Henry *del Belk* possessed one sixth of a knight's fee in Wiverton. Knights are not usually named from a commonplace topographic feature like a field bank (see Clark 2002, 101 ff.; McKinley 1990, 203–04), so I checked the spelling in the original manuscript; it is clearly written <Belk>. Since Thurgarton Priory owned land in Wiverton, I then searched the Thurgarton Cartulary, where I found *Henricus de Bek miles*, who in about 1253 × 1266 granted to the prior and convent of Thurgarton Priory all the meadows and lands that he bought by purchase in Wiverton and Tithby (Foulds 1994, no. 290). I suggest that this is the same man, and that *Belk*, in the text of the

4. The surname appears as *de Rolk* in Train's edition, but I have checked the MS (TNA, C 143/314/16) and the correct reading is *del Roche*.

inquisition, is a scribal miscopying of <kk> as <lk>. There is an example of it in the cartulary itself, where the stream known as *Glasbek* (Foulds 1994, nos 23 and 1138) is also written as <glasbelk> (Foulds 1994, no. 56 and footnote). Henry's surname is probably Norman and refers to one of the places in Normandy called Bec or Le Bec (Dauzat and Rostaing 1963, 66). As for the modern surname *Belk*, this has a quite different origin from either of those proposed by Reaney (see Redmonds, King and Hey 2011, 13–14) and will be discussed in Part Two of this paper.

§2. Orthographical ambiguity

Medieval English clerks inherited their spelling practices from the conventions of medieval church Latin, significantly modified by those of Anglo-Norman (AN) and to a small degree by those of OE. The extent to which this mixture of spelling traditions accurately reflected ME dialect pronunciation was probably highly variable, even without the added complication of homography, when a graph or digraph is used to represent more than one phoneme.

For example, <th> commonly represented similar sounds to those in modern English: the voiced dental fricative [ð] as in *brother*, and its unvoiced equivalent [θ] as in *path*. This is how Gillian Fellows Jensen interprets the digraph in the surname of *Rogerus Breth*, a tenant of the Bishop of Lincoln in Farndon (Notts) in a survey of c. 1225, treating it as a nickname from ME *breth*, OE *bræð* 'odour, stink' (Fellows Jensen 1975, 50). However, <th> can also be an inverted spelling of <ht>, pronounced [χt] after a back vowel and [çt] after a front vowel, and it is a frequent spelling of final <t>. My own belief, which Dr Fellows Jensen was kind enough to mention (Fellows Jensen 1975, 50, n. 16), is that <Breth> in this document is a spelling of the common AN surname *Bret*, from OF *Bret* 'Breton' (see Reaney 1958, s.n. **Bret**). A century later, the lay subsidy returns for Farndon list *Mabilla la Bret* in 1327 and *Roberto Bret* in 1332 (TNA, E179/159/4, m. 15, and 159/5, m. 12). It is possible, but I cannot prove, that Mabel and Robert were descendants of Roger Breth, or indeed of *Malgerus Breth*, who is a juror in the same survey for the adjacent vill of Kilvington, Stoke and Elston (Barley 1955, 25). In fact the same orthographical variation occurs in another (related?) Nottinghamshire gentry family. In 1279–80 *Rogerus le Bret*, also named as *Rogerus le Breth*, possessed one knight's fee in Wiverton (Standish 1914, 9); he is identical with *Rogerus de Bret* [*sic*], who in *Feudal Aids*, 1284–85, is said to hold half the vill of Wiverton. There is no doubt in this instance that *Breth* is a clerk's alternative spelling for *Bret*.

Orthographical ambiguity is especially troubling if you have only one spelling of a name to work with. Many consonant letters in ME have more than one phonemic value, as do all the vowel letters, and the usefulness of alternative spellings of an etymologically ambiguous name cannot be overstated. It is common, for example, for the same vowel letter to represent both the long and the short vowel, though there are ways in which clerks sometimes made an effort to distinguish them. A single vowel letter followed by two consonant letters always indicates a short vowel but, when followed by a single consonant letter, the length of the vowel is ambiguous, either long or short.

William *le Gylor* appears several times in the early fourteenth-century Nottingham Borough Court Rolls (1311, 1322 at CA 1253, 1257 and 1324 in Calendar 1258b/930) and his name apparently corresponds to OF *guileor*, ME *gilour* ‘deceiver, traitor’ (MED, s.n. *gilour*; Reaney 1958, s.n. **Giller, Guiler**). The vowel in ME *gilour* is etymologically long, which is why it is usually spelled with a single *l*, and it fits Reaney’s attribution to it of the modern surname *Guiler*, whose pronunciation /gailə/ shows the expected Modern English diphthong. There is one anomalous, late spelling with *-ll-* in MED (dated *a.* 1475), which might justify Reaney’s conclusion that it is also the source of modern *Giller*, but in the light of some prosoponymic variants I believe it may have another origin. The Nottingham man’s name in the court rolls is not only spelled *Gylor* but as *Gillour* in 1315 and 1323 (CA 1255, 1258a) and as *le Gelour* in 1311 and 1313 (CA 1253, Calendar 1254/381). The only way I can explain the variant vowel in *Gelour* is that it represents a lowering and lengthening of short *ĭ* in an open syllable, a mostly northern phonetic change that occurs sporadically in a number of Nottinghamshire surnames and place-names (McClure 2010b, 218–19). If the etymological vowel here is short, as is also implied by the spelling *Gillour*, the name is not obviously a ME form of OF *guileour*, where the vowel is long. This suggests to me that *Gilour*, *Gillour*, *Gelour* is a derivative of ME *gil(e)* ‘gill of a fish’ and is a variant of ME *giller* ‘one who guts fish’ (MED) or perhaps ‘one who sells gill fish’. Interchangeability of *-er* and *-our* as agent noun suffixes is well evidenced in ME, through OF and AN influence. Indeed, *gil(l)er*, *gil(l)our* may have been coined in OF or AN, though unrecorded. The term very likely denoted a fishmonger, perhaps specifically a stockfishmonger, since *gill fish* seems to have been synonymous with *stockfish* ‘fish dried in the air without salt’ (MED, s.v.

gil(e)). Prosopographic evidence is supportive; in 1313 William *le Gelour* was accused of owing money for sail-cloth.⁵

Another form of orthographical ambiguity is produced by scribal influence, where a clerk may have recorded a name using a spelling that reflected his own dialect, or that of the scriptorium where he was trained, and which was different from the dialect of the locality from which he was recording the name. Allowing for this is essential to any study of ME dialects based on surname or place-name forms. Competing spellings of the same name in the same locality can only be taken as safe evidence for competing pronunciations if they are not the product of scribal influence.

