An Onomastic Note on Wolfram’s Gahmuret

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Nomen est omen, as the old adage advises us. The fact that names are portents of character, as well as signifiers of individual identity, is a commonplace at the heart of onomastic interests. A reader’s understanding of Gottfried’s Tristan is shaped early and definitively when the author states that the name given to him marked him for an unhappy fate: «von triste Tristan was sîn name; / der name was ime gevallesame / und alle wîs gebær: / daz kiesen an dem mære» (Tristan, 2001–04).

In the following I would like to argue that Gahmuret, Parzival’s father, bears a descriptive name. To that end, the evidence of descriptive names in Parzival will be discussed briefly. This will be followed by a review of the salient features of Gahmuret’s characterization and the scholarship that has dealt with it, as well as the source(s) of his name. Finally, linguistic matters will be addressed with respect to their bearing on the etymological explanation for Gahmuret’s name.

The virtually undisputed champion of naming among the Middle High German authors is Wolfram von Eschenbach. The sheer number of proper nouns, both of places and persons, is astonishing in scope and variety of putative sources. Particularly interesting to scholars have been the so-called redende Namen, «welche über ihren Träger etwas aussagen, oder deren Bedeutung das Wesen desselben bezeichnet» (Froehde 141), i.e., names that invite the reader to reflect about a character’s attributes and, in so doing, the etymology of a name. Well-known examples include the eponymous protagonist, Parzival, and his wife, Condwiramurs. Condwiramurs, as Wolfram tells us, is derived from Condwirenâmûrs (Parzival 327, 20), «guiding love.» Parzival, in turn, is so named because «der nam ist rehte enmitten durch» (Parzival 140, 17).

Many of the other proper names that Wolfram scatters and clusters throughout Parzival are the subject of onomastic scholarship, particularly with respect to source. Broadly speaking, the approaches have highlighted three sources for Wolfram’s naming impulses.

The first is the matter of names given to characters that are nameless in Chrétien’s unfinished model, the Roman de Perceval ou le Conte du Graal. Parzival’s cousin, Sigune, and Anfortas, Wolfram’s Grail King and brother to Parzival’s mother, Herzeloyde, are examples of such naming. It is consistent
with Wolfram’s genealogical preoccupation that someone as important as the hero’s cousin and mother’s brother should merit names in their own right, rather than Chrétien’s more impersonal descriptors, *germaine cosine* (Chrétien 3586) and *li Rois Peschierre* (Chrétien 3506) respectively.\(^5\)

The second category of naming sources of interest to scholars contains proper nouns which, for lack of compelling evidence to the contrary, Wolfram appears to have invented from whole or partially cut cloth, e.g., Kyot and Flegetanis.\(^6\)

Finally, there remains a group of names that offers a tantalizing glimpse of Wolfram the indefatigable wordsmith. This group includes the kind of alteration of an attested, transmitted source for a name that, depending upon whether we see Wolfram as an impish ingénue or an embarrassingly plodding illiterate, delights or insults the ear. Is the character’s name Terredelaschoye, for example, really Wolfram’s clumsy misreading of a person for what was a place name in the original, or is this «confusion» merely one of Wolfram’s many recourses to poetic license?\(^7\) Wolfram’s treatment of names in this respect is closely linked to the debate about his «learning,» as Werner Schröder wryly observes: «[O]bwohl er keine Schule besucht hatte, hat er sich mit dem Heißhunger des Autodidakten viel, wenn auch manchmal krauses Wissen angeeignet, das er als Steinbruch für seine Erfindungsgabe zu nutzen verstand, nicht zuletzt auf dem Felde der Namen» (xxiv).

Within the context of Wolfram’s multiple naming strategies, the name of Parzival’s father, Gahmuret, is particularly interesting and promising to onomasticists for several reasons. First, it is the name of an important character in the hero’s family tree. The importance of Gahmuret is suggested even more strongly by the fact that an entire cycle of prefatory adventures is devoted to him. Second, it represents another instance of Wolfram naming a character that had been unnamed in Chrétien’s model. Third, it is a name that, as in the case of so many others, lends itself to etymological speculation within the context of both *redende Namen* and the presaging power of naming.