In the midlands the reflexes of OE *hyll* ‘hill’ are written in ME as both <hull> (probably for /hyll/) and <hill>, <hyll>, etc. (for /hill/), and although it is clear that the former is predominant in the west (Kristensson 1987, 87–89) and the latter in the far east, i.e. Lincolnshire (Kristensson 1967, 109), it presents a problem for dialectologists to know where to draw the isophonic boundary. In the two Lay Subsidy Rolls for Nottinghamshire (1327 and 1332) there is a mixed usage, summarized by Kristensson (1987, 96) as eighteen *u*-spellings and twelve *i*- or *y*-spellings. In some instances the same place or person is named with a *u*-spelling in one roll and an *i*-spelling in the other. Kristensson may be right to see this as evidence that both pronunciations were current in the same village, but he disregards a salient fact, that each of the two rolls was written up by two main clerks (making four different clerks), one of whom was a consistent *u*-speller and the other a consistent *i*- or *y*-speller, and that coverage of the county was shared out differently in the two rolls (McClure 1973). This is why the same names appear spelled <u> in one roll and <i> in the other. The pattern of orthographic variation looks less like a sensitive response to local variation in pronunciation and more like scribal normalisation by some of the clerks.

It is both a strength and a weakness of Kristensson’s monumental survey of ME dialects (1967–2002) that for most counties he relies on lay subsidy rolls as a single source. The rolls have the advantage of covering in a uniform format most of the country at a similar time and of

5. A further orthographical ambiguity in this name is the use of initial *G*- which, when followed by a front vowel, can represent the voiced affricate [dʒ]. *Gil(l)our* could therefore be an unrecorded derivative of ME *gille*, *jille* ‘a small vessel for liquids’, hence ‘a maker of gills’. On the other hand *Gille* probably has etymological [ll], so one would have to assume a reduction to [l] to create [e:] in the resulting open syllable; and there are no alternative spellings *Jilour*, *Jelour*, *Jeller*, etc. to support this interpretation.

being compiled from locally derived returns (mostly now lost) for each vill. However, they were copied up by clerks of unknown provenance and training, some of whom made serious copying errors (McClure 1973), so they cannot all have been as local as Kristensson (1965; 1967, xii–xv; 1981, 8–9) wants to believe. The *Survey* is a huge achievement, but I am not convinced by Kristensson’s claim (1967, xiii) that he has been able to ‘gauge and eliminate’ ‘a practically uniform scribal influence’. Name spellings from whatever source, and especially if it is a single source, need to be interpreted in their local orthographic context, preferably with close attention to the correlation of scribal hands (see §1) with spelling practice. Kristensson has not tested the subsidy roll spellings against those in other locally produced documents, as has been the practice in other dialect studies, for example, those by Rubin (1951), Sundby (1963) and Cubbins (1981).

§3. Phonological ambiguity

Homophony is a frequent problem in establishing the linguistic identity of surnames. It arises because a single sound can function both as a phoneme in its own right and as an allophone of other phonemes, varying with phonetic context. The final consonant of **Mouth** is a case in point. The surname is plausibly explained by Reaney (1958) as either a nickname from ME *m(o)uth* (OE *mūð*) ‘mouth’ (presumably for someone with an odd mouth), citing Robert *Muth* (1183, Essex), or a topographic name from ME *muthe*, a dialect form of OE (ge)*mȳð* ‘junction of streams’, citing William *atte Muthe* (1315, Surrey). A surname *Mouth* also appears in the Nottingham records: *Will’o Mouth*, 1304 in Nottingham Borough Court Rolls (CA 1251a). At first sight it looks like Reaney’s nickname, but William may have belonged to the same family as Robert *Mouth* of Gedling, 1336 in Stevenson (1882, 398, no. 148) who, from the context of his grants of land to the Nottingham merchant William de Amyas, must be identical with Robert *le Mogh* of Gedling 1335–36 (Stevenson 1882, 347, no. 146). *Rob’to le Mogh* was assessed for tax in Gedling in 1332 (TNA, E179/159/5, m. 8). Alternatively William *Mouth* could be identical with William *Damelmowth* [*sic* for *Danielmowth*], 1315 in Stevenson (1882, 378, no. 56), earlier named as William *Danielinowh* [*sic* for *Danielmowh*], 1307 in Nottingham Borough Court Rolls (Calendar 1251b/88). The prosoponymic evidence in both cases suggests that *Mouth* and *-mowth* are variant pronunciations of ME *mogh* /mɔ:ɣ/ ‘kinsman by marriage, especially a son-in-law’ (Old Norse *mágr* ‘brother-, father- or son-in-law’ or OE *māga* ‘male relative, son’).

Patterns of phonetic variation naturally form part of the linguistic context in which one tries to make sense of otherwise obscure or difficult names, but not all the dialect variants that occur in ME names can be found in standard works on ME phonology. The equivalence of *Mouth* and *Mogh* shows that [θ] was sometimes an allophone of [χ]. This phonetic development is noted as a dialect feature by Wyld (1921, 289) and Dobson (1968, 181–82), but not before the early sixteenth century, though Dobson speculates that ‘this change may have occurred before 1400’. It is not recorded as a ME feature in any of the major surveys of the ME language. It does occur in other ME names, however, for example in Yorkshire place-names from the thirteenth century (Smith 1962, §§ 43, 49) and possibly in the name of Jordanus *Godynoth*, 1297 in an extent of Gringley on the Hill, Nottinghamshire (TNA, SC11/534, m. 1). This probably represents a pronunciation of *Godynogh* ‘good enough’, a relatively common nickname found in medieval Nottinghamshire and elsewhere (see Reaney 1958, s.n. **Goodenough**). Some dialect features are recorded only in names, which underlines both the potential value of names research to phonological history and the need for researchers in surnames and place-names to build their own repertoires of phonetic variants that cannot be referenced from manuals of English language history. In fact there is some supporting literary evidence for this phonetic change in MED, which records *inoth* (*inop*) for *inough* in a document dated c. 1300.

There are several hypotheses for the origin of **Gooch**. Reaney (1958) explains it as a nickname from Welsh *coch* or *goch* ‘red’ (i.e. red-haired). Welsh <ch> represents [χ], a sound that was also current in standard English until the seventeenth century, when it either disappeared altogether, as in the modern pronunciation of *though*, or survived in one of its dialectal allophones, occasionally [θ], as I have already mentioned, but more usually [f] as in *cough* and *enough* (Dobson 1968, 946–47). Accordingly the usual English spelling of Welsh *Goch* is <Gough> or <Goff>, not <Gooch>. The supposed change from [χ] to [f] is awkward from an articulatory point of view and is not otherwise attested, so Morgan and Morgan (1985, 72) suggest that it arose, not through normal phonetic change, but because Englishmen mistook written Welsh <ch> as the English spelling for [f].

Whether Welsh *Goch* was ever anglicized to *Gooch* in the Welsh marches remains to be proven, and it is not the only question that needs asking of Reaney’s explanation. His other surname examples are from Essex (John *Guch*, William *Gugge*, 1327, John *Gooch*, 1374), and this is where *Gooch* is mainly found today, as well as in East Anglia. Coates

(2009) demolishes Reaney's explanation on phonetic and geographical grounds (a Welsh nickname in medieval Essex is hardly likely) and proposes a more plausible etymology, from AN **gouge*, the nominative form of OF *goujon* 'gudgeon', a species of small freshwater fish used for bait, and perhaps, like *Gudgeon*, a nickname for a gullible person. On this analysis the final [tʃ] of *Gooch* is a devoiced allophone of the [dʒ] in OF **gouge*.

This may be the correct origin for some instances of the name, but prosoponymic variants published by Insley (1994, 131–32) and Briggs (2010) strongly suggest that the source of the surname in Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex is the OF personal name *Goce* or *Goche*, which was used in AN families associated with Suffolk and Norfolk, especially the area around King's Lynn. Insley lists many instances of *Goche* as a forename and patronymic, and observes that in some cases *Goche* was apparently in variation with *Goce* and *Jo(s)ce* (representing an alternative OF pronunciation /dʒotse/, later /dʒose/). One certain instance is *Hugo filius Goce* as an alias of *Hugo filius Goche de Lenn*' (King's Lynn, early thirteenth century).⁶ Briggs notes in addition that *Ricardum filium Ioche* is identical with Richard son of *Iosce de Flet* (Fleet, Lincs, near King's Lynn, 1162–64) and Richard son of *Jocel[in] de Flet* (twelfth century). *Jocelin* is a diminutive pet form of *Joce*. The prosoponymic evidence proves that [tʃ] in the East Anglian surname *Gooch* is not an allophone of the Welsh [χ], or OF [dʒ], but OF [ts].⁷

§4. Morphological ambiguity

Morphological ambiguity is a complex phenomenon, so I am going to focus on some general topics that illustrate it in different ways: hypocorisms; absence of grammatical particles; metonymy; and derivative formations. All of these involve some kind of elliptical expression, and the solutions, where they can be found, are contextual and often prosopographic or prosoponymic. I shall then say something about the implications of homonymy for applied anthroponymics.

6. Insley's discussion of *Goche* is an addendum to his treatment of Old Norse *Gaukr*, ME *Gōki* in Norfolk, where he demonstrates that *Goche*, *Gochi* could not satisfactorily be derived from *Gaukr*, *Gōki*, as Reaney (1958) had supposed (s.n. **Gookey**). It is an excellent illustration of the practices advocated in this paper, with perceptive attention to ambiguous orthographic practices.

7. Insley (1994, 132) comments that 'the spelling *-ch-* in *Goche*, *Gochi* is problematic and it is difficult to ascertain its exact phonetic significance'.

§4.1. *Hypocorisms*. Pet forms of ME given names are generally created through syllabic reduction and phonetic variation, with potentially homonymic consequences (McClure 1998). Prosoponymic variants are often the only reliable evidence for identifying them accurately, and they are producing a growing body of revised interpretations of surname origins. *Joppe* is known from contemporary literature to be a ME form of the biblical name *Job*, and this is the standard explanation for the surnames **Job**, **Jobson** and the presumed pet forms **Joby**, **Jobin**, and **Joblin** (Reaney 1958). However, some of the surnames are remarkably common for a given name for which there is little evidence in medieval English records. In an edition of the Lancashire Eyre Roll of 1292 (Lynch 2015) *Joppe* will be shown to be a prosoponymic variant of the common given name *Geoffrey*.⁸ It is a twin form of *Jeppe*, which Reaney himself had guessed to be an altered form of *Geff* or *Jeff*, short for *Geoffrey* (Reaney 1958, s.nn. **Gebb**, **Gepp**, **Jepson**); *Joppe* derives from *Joffrey*, an OF variant of *Geoffrey*.

Homonymy is a particular problem here because pet forms may be shared by more than one name. For example, prosoponymic evidence has established that ME *Marion* and *Mariot* were sometimes pet forms of *Margery* as well as *Mary* (Redmonds 2004, 20–21). **Dand** was used for both *Andrew* (certainly in Scotland, see Reaney 1958) and as a rhyming pet form of *Randal*, at least in England (McClure 1998, 129). **Daw** and its diminutive *Dawkin* may sometimes have been pet forms of *David*, as Reaney (1958) claims, but in the north midlands and north Wales *Dawkin* is the name of men otherwise known as *Radulfus*, i.e. *Ralph* (McClure 1998, 123–28; Padel 2003, 121–22). On the other hand, although *Mall* and its diminutives were used for women named *Mary* from at least the sixteenth century onwards, no evidence has yet been found to justify Reaney's belief (1958, s.nn. **Mall**, **Mallet**, **Malin**, **Malkin**) that this was true in the medieval period, when all the prosoponymic data shows that it was a pet form of *Mald*, i.e. *Maud* (McClure 1998, 102–07). Absence of prosopographic information or prosoponymic variation leaves the identity of some pet forms currently undetermined. We know that *Edecus* was a pet form of *Edith*, because the same woman is named both ways in early fourteenth-century Ruthin (north Wales), but for lack of similar evidence it is impossible to tell if all other names in *-cus* were also female and whether they were pet forms of OE or OF given names (McClure 2005, 23–42).

8. Thanks are due to Margaret Lynch for giving the Family Names of the United Kingdom project access to her findings in advance of publication. She shows that Geoffrey son of *Joppe* is identical with Geoffrey son of Geoffrey of Wardley.

Uncertainty about the gender of a pet form arises mostly from the fact that our evidence for them derives more often from surnames than from forenames. **Nelson** means ‘son of Nell’, but is *Nell* the Norman male name *Nele* (Latinised as *Nigellus*) as Reaney (1958) states, or is it a rhyming pet form of *Ellis* (male) or *Ellen* (female)? Prosoponymic evidence in Yorkshire confirms the first two but not yet the third (see Redmonds 1997, 45–46). Reaney (1958) explains **Sill**, **Silcock**, **Silkin** and **Sillet** as pet forms of *Silvein* or *Silvester* (both male), but Redmonds (2015) explains **Silson** as ‘son of Cecilia, via the pet form *Cil*’, on what evidence is unclear. A Latin ending can settle the matter in individual instances, as Reaney’s quotation of the Latinised male nominative form *Silcokkus de Altricheham* (1283) proves. *Cil* or *Sil* for *Cecily* (ME *Sisely*) is unproven but perfectly feasible. A similar syncope occurs in ME *Ibbe* for *Isabel*; at least that is Reaney’s reasonable inference on formal grounds, though he allows for the possibility that *Ibbe* may occasionally have been a short form of the rarer male name *Ilbert* (Reaney 1958, s.n. **Ibbs**). None of these equivalences have been confirmed prosopographically or prosoponymically, though the Latin ending of the common diminutive form *Ib(b)ota* is clearly feminine. The pet form *Tibbe* offers another glimmer of light. It is reckoned to be either a rhyming form of *Ibbe* for *Isabel* or a reduced form of the male name *Tibald* (Reaney 1958, s.n. **Tibb**), and there is some indirect evidence for both. Examples of the forename *Tibbe* or *Tybbe* quoted by Reaney appear to belong to some men named in the Cheshire *Assize Rolls* for 1286 and 1290, while the Latinised diminutive in *Tibota* Foliot, 1279 in *Rotuli Hundredorum* (Oxfordshire), and *Tibota* Yonge, 1381 in *Poll Tax Returns* (Bidfield, Gloucestershire) points unmistakably to a female name.