One of the first things striking the reader of the Gahmuret episodes is the distinctiveness of his characterization with respect to the attributes attached to him, as well as the scenes in which those attributes assert themselves. In other words, Gahmuret’s character, and therein also his fate, seems to me to be reflected in his very name. I am mindful of the fact that, while almost any etymological argument can be possible, it requires more to make it plausible, convincing or even compelling. In the case of popular medieval literary texts etymological calisthenics, scribal inconsistencies, and multiple adaptations across several languages leave room for any number of possible onomastic explanations or derivations.
An interesting point of departure is the fact that Gahmuret’s name has as often occasioned etymological speculation, without much regard to his narrative presence, as it has been more or less ignored in discussion. One of the most ardent admirers of Gahmuret, Margaret Richey, for example never touches on an etymological or even literary source for his name. The scholarship that has addressed Gahmuret’s name falls into several broad categories. The first includes what might be called the accidental camp, according to which Wolfram’s naming strategies are based on alteration, corruption, or misunderstanding of the source(s). Joachim Heinzle and others, for example, posit that the name Gahmuret was likely taken «mistakenly» from the geographical identifier of Bliocadrans, «le roi Ban de Goremet» and Perceval’s father in the prologue to Chrétien’s *Conte du Graal* (Chrétien 465). Ernst Brugger combines onomastic threads by proposing that the name was transferred from place to person, not unheard of in the case of Wolfram, by none other than the no less etymologically elusive Kyot himself. Karl Bartsch (138) surmises that Wolfram may have had in mind the German name *Gamarit* as a model for Gahmuret. Bartsch further surmises that the name may be connected to an early, fragmentary version of a Tirol und Fridebrant, in which the name [G]amuret occurs. Richard Heinzel suggests a derivation from Gamor, a Saracen prince who appears in an early English tale about Arthur and Merlin.

What these derivations have in common is the search for a textually attested source, or inspiration, for Gahmuret’s name. Such derivations are understandable in view of the pervasive body of onomastically established *dramatis personae* in Arthurian texts. Largely absent in these discussions, however, is consideration of how a particular derivation drives, or is driven by, the relationship between Gahmuret’s name and characterization. One of the early exceptions is San-Marte [Schulz], who derived Gahmuret’s name from the Welsh *camgredwr*, meaning «heretic,» because of his marriage to the black, heathen queen, Belakane (401). According to San-Marte, Wolfram wrote down the name «nach dem ungefähren Klange» (400), and from thence San-Marte imputed the meaning of *Liebeskleinod*, «small love token,» from *game + amoreux*.

Almost any etymology is possible, one might argue. Sigune, for example, may well be a thinly veiled anagram of Chrétien’s nameless *cosine*, while Belakane may well be derived from *Pelikan*, «pelican,» as San-Marte speculates, or as easily from *belacana*, «beautiful reed,» as Bartsch suggested. Yet the underlying question is left begging, as Wolfgang Kleiber argues succinctly: «Weitere Quellen wären nachweisbar, doch halte ich die Suche nach Vorlagen für steril; wichtiger scheint mir […] die naheliegende Frage,
was Wolfram mit diesen Namenmassen bezweckt hat» (83). For much of what has been written about Wolfram’s naming strategies, then, Heinzle’s observation about Brugger’s own etymological argument remains valid: «Die Beweisführung […] an allen entscheidenden Punkten auf Hypothesen angewiesen, ist zu spekulativ, um ernsthaft erwogen zu werden» (50).

Against this background, I would like to suggest a derivation of Gahmuret’s name that is more context-sensitive with respect to narrative and characterization. My suggestion seeks to address Kleiber’s intentional issue on the notoriously slippery ice of phonetic, not to mention orthographic, vagaries. If Gahmuret’s name can be read to suggest something about his character, to be a nomen est omen representation of sorts for that character, then it seems useful to start with what Wolfram tells us about Parzival’s father. Several points are germane in this regard.