§4.2. *Absence of grammatical particles*. One way in which homonymy commonly occurs is through the omission of grammatical particles such as the definite article (ME *the* but more usually AN *le* or *la*) in occupational names and nicknames, and through the dropping of grammatical or lexical connectives like prepositions and filial indicators in locative and relationship names (*asyndeticism*). Fortunately for us, clerical practice before the fifteenth century was variable (McClure 2010a, 169–70). When clerks include the definite article, it always rules out a relationship name and (with some important exceptions) a locative name, while their use of syndetic connectives almost always rules them in. For locative names the connective was a prepositional element such as Latin or AN *de*, ME *atte*, and AN *del*, *de la*. To indicate relationship names

clerks either used a simple appositional Latin genitival form (*Willelmi*, for example), or more commonly prefixed the personal name (not always fully latinised) with Latin *filius*, *filia*, etc. As with names prefixed with the definite article or a preposition, the partly or wholly Latin or AN phraseology of these syndetically formed relationship names may reflect clerical formulae rather than vernacular usage, which may have been predominantly asyndetic. On the other hand, from the fourteenth century onwards, especially in the midlands and north, clerks increasingly employed the equivalent ME post-fixing of genitival *-s* or *-son*.

Because of their greater semantic explicitness, it hardly needs saying that syndetic name-forms and name-forms with the article are of immense value to the surname researcher. How else can one hope to distinguish between (i) the ME surname *Hayrun* as a nickname from OF *hairon* ‘heron’ and (ii) the homonymous *Hayrun* as a locative name, which is sometimes from an altered form of Harome in the North Riding of Yorkshire (Reaney 1958, s.n. **Heron**) and sometimes from (Le) Héron in Seine-Maritime (Keats-Rohan 1999, 333; 2002, 497–98; Redstone and Redstone 1937, 182 ff.)? It is the fully elliptical name-form that so often misleads us, and one way to try and disambiguate it is to find prosoponymic variants in syndetic form or with the definite article.

Reaney (1958) gives two explanations for **Massey**: (i) from Macey (La Manche), Macé (Orne) or Massy (Seine-Maritime), citing Hamo *de Masci*, 1179 in *Pipe Rolls* (Derbys); and (ii) from OF *Masci*, an attested pet form of *Matthew*, citing William *Massy*, 1330 in *Records of the Borough of Nottingham* (Stevenson 1882, 389). The first citation is clearly a locative name because it has the relevant preposition, but the second is elliptical, with no preposition or other grammatical information, and Reaney’s interpretation of it as an asyndetic patronymic, though possible, is arbitrary. The local context of this surname and of the man who bore it is crucial. In the 1330 document William *Massy* was a witness to a grant in Gedling (Notts). He is therefore probably identical with or a relative of William *Mascy*, who held one tenth of a knight’s fee in Gedling in 1287, also named as William *le Mascy* in 1281 in Standish (1914, 27 and 14). An earlier *Will[elmu]s le Mascy de Gedling* had died by 1268 (Sherwood Forest Eyre, TNA, E32/127). The definite article excludes the possibility that it is a patronymic and, taken at face value, it implies a derivation from OF *massi* ‘heavy, solidly built, strong’. However, it is not uncommon in AN surnames for the preposition *de* to be substituted for the definite article *le* (as in *de Bret* for *le Bret*, quoted earlier) and vice versa, so I keep an open mind on whether the Gedling

family might alternatively be a branch of the *de Mascy* family of Cheshire and Derbyshire.⁹

In the majority of prosoponymic variants mentioned so far, the focus has been broadly synchronic, identifying individuals whose surname has been differently rendered in the same document or set of documents (the court rolls or rentals of one manor, for example) or in different contemporary records, such as inquisitions or lay subsidy rolls. My next example illustrates a diachronic, genealogical focus, in which earlier members of the same family can provide a more conservative name-form that resolves the potential homonymy of later ones. **Barry**, the surname of several Norman families in England, Wales and Ireland, is exemplified in Reaney (1958) by Nest *de Barri*, 1185 (Sussex), and Richard *Barri*, 1195 (Suffolk), and explained thus:

Though most examples are without a preposition, the surname must, in the absence of any evidence for a personal-name or any suitable attribute, be local in origin. It was probably brought over from France where it survives as *Barry* and *Dubarry*, from OF *barri* ‘rampart’, later applied to the suburb below the rampart, hence ‘dweller in the suburb’ (Dauzat).

Since both of Reaney’s citations spell the name as *Barri*, there seems at first sight no other etymological option for the Norman name, though it need not be Old French. No place with this name has been identified in or near Normandy and, according to Gerald of Wales, who was a member of the de Barry family, it derived from the island of Barry (Glamorgan), which his grandfather Odo had been given by William the Conqueror (Rhys 1908, 60; FaNBI, s.n. Barry).

Nevertheless, Reaney was right to be wary of assuming a locative origin for *Barri* when not preceded by a preposition. In medieval Nottinghamshire there were two gentry families variously named *Barri* and *Barry*. One held the lordship of Teversal from at least the twelfth century and the other the lordship of Tollerton from at least the early thirteenth. It is not certain that these families were related, but the earliest known member of the Teversal family was *Radulphus Barret* (1130 in *Pipe Rolls*). He may be identical with *Radulphus Barre* (i.e. *Barré*), who in 1153 witnessed the foundation charter of Welbeck Abbey (White 1904, 256); he will have been an ancestor of *Radulphus Barre*, who in 1204 (*Pipe Rolls*) was in dispute with *Willelmo Barre* over land in Teversal. Later members of the family include *Galfridus Barret*, 1175 in *Pipe Rolls*, whose name is written *Barriet* in the chancellor’s copy; he

9. Hamo de Masci held Dunham (Massey) in Bowden, Cheshire, in 1086 *Domesday Book*.

is probably identical with *Galfridus Barre*, who in 1166 (*Red Book of the Exchequer*) held two knight's fees in Nottinghamshire, one certainly in Teversal, the other perhaps in Tollerton. From the early thirteenth century the name is also written *Barri* and *Barry*: *Thomas Barri* 1230 in *Pipe Rolls* (Notts); *Galfridus Barry* 1244 in *Book of Fees* (Notts); *Thomas Barry* of Teversal 1328 in *Inquisitiones post mortem* (Blagg 1939, 105).

The source of AN *Barré*, *Barri* is evidently OF *barr(i)et*, *barré* (Latin *barratus*) 'barred, striped'. The pronunciation of OF *-é* as /i/, and spelled <e>, <i> or <y>, is AN and is first recorded in the first half of the thirteenth century (Short 2007, §8.1); it also appears in the surname of *Ide le Tauny*, c.1276, cited in MED, s.v. *tauni*, from AN *tauné*, OF *tan(n)é* 'tawny'. As a surname of knightly AN families, it is possible that *Barré* alluded to the wearing of a striped scarf or other piece of clothing for identification in battle, an early example of a heraldic emblem. Thoroton (1797, III, 303) states that 'the Seal of Sir Galfr. Barre, with his name circumscribed in the year 1244 was Barry of eight or ten, with a File of five Labells'. As a heraldic term *barry* '(a field) divided horizontally into a number of equal parts by bars of two colours arranged alternately' is first recorded in English in c.1486 (OED) but presumably derives from AN *barré*, *barri*.

Asyndetic forms of locative surnames are sufficiently common that it is easy to overlook alternatives. Reaney (1958) explains all instances of **Crown** as either a Norman toponymic surname, from Craon (Mayenne), or an English topographic surname *atte croune* alluding to the name of an inn. Both explanations are supported by citations with appropriate prepositions, but the toponymic name is also illustrated by one with none, *Thomas Crowne*, 1327 (Worcs), which could surely have other origins. The same doubt arises with the medieval Nottinghamshire surname *Croune*, attested in *Gilb' o Croune*, 1327, and *Agn' Croune*, 1332 in Lay Subsidy Rolls (Warsop, TNA, E179/159/4, m. 4, and 159/5, m. 13). It might be a nickname from ME *croune* 'crown, garland, chaplet', also 'crown of the head'. It could have been given to someone who wore a garland at celebrations, or whose head was physically distinctive (large, or bald perhaps), or the original context might have been occupational and the name given to a maker of crowns or garlands. In the case of the Nottinghamshire name, however, there is a prosoponymic variant that cuts through the speculation and tells a different story. In a section of the 1287 Sherwood Forest Eyre dealing with offences in Warsop and Clipston, *Joh' Croune*, alias *Joh' Madythecroune* ('mad in the head') was a pledge for *Will' Madythecroune*, alias

Will' Croune (TNA, E32/127). By ellipsis *Croune* has become a metonym for *Madythecroune* 'mad in the head'.

§4.3. *Metonymy*. This is a common feature of medieval nicknames and the semantic function of the source word is bound to be uncertain if there are no linguistic or extra-linguistic contexts from which to derive its onomastic application. Some surnames appear to derive from words for man-made products, and Reaney concluded that these were almost always metonyms for the occupation of making or selling the product. In his own words, 'many surnames, previously regarded as nicknames difficult to explain, are really occupational' (Reaney 1958, xlii). That may sometimes be so, but he gives too little credence to other possibilities. He explains **Lace** as metonymic for *Lacer*, a maker of cords or strings, but MED records many other senses for ME *lace*. It commonly denoted a belt or a buckle, especially one made of interwoven strands of silk, threads of gold, etc., such as the green *lace* that Sir Gawain wore round his waist, trusting that it would magically protect his neck from the Green Knight's axe. It is worth noting that ME nicknames like *Berd* 'beard' are simplex bahuvrihi expressions (Marchand 1969, §5. 11. 1) denoting 'one who is characterized by wearing a beard'; they may in practice be reduced forms of a prepositional phrase like *with the berd*, which occasionally appears as the surname form (see Reaney 1958, s.n. **Beard**). *Lace* could just as well be a bahuvrihi, naming someone who wore a fancy belt or who used braided silken laces for tying his clothes, shoes, or armour. Similarly Reaney's explanations (1958, s.nn. **Purse, Blades**) of ME *Purse* and *Blade* as metonymic for *Purser* 'maker of purses' and *Bladesmith* take no account of the possibility that they were given to people who were recognisable by the purse or the knife that they wore.¹⁰

Reaney's gloss for the name **Hodd** or **Hood** seems to justify his reliance on occupational metonymy as an explanation: 'A maker of hoods. Hamo *Hode* is also called *Hodere* (1317 in *Assize Rolls*, Kent)'. The prosoponymic variation of *Hode* 'hood' and *Hodere* 'hooder, hood maker' (if *Hode* is not in error for *Hod'e*, i.e. *Hod[er]e*) is exactly what is needed to establish the plausibility of the explanation, but similar, unambiguous examples are extremely hard to find, even for men named *Hode*. Clark (1992, 176) notes that a London bearer of this name in 1292 seems to have been a corn merchant. It is true that there are instances of

10. The modern surname *Blades* has other possible sources, including derivation from a lost place in Swaledale, North Riding of Yorkshire; see DYS and FaNBI, s.n. **Blades**.

names ending in *-er* which are homonymous with a product term in *-er*. One of these is ME *wafre* or *wafre* ‘wafer’, which according to Reaney (1958, s.n. **Wafer**) lies behind the name of Simon *le Wafre*, who is otherwise named *Wafre* ‘maker of wafers’. I am fairly sure that this is not a metonym, as Reaney thinks. The definite article in *le Wafre* would be most unusual in a metonymic surname. *Wafre* is simply a variation in pronunciation, in which *-erer* has been simplified to *-er*; in fact MED (s.v. *wafre*) provides lexical evidence of *wafre* for *wafre*, and I would suggest that the same reduction lies behind similar names in *-er*, such as **Madder** and **Pepper**. Reaney (1958, xlii) acknowledges this possibility when he writes: ‘Apart from mere shortening by which *Cofferer* and *Coverer* became *Coffer* and *Cover*, the name of the article made or the commodity dealt in was used by metonymy for the maker or dealer’. His silence on this possibility when explaining *Wafer*, *Madder*, *Pepper*, and similar names (see McClure 2010b, s.nn. *Ambler*, *Somur*) shows the bias in his thinking.

If Reaney were right that metonyms are a frequent and regular source of occupational surnames, one would expect to find in town records more than a few examples where the context associates the named person with the relevant product. One likely example is the name of Thomas *Cony* (i.e. ‘rabbit’), 1323 in *York Freeman’s Register*, who was a pelterer or a dealer in animal skins, perhaps including in his case rabbit skins (Reaney 1958, s.n. **Coney**). But comparable instances are exceptionally scarce (I have not yet found any in the Nottingham records), suggesting that this sort of name usage is haphazard and infrequent rather than regular. *Pace* Reaney (1967, 19), it is better to classify these names as nicknames rather than occupational names, some of which, of course, may have been coined in an occupational context. As for *Hood*, Reaney surely cannot have thought that the medieval folk hero Robin Hood was a hood-maker; he was a hood-wearer, a hoodie, and so, I guess, were most of the people who bore the surname in late medieval England.