The first, and arguably critical, point to be made is that Gahmuret and his offspring are identified explicitly as being descendent from a specific line, Mazadan, a line that was enriched by supernatural genes through Terredelaschoye: «sîn art was von der feien» (Parzival 400, 9). In effect, this meant for Gahmuret that the merry month of May inevitably compelled a «stirring of the loins»: «sîn art von der feien / muose minnen oder mine gern» (Parzival 96, 20–21). The reader is thus prepared already for the fact that Gahmuret becomes embroiled quickly and serially in affairs of the heart. To judge by Belakane’s and Herzeloyde’s reception of Gahmuret, his looks and actions were such that his amorous overtures met with favor. The same can be surmised of Anpflise, the widowed French queen, with whom Gahmuret had had a prior «understanding», and who pursued her claim on him through emissaries. Hilda Swinburne summarizes that «it is part of his inheritance, a quality of his family, that he shall be a great lover» (199). Nor was Gahmuret indifferent to making an attractive impression, as witness the description of his entrance to Kanvoleis, Herzeloyde’s home: «dô leite der degen wert / ein bein für sich úfez phert, / zwên stivâl über blôziu bein» (Parzival 63, 13–15). In short, Wolfram tells us in no uncertain terms that Gahmuret was destined to love as surely as he was made to be loved in turn.

The second point to be made about Gahmuret is his indisputable prowess as a knight. Whether he is portrayed as a knight-errant rescuing a beautiful damsel in distress, like Belakane, or whether he is a spontaneous participant in a tournament, the «prize» of which happens to be the equally beautiful Herzeloyde, Gahmuret is victorious against any and all challengers. To judge by the appellatives alone that Wolfram lavishes on Gahmuret, the prologue would seem to serve a fairly simple and obvious function, i.e., to presage that his son, Parzival, is likewise destined to be anything but a slouch in matters of
love and fighting. Yet we also know about Parzival that he is destined to be a hero «slowly wise,» «træclîche wîs» (Parzival 15, 4). There is an element of youthful rashness in Parzival that bears comparison to his father. Gahmuret’s relationship to both Belakane and Herzeloyde blossoms quickly, yet is also marked by irresolution on Gahmuret’s part. He acts quickly and decisively but is loath to accept the implications of committing to the eventual prize. Given Gahmuret’s prowess, it is not surprising that Belakane was more than willing to grant him the favors that she had withheld from the erstwhile lover who had died in her service. Gahmuret seems not to have thought through the consequence of a long-term, sedentary relationship with Belakane.

Much can be said of the racial and religious that overshadows Gahmuret’s relationship with Belakane. Gahmuret himself early on raises the canard of religion when he writes to Belakane that baptism would be a condition for his commitment: «frouwe, wiltu toufen dich, / du maht ouch noch erwerben mich» (Parzival 56, 25–26). Not only is Belakane willing to be baptized for Gahmuret’s sake, «ich mich gerne toufen solte / unde lebens wie er wolte» (Parzival 57, 7–8), but Wolfram himself had earlier suggested that Belakane had been baptized by her own tears following the death of her lover, Îsenhart: «ir kiusche was ein reiner touf» (Parzival 28, 14). In the end, however, it becomes clear that Gahmuret seeks to extricate himself from a commitment, or rather the consequences of a commitment, into which his amorous nature had compelled him. The issue of baptism arises after the fact.

This is not to suggest that Gahmuret had changed his mind about Belakane’s attractiveness as a worthy object and source of minne. There remains, however, a strong sense that Gahmuret was not prepared to «settle down» and thus to forsake further adventures, both martial and amorous. Unbeknownst to himself, Gahmuret leaves behind an expecting mother. In much the same way Gahmuret’s son was later to leave his mother impetuously. Gahmuret, like Parzival, is characterized by a certain impulse to rashness.

The second relationship into which Gahmuret enters is no less marked by impulse and reluctance. Gahmuret again becomes involved in a matter involving consequences that he is reluctant to accept. In fairness to Gahmuret, one could not have expected him to know precisely what prize was attached to the tournament at Kanvoleis. As far as Gahmuret was concerned, the tournament was an opportunity for fame, honor and the sweet, if fleeting, solace of fair ladies. To his surprise, however, Gahmuret again has a queen dealt to him, along with the explicit prospects of domestication.