§4.4. *Derivative formations*. What a name like *Hood* does not tell us is the implied verb; is it ‘make’ or is it ‘wear’? A similar problem arises with agent nouns when they are derivatives formed with the suffixes *-er*, *-our* and *-man*. The stem may be a noun acting as the object of an unstated verb or it may be a transitive verb with its object unstated. When surnames with this morphology are not recorded as intelligible words in the literary record, we will often have problems explaining them because a crucial element of the meaning is hidden from us. Is ME *boltere* a derivative of the verb *bolten* ‘to sift (meal or grain)’, as

Fransson (1935, 59) suggests, or a derivative of the noun *bolt* ‘bolt; arrowhead; door fastening’ and therefore a maker of bolts, as MED assumes (without evidence)? Reaney (1958, s.n. **Bolter**) gives both senses.

This is the difficulty with ME *Siveker*, *Sifker*, *Seveker*, *Seuker*. It is attested sporadically in many counties of medieval England, though not recognised as a word in MED. Prosoponymic and prosopographic evidence indicates that it has something to do with sieves. In the court rolls of Mansfield (Notts) *Agnes relicta Joh'is le Syueker de Mamesfeld* (1315) appears to be identical with *Agnes que fuit ux' Joh'is Syueman de Mamesfeld* (1316 in Nottinghamshire Archives, Nottingham, DDP/17/1). *Syveman* is literally ‘sieve-man’ (Fransson 1935, 172). In the Nottingham Borough Court Rolls of 1409 (Calendar 1305/39) Roger *Seuker* is said to have owned a pair of wooden sieves. However, the morphology of the name is uncertain and its meaning ambiguous. If the suffix is *-ere*, we do not know if the stem *Sivek-*, *Sevek-* is nominal (an OE **sifoc* or **sifeca* ‘sieve’) or verbal (an OE **sifecian* ‘to sieve’). If the suffix is OE, ME **-kere*, the stem might be OE *sife* ‘sieve’ or the derivative verb **sifian*, ME *siven* (see McClure 2009). So further evidence is needed to settle whether it denoted a maker of sieves or a user of sieves (like *Boltere*, one who sifts flour, perhaps). It could be a source of modern *Shuker*, which is not in Reaney (1958) or Reaney and Wilson (1991), but will appear in FaNBI.

ME *couchour* or *coucher* is recorded in MED but the senses are variable or undetermined. If the stem is the noun *couche* ‘couch’, it presumably denoted a maker of couches or beds, the only sense given in Reaney (1958, s.n. **Coucher**); if the stem is the intransitive verb *couchen* ‘to lie’, then it could be a nickname ‘bed-ridden person’, a sense which is actually attested for the word (a. 1425 in MED), but if it is the transitive verb ‘to lay (something) on (something)’, it is probably an occupational term for a maker of opus anglicanum or *couched werk*, a tailor who made robes embroidered with gold or silver thread or jewels. These tailors were also known as *setters*, from a derivative of *setten* ‘to set, fasten, stitch’, but this was not understood until Ekwall (1951, 357–58) drew the right inference from some prosopographic evidence in the London records, where a man surnamed *Settere* was paid £40 for making an embroidered cope. This is not the only possible origin of the name, as Reaney (1958, s.n. **Setter**) discusses at length. In fifteenth-century York, for example, some setters were masons (OED, s.v. *setter*). It is the unknown object of the underlying verb that is the source of doubt when there is no defining context.

The same problem and its prosoponymic solution attaches to AN or ME *le Seur*, *le Seour* and *le Seuour*, recorded in the Letter Books of late thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century London. There are several possible etymologies for these name-forms, including OF, ME *seur* ‘assured, confident, dependable’, OF, ME *seuer(e)* ‘sewer, tailor’ or ‘shoemaker’, ME *seuer(e)* ‘follower, hunter’, and ME *seuer(e)* ‘an officer who superintended the laying of the table and the seating of the guests’ (MED). This last is an aphetic form of OF, ME *asseour*, *asseour*, a derivative of OF *asseoir* ‘to cause to sit, to seat’. Through confusion with OF, ME *assaour* (from OF *assaier* ‘to examine, test’) it also came to mean ‘an attendant who tasted, carved, or served his lord’s food’ (MED, s.v. *seuer(e)*, OED, s.v. *sewer*). There is no way of settling the sense of the London surnames without defining contexts. Reaney (1958, s.n. **Sewer (ii)**), correctly as it turns out, opted for the aphetic form of *asseour*, and naturally cited OED’s definition. However, some published prosoponymic data, not picked up by Wilson when he revised Reaney’s dictionary in 1991, proves that what these men seated or set were not people or tableware but threads and gems, as is demonstrated by the evidence in Fitch (1976), taken from the Hustings Rolls of late thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century London, that *le Asseur*, *le Asseyur*, *le Seur*, *le Seour* and *le Seuour* were AN or ME aliases of embroiderers named *Settere*.

As this instance shows, the literary record of a word’s sense is not necessarily a reliable guide to its anthroponymic meaning, and one also needs to bear in mind that not all homonyms are recognised or recorded in the standard dictionaries. For example, the ME surname *Ringere* is explained by Thuresson (1950, 181) as a derivative of OE *hringan* ‘to ring (a bell)’, and Reaney (1958, s.n. **Ringer**) follows suit. It is justified by the OED entry for *ringer* n.¹ ‘bell-ringer’.¹¹ If, however, the stem were to be the ME noun *ring* we might alternatively have an occupational name for a maker of rings. In fact there is a case in the London Eyre of 1276 where a man surnamed *Ringerer* (*sic*, presumably a dittographic error for *Ringer*) was accused of illegally setting precious stones in brooches and rings of latten (McClure 1983, 102).

Not all names in *-er* or *-our* and *-man* are occupational; some, like *Couchour* and *Gilour*, mentioned earlier, may alternatively be nick-

11. MED cites Thuresson’s example of 1207 (Hug. *le Ringere*, *Curia Regis Rolls*, Suffolk) as the earliest example of this sense. The name does not, of course, attest the sense ‘bell-ringer’, as there is no defining context, and the MED inference is questionable. The first quotation that definitely indicates ‘one who rings (a bell)’ is dated c.1425.

names, while in southern England they can be topographic and synonymous with names prefixed with *atte* (Fransson 1935, 192–208). McKinley (1988, 152–73) gives a good selection of surnames in *-er* in medieval Sussex, including names like **Dicker**, which might be occupational, ‘one who digs ditches’, where the stem is assumed to be verbal, or which might be topographic, ‘one who lives by a dike’, where the stem is nominal (Reaney 1958). As for **Hopper**, **Reader** and **Winder**, which Reaney explains as occupational (‘dancer’, ‘thatcher who uses reeds’, and ‘one who winds (wool?)’), McKinley shows on contextual grounds that they are probably topographic, from the ME nouns *hop* ‘remote, enclosed place’, *rede* ‘clearing’ and *wind* ‘winding path or street’. **Waterer** is explained by Thuresson (1950, 114) and Reaney (1958) as a derivative of the OE verb *wæterian* ‘to (lead cattle to) water’ and by Cottle (1978) as a derivative of the ME noun *water* (hence ‘water-seller’), but the surname almost exclusively belongs to Surrey, where a sixteenth-century Woking family named *Waterer* was alternatively called *Atwater* ‘at the water, stream or pond’ (McClure 1982). On the other hand, the London surname *Stokker* did not denote ‘one who lived by a *stock* (‘tree stump; footbridge?’)’, as Thuresson (1950, 36–37) and Reaney (1958, s.n. **Stocker**) infer, but a stockfish-monger, for which MED, s.v. *stokker*, n. (2), gives contextual proof.