What follows in the exchange between Herzeloyde and Gahmuret underscores the resolve of the former and the reluctance of the latter. Gahmuret first cites Belakane as the reason for being unable to commit to Herzeloyde,

In a penultimate act of what begins to seem like a desperate attempt to avoid commitment, Gahmuret cites his brother’s death as an impediment to the kind of happiness that Herzeloyde presumably deserves: «ich solt iuch, frouwe, erbarmen: / mir ist mîn werder bruoder tôt. / durch iwer zuht lât mich ân nôt. / kêrt minne dâ diu freude si: / wan mir wont niht wan jâmer bî» (Parzival 95, 6–10). Herzeloyde is well prepared to block Gahmuret’s retreat: «Lât mich den lîp niht langer zern: / sagt an, wâ mite welt ir iuch wern?» (Parzival 95, 11–12). In what amounts in this case, and after what preceded it, to lame recourse to a technicality, Gahmuret challenges the legitimacy of the tournament itself: «ez wart ein turney dâ her / gesprochen: des enwart hie niht» (Parzival 95, 14–15). In the end, however, Gahmuret is declared victor and rightful consort to the queen.

Gahmuret’s irresolution has found its match in Herzeloyde’s resolve, buttressed by the counsel of her advisors. The reasons that he marshals for avoiding the prize of Herzeloyde again have nothing to do with the queen as such. On the contrary, Gahmuret is more than willing to answer the call of his genetic predisposition toward amorousness. He is not, however, ready or willing to pay the price of sedentary domestication that comes with the prize. Even a medieval audience, used to the errant knight’s perpetual quest for fair lady’s favor while remaining for the most part unattached, might have been struck by the question of how Gahmuret proposed to jump from one assignation to another without eventually facing the kind of commitment that service to fair ladies would at some point entail and that was the rightful culmination of many a hero’s questing.

Gahmuret’s problem is ultimately, to paraphrase and modify Margaret Richey’s assessment,11 that he is irresistibly driven to be at once faithful and faithless. He is compelled to love two things without apparent end, namely women and knight errantry. He commits to the first as impetuously as he pursues the latter stubbornly. When faced, as in the cases of Belakane and Herzeloyde, with a prize that binds, Gahmuret is caught in a position in which he seeks to avoid personal responsibility for the consequences of his actions. It is, in the end, Herzeloyde who summarizes eulogistically the character of her
husband: «mînes herzen freude breit / was Gahmuretes werdekeit. / Den nam mir sîn vrechiuger» (*Parzival* 109, 21–23).

I have tried to offer in some detail an insight into Gahmuret’s character as Wolfram draws it in word and action. The rationale for doing so on behalf of an onomastic argument arises in part from the very purpose which much of medieval literary naming served, as Bruno Boesch suggests: «[Der redende Name] sucht bewußt den Zusammenhang zwischen Wortbedeutung und Namensträger neu zu schaffen. Der Name wird zur Metapher, welche die Vorstellung in einer bestimmten Richtung festlegt. Zugleich ist er im Rahmen der Dichtung ein Vorausurteil, das die Freiheit in der Verfügung über die Gestalt einschränkt» (247). With a clearer picture of the Namensträger’s character it is possible to consider its relationship to the Wortbedeutung.

There are several approaches to considering this relationship. One is to defer to the constraints – or possibilities – of a well-established literary tradition with an equally well-established cast of characters, like Arthurian literature. Given a potential combination of scribal error, cross-lingual corruption, and an imagination spurred when encountering an exotic name, a range of variants and sources, can be rationalized for a given name. In the case of Gahmuret, several issues arise when trying to explain or derive his name.