Names in *-man* can be particularly troubling to explain with certainty. As an independent word meaning ‘servant’, *man* can function as the generic in occupational compounds, but as a suffix it is also equivalent to *-er* in derivative occupational names and (in southern England) in topographic names. It also occasionally operates as a hypocoristic formative when attached to post-Conquest given names, in a similar fashion to Continental Germanic names in *-man* and some late OE names in *-mann* (Insley 2002, 165; 2013, 227). Consequently, in *-man*-names where the stem could either be a given name, a surname, a product term or a topographic term, it can be problematic to distinguish asyndetic relationship surnames from topographic surnames, from occupational surnames and from surnames denoting ‘X’s servant’. **Potman** is an example. Reaney (1958) suggests it may sometimes have been synonymous with *Potter* ‘pot maker’ (working in clay, copper or brass) and at other times with *atte Potte* ‘at the hole or pit’, and these meanings are backed up by prosopographic evidence from Sussex records cited by McKinley (1988, 178–79). Reaney also cites *Poteman* as a forename and patronymic in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Kent. This must be a pet form of *Philip*, via the diminutive *Philipot*, though Reaney oddly explains it as ‘servant of *Pott*’, used as a given name. Like **Bateman**,

Hickman and **Human**, which also occur as forenames or as syndetic patronymics, it is probably a pet form with *-man* as a hypocoristic suffix (McClure 2003, 108–14).

§4.5 *Applied anthroponymics*. Homonyms are a constant challenge to definitive surnames research and have troubling implications for applied anthroponymics. Names of doubtful identity must be disambiguated by contextual evidence or removed from the analysis. MED frequently cites surnames as evidence for ME vocabulary but its examples are often linguistically ambiguous and even when they are not they are sometimes wildly misinterpreted. For instance, ME *blader* is glossed in MED as ‘blade maker’ (i.e. bladesmith), a sense not recorded in OED before 1598 and conjectured for ME by Thuresson (1950, 226) and Reaney (1958, s.n. **Blader**), but Ekwall (1951, 216 and 354) firmly rejects this, identifying it as OF *blad(i)er* ‘corn dealer’. The citation of the Hampshire surname *de Burhunte* (1286) as evidence for ME *borhunte* ‘boar hunter’ is phonologically and morphologically untenable; it is a toponymic from Boarhunt in Hampshire, as prosopographic evidence confirms (McClure 1996, 65). MED quotes *Ernaldi Joberti* (1230) as evidence for ME and AN *jupart(i)e* ‘jeopardy’, but the surname is plainly the Latin genitive of the OF personal name *Jobert* and signifies ‘Jobert’s (son or other relative)’. *Marcus le Celer* (c.1200) is cited as an example of ME (OF) *celer* ‘cellarer’ but as OED comments (s.v. cellar, n.²) it may be an alternative spelling of AN and ME *sel(l)er* ‘sadler’, for which Reaney (1958, s.n. **Sellar**) cites prosoponymic evidence: the Londoner Philip *le Celler* (1319) is also called *le Sadeler* (1320). ME surnames are sometimes the only evidence there is of ME vocabulary and can also provide significant antedatings of known words, but they need interpreting with close attention to context (McClure 2010a; 2010b; 2011). OED’s policy (for the third edition, in progress) of citing name-forms that antedate the first literary record of a word is far more careful than MED’s and is sensitive to the possibilities of ambiguity (Simpson, Weiner and Durkin 2004, 359–64).

Much has already been learned from ME occupational surnames about economic specialisation in medieval England, especially from the monographs of Fransson (1935) and Thuresson (1950), although, as I have illustrated, absence of context inevitably leaves some of their etymological interpretations open to doubt. Topographic surnames, like minor place-names and field names, can offer insights into the characteristics of past landscapes, as Tooth (2000) and Redmonds (2011, 5–25) have shown in their studies of north Staffordshire and the Yorkshire Dales.

Among linguistic monographs dealing with this type of name, Löfvenberg (1942) is exemplary in his awareness that lack of context makes it extremely difficult to spot scribal errors or resolve etymological and semantic ambiguities (xxv–vi).

There is also much to be learned from ME surnames about the ethnic and social origins of the people who bore them and the societies in which they lived and worked. This is nowhere better shown than in an essay by Cecily Clark on the names of King's Lynn (Clark 1983), which ranges across all surname types (i.e. those from personal names, place-names, topographical terms, occupational terms and nicknames) to provide insights into the mix of racial and linguistic influences on the community. The cogency of her arguments derives from her alertness to linguistic ambiguity and to the linguistic and prosopographic contexts in which the names are recorded. As she put it herself (Clark 1983, 279):

Viewing the recorded forms, not in isolation, but in relation to the place that produced them and to its known circumstances and activities has enabled etymological questions to be put into a fresh, and truer, perspective. Names, and above all nicknames, ought never to be studied without reference to the social and economic life of the communities which use them.

In another essay she demonstrated how prosopographic evidence can be used to deduce correlations between type of surname and social class (Clark 2002, 99 ff.). It follows that the prevalence of particular surname types in a community can give pointers to the social make-up of that community. A new edition of the *Durham Liber Vitae* (Rollason and Rollason 2007) is one of the few attempts in England to bring onomasticians and prosopographers together to elucidate a historical document. Two essays there (McClure 2007, and Redmonds and McClure 2007) analyse the changing character of the surnames and their social implications within the confraternities of Durham Cathedral Priory.

For demographers and for political and economic historians, some of the most useful surnames are those from place-names. Reaney's mapping of modern English surnames derived from medieval French (especially Norman) place-names has not been superseded (1967, 68–73), but it deserves to be revisited in the light of fuller historical information about the names and their bearers, and to be extended to include all medieval surnames of French origin, whether or not they survived to the modern day. It would be interesting to know which names disappeared from England after the break with Normandy in 1204, and whether any distributional patterns can be discerned.

The problem with analysing distribution is how to allow for ambiguous forms. This applies even more acutely to surnames from English place-names, which have long been seen as evidence of internal migration. As much as forty per cent of them in their ME forms can belong formally to more than one place, and early attempts to measure patterns of mobility were compromised by difficulties in identifying and removing ambiguous forms from the databases. It led Ekwall (1956, xxxix) and Reaney (1967, 345) to conclude that ‘the material... does not lend itself to accurate statistics’ (Reaney’s wording). On the other hand no-one had yet attempted a rigorous, comparative analysis of large bodies of data from which all ambiguous forms had been excluded, so I decided to try this using my extensive collection of data from Nottingham and from rural Nottinghamshire. The consistency and intelligibility of the results were encouraging, and I extended the analysis to compare the Nottingham data with those of towns of different sizes, viz. Leicester, Norwich, York and London (McClure 1979). The method has since been successfully used by other scholars to infer patterns of migration into Bristol (Penn 1985), Coventry (Goddard 2004) and Lincoln (Wilkinson 2007).

§5. Semantic ambiguity

I have illustrated from names like *Hood* and *Lace* that even when you think you know the word from which the surname was derived, its onomastic function can be elusive. This is also true of occupational names, like *Settere*, where we know its morphological components but not necessarily its sense. It is even truer of nicknames, where the etymology may be lexically transparent but its onomastic meaning obscure. For example, in the Lay Subsidy Rolls for Nottinghamshire, *Rob'to Allefowe* (1327), alias *Alfought'* (1332), and *Will'o Allefogh'* (1327), alias *Alfouth'* (1332), were both assessed in Beeston (TNA, E179/159/4, m. 2, and 159/5, m. 5). Already a family name it seems, it is a hitherto unrecorded compound of ME *al(le)* ‘all, completely’ and the ME adjective *fou, fogh* ‘particoloured, variegated, spotted or streaked’. In the 1332 forms it apparently alternates with *foughet*, past participle of ME *fouen* ‘to stain or discolour something’, but in the light of the earlier discussion of *Mouth* as a variant of *Mogh* (see §3) the spelling *-fouth* probably represents a pronunciation of *-fogh*, and so may *-fought*, in view of the similar spelling *enoght* (a.1400) for *inough* in MED. The problem is not formal but semantic; there is nothing to tell us what was (dis)coloured, spotted or streaked, whether for example it was clothing, hair or skin (birth marks?).

Nicknames draw in part on a vocabulary of colloquialisms and slang that is poorly represented in ME literary texts, so we are more dependent than ever on chance contextual information as a guide to sense.¹² One well-known group of phrasal nicknames is formed with a verbal stem and a noun as object. Seltén (1969, 13) draws attention to the fact that Johannes *Prikebut* de Norwico (Norwich), 1293, was a fishmonger, which makes it more likely that *but* here is the name of the fish not the word for an archery target. It is tempting to see similar formations, like *Wagpole* and *Waggestaf* ‘shake staff’, as occupational, too. These two names might have named a beadle (Reaney 1958, s.nn. **Waple**, **Wagstaff**) or a soldier (i.e. one who wields a long-handled weapon), as is usually supposed for *Shakelance* and *Waggespere* (Reaney 1967, 292). Or did they, as Reaney also tentatively suggests, denote ‘a philanderer’, on the hypothesis that ME *pole* and *staf*, like *burdoun* ‘pilgrim’s staff; lance’, also denoted ‘penis’?

Without relevant contextual information, the social connotations of such names are unrecoverable, but for the most famous member of this subset, **Shakespeare**, there is certainly a hint of something ungentlemanly in a reference to Hugh Shakspere of the diocese of Worcester-shire, who in April 1487 was elected a fellow of Merton College, Oxford; in June the same year he is referred to as *Hugo Sawnder alias dictus Shakspere, sed mutatum est istud nomen eius, quia vile reputatum est*, i.e. ‘Hugh Sawnder also known as Shakspere, but that name of his has been changed because it is of ill repute’ (Salter 1923, 98). Unfortunately there is no explanation of why the name was disreputable.

Metaphoric nicknames, especially those from animals, birds and insects, are a delight but their onomastic denotation is mostly a matter of speculation. For Reaney (1958) to interpret **Crane** as a name for a long-legged man is uncontentious, but for others, like **Fox** and **Woodmouse**, he is often, and perhaps wisely, unwilling to venture an opinion. Jönsjö (1979, 193) thought *Woodmouse* might have denoted ‘a very small man’, citing William *Wodemous* from the 1286 Wakefield Court Rolls, but ignores the fact that the man in question ‘drove out Moll de Mora and her son from her house, and killed her dog and carried off a web of 10 ells of cloth’. Redmonds (1973, 16) quotes the passage and remarks on the irony. Mice are generally associated with timidity. We may also wonder why William is named *Woodmouse* rather than plain *Mouse*. Did he, or an eponymous ancestor, live and work in woodland? Jönsjö cites other instances of the surname from Co. Durham and Lancashire, and I

12. See McClure 1981b for a more detailed discussion of some of the points that follow.

suspect that it belonged to a substantial ME repertoire of generic nicknames, whose senses we have only a slim knowledge of from occasional figurative usages in literature and art, and in recorded proverbial expressions.

Prosopographic information is like gold dust, but it can puzzle as well as illuminate, especially when it contradicts the literal, lexical sense of a surname. Lay people are called **Abbot**, **Bishop**, **Cardinal**, **Monk**, **Pope**, **Prior** and **Priest**; men are named **Nun**; serfs are called **King**, **Lord**, **Squire** and **Sheriff**. One possibility is that they were metonymic, given to people who worked for or who owed rent to religious houses, the local parson or lord, or the monarch. However, although most of the names of this type are common, no contextual evidence has yet been found to bear this out. McKinley (1988, 234–40) provides a useful discussion of these and similar names in medieval Sussex where such evidence as there is points to nicknames, not to occupations or feudal relationships. Reaney (1958; 1967, 170–71) explains some of them as metaphors ridiculing excessive pride or censoriousness, or as ‘pageant names’ acquired from acting a role in official processions, ceremonies, tableaux and plays. There were also games and folk rituals, where roles like the Boy Bishop, the Abbot or Lord of Misrule, the King of the May, the King of the Bean and the Lord of the Harvest imitated or subverted the spiritual or temporal powers that dominated daily life. Our knowledge of medieval subcultures is poor but nicknaming probably thrived in them, especially as a form of mockery (McClure 1981a, 74). We know that metaphor, metonymy and irony all play a part in nicknaming but our ignorance of the context in which such names were coined leaves us with innumerable unresolved ambiguities and speculations. This is not a counsel of despair but an incentive to look beyond the linguistic form to seek out any contexts, literary or otherwise, in which a nickname or its lexical source is meaningfully embedded.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

ME surnames form a vast body of historical information, little of which has yet been explored or exploited. Only a tiny proportion of the documentary sources (such as court rolls, guild rolls, rentals, tax rolls, wills, cartularies and deeds) is in print or online. The soundness of any extrapolation from a collection of names, whether for dictionaries or for research in applied anthroponymics, is relative to the care with which each name is interpreted in all the linguistic and prosopographic contexts for which evidence is available. As Clark (2002, 121) insisted, ‘personal-

name projects must be designed on a scale permitting of full, multi-dimensional exploration of the material'. The method is fundamentally comparative and locally focused; only that approach can deal effectively with the linguistic ambiguity that is endemic to surnames. In Part Two of this paper I shall discuss the application of this method to researching hereditary surnames in the post-medieval period, when loss of original lexical and onomastic transparency, combined with phonetic change, transformed many surnames beyond recognition and created a plethora of baffling and sometimes misleading variants.

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