The first of these is that Wolfram’s name for Parzival’s father, Gahmuret, is distinctly different from the name for Perceval’s father, Bliocadran, in the eponymous «continuation» of Chrétien’s *Conte du Graal*. The difference is such that it would be difficult to argue for a misreading or mishearing of the French name. On the surface, the relationship between Wolfram’s Gahmuret and the character Beals von Gomoret in Hartmann von Aue’s *Erec* seems more plausible, though this derivation is not based on any meaningful relationship between name and character. Moreover, there are some linguistic matters that come into play in an argument deriving Gahmuret from Gomoret. If one were to adopt a linguistic approach, there appear to be at least three changes to be accounted for in the change from Gomoret to Gahmuret. The first is the insertion of the *h* in Gahmuret in most of the name’s renderings. Second, the vocalic change from a mid-back *o* to an open *a* seems arguably as much deliberate as a matter of error. Third, there is a similarly notable vocalic change from mid-back *o* to high-back *u*. While any error is possible, I hope to make a plausible case for a reading of Gahmuret’s name that is «meaningful.» The linguistic issues involved in deriving Gahmuret from Gomoret can perhaps best be approached from the perspective of other naming characteristics.

While it cannot be proved that the lowering of Gomoret’s *o* to Gahmuret’s *a* was not accidental, this kind and degree of vocalic change is not an «error»
commonly attributed to mishearing. Scribal error in misreading \( a \) instead of \( o \)
also seems unlikely, since the manuscript variants consistently write \( a \) in
Gahmuret’s name, whatever other variant spellings may be attested. Moreover,
Wolfram consistently renders \( a \) in the first syllable of his presumed
source’s names as \( a \), e.g., Brandleidelin from Brandleiz, Karidæl from
Carduel, der Waleis from li Galois. Likewise, Wolfram consistently retains
Chrétien’s \( o \), as in Dodines from Dodinuæ, Monte Rybele from Montrevel,
and Joflanze from Djofle.

If, then, Gomoret served as a naming model for Gahmuret, a case can be
made that Wolfram’s change from initial \( o \) to \( a \) was deliberate. To this can be
added the fact that Wolfram added an \( h \) to the name he chose for Parzival’s
father. Again, there is no compelling scribal or phonetic reason to make this
particular change, especially if it is intended to be unpronounced. There is no
reason to assume that the \( h \) was inserted to mark lengthening of the preceding
\( a \).\(^{16}\) If the \( h \) was inserted to mark the syllabic end as a velar fricative, rather than
a lengthened vocalic \( a \), then the pronunciation would be the same as Middle
High German \( gâch \), which is often reduced to \( b \), analogous to the contrast
between New High German adverbial \( boch \) and adjectival \( hob- \). Middle High
German \( gâch \), denoting «impetuous, sudden, eager, ardent, rash,» describes
accurately the way in which Gahmuret pursues his fundamental passions for
knightly derring-do and love. This is far from compelling on linguistic
grounds, but it is plausible from the perspective of descriptive naming.

The second part of Gahmuret’s descriptive name points even more directly,
and consistent with the thrust of the narrative, to his amorous passions. Here,
too, I take it as a given that linguistic evidence is far from compelling, or even
consistent in the manuscript variants, but the matter of Gahmuret and love
have been acknowledged as closely linked since earliest scholarship. If a
plausible argument can be made for a two-syllable name, of which the initial
vowel of the second syllable has been elided, then \( amour \) seems a defensible
candidate for completing Gahmuret’s descriptive name. One possible ex-
planation for the elision may have to do with the use of the \( h \) in the final
position of the first syllable to suggest a fricative and hence meant to be read as
\( gâch \), «impetuous.» Without elision the \( h \) would be intervocalic, something
like Gabamuret, which might give a reading of the \( b \) as resonant rather than
fricative and hence distort an important element of the descriptive name.
\( Amour \) does occur in various spellings\(^{17}\) in \( Parzival \), so that Wolfram’s
familiarity with it can be stipulated.

Finally, there is the matter of the ending, –et that bears some speculation. A
simple conjecture is that the often diminutive –et ending is analogous to other
names found in \( Parzival \) and elsewhere: Iwanet, Trebuchet, Kaylet, along
with feminine formations like Lunete. Another explanation for the –et ending is that Wolfram meant to suggest a Germanized verb, *amûren*, in either its third-person singular or past participial form, *amûret*. This possibility is especially tempting, even if more speculative than what has been suggested so far, for two reasons. First, the explanation accounts for every part of Gahmuret’s name and has the specious persuasiveness of being «thorough.» Second, it suggests both sides of Gahmuret’s tempestuous love life, namely that he loves quickly and is just as quickly loved.

At this point, and in defense of what has been argued on behalf of Gahmuret as one of the *redende Namen* in Wolfram, it should be recalled that Wolfram often and tantalizingly invites precisely this sort of questioning approach to his characters and the narrative strands into which they are woven and reveal themselves. This remains both the boon and bane of Wolfram scholarship. Werner Schröder’s remark about the roster of knights cited by Parzival (772, 1–23) bears repeating in this context, too: «[D]ie Phantasie [ist] selten ganz freischwebend. In der Mehrzahl lassen sich Anregungen, Anstöße, Muster erkennen. Da sie öfter entlegen scheinen, sind sie wahrscheinlich manchmal nur noch nicht entdeckt» (xxv).

Gahmuret, the man who loves and is in turn loved – quickly, can thus be seen to be possessed, like so many other Wolfram creations, of a descriptive name. While the arguments for the meaning of Gahmuret’s name may not be compelling, they are plausible and, perhaps more importantly, consistent with Gahmuret’s characterization. No author who, like Wolfram, challenges his audience at every turn of the tale to read beyond the boundaries of the text would begrudge the extended search for meaning, for connections, for significance.

Notes

1 An early version of these remarks was presented at the Kentucky Foreign Language Conference. I acknowledge gratefully the helpful comments and suggestions of colleagues.
2 All citations from Gottfried von Strassburg, *Tristan, Text und kritischer Apparat*.
3 All citations from Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival, Studienausgabe*.
4 See for example early studies by Schulz (1857) and Bartsch (1874); for modern studies see Fourquet (1949), Kleiber (1962), Knapp (1974), Rosenfeld (1974), Schmid (1978), and Schröder (1982). See also more recently Gerstenecker (2008). I am indebted to Albrecht Classen for his reference to some interesting onomastic etymologies proposed by André de Mandach (1995).
5 All citations from *Les romans de Chrétien de Troyes*. 
The scholarship on whether Kyot and Flegetanis were actual or invented sources cited by Wolfram for his *Parzival* remains both unresolved and impassioned. For a good overview of the competing positions see Draesner (1993).

Wolfram changes Chrétien’s *Blancheflor la bele* to *Condwiramurs*, and in so doing creates a fanciful syllable etymology that bears no linguistic similarity to the French original.

A *roi Bans de Gomeret* also appears in Chrétien’s *Erec et Enide*.

Although Heinzel does not consider Gahmuret to be a descriptive name, he does recognize an essential feature of Gahmuret to be a «flatterhafter Liebhaber» (96).

The issue of Gahmuret and Parzival’s inherited predisposition(s) is discussed in Christoph.

«Small cause has Gahmuret to misprize his own powers in the art of wooing and winning! The story shows him to have been at all times an irresistible attractive lover» (2).

See for example Bruce (1999).

See Wolfgang (1976).

In considering this sort of linguistic reconstruction it helps to bear in mind the injunction, attributed to Voltaire, that etymology is a science «where the vowels do not count at all and the consonants very little.»

Lachmann’s *Parzival* edition lists several manuscript variants for Gahmuret’s name, including *Gagmuret* (D), *Gahmuoreth* (D), *gahmuret* (G, D), *gahmures* (G) *Gahmûretes* (G), *gahmóretes* (G), *Gahmuet* (G), *gamurete* (D), *Gamuret* (dg). Wolfram’s *Titurel*, in which Gahmuret also appears, includes the variants *Gahmurethien* (G) and *Gahmiret* (G).


For example: «si wære wol âmîe» (*Parzival* 345, 23); «ir habt ein ander âmîs» (*Parzival* 133, 10); «Amor was sî krîe» (*Parzival* 478, 30); «Condwîren âmûrs» (*Parzival* 527, 20).

**Works Cited**


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