

CHARON'S SEMANTICS.  
NAMING WEATHER SYSTEMS:  
BETWEEN SCIENTIFIC TRADITION  
AND MEDIA LORE

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*Caronte, ad esempio,  
che traghetta le anime all'inferno,  
mi sembra un nome azzecato.  
Fa capire subito che fa molto caldo.*  
—Margherita Hack<sup>1</sup>

Between April and August 2012, Italy faced an unprecedented condition of persistent anticyclones (high pressure systems) coming from Africa and producing fine but very hot weather all over the country. Mass media gradually started to make reference to them by using proper names, almost all taken from ancient history and classical mythology: *Hannibal*, *Scipione* (Scipio), *Caronte* (Charon), *Minosse* (Minos), *Ulisse* (Ulysses), *Nerone* (Nero), *Caligola* (Caligula) and *Lucifero* (Lucifer).<sup>2</sup> This rich onomastic series generated a lively debate, almost exclusively on websites, forums and blogs, concerning the way of naming such atmospheric phenomena, nicknamed by a weather forecast website (IlMeteo.it) as a result of proper polls among its registered users.

On the one hand, it seemed to be a tradition—having been customary for years—for European cyclones and anticyclones to be named only by the German Institute of Meteorology at the Free University of Berlin (vd. infra). On the other hand, it has been argued that such a right is neither

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<sup>1</sup> *LaNazione.it* (July 7: <http://urly.it/1gtl>): [It seems to me that Charon, for instance, who ferries men's souls to hell, is a well-chosen name. It makes us immediately realise that the weather is so hot].

<sup>2</sup> The original Italian names are those in italics, followed by the English version (which anyway corresponds to the Latin form). *Hannibal* was originally named with the English spelling: see below for further notes.

legally nor scientifically binding and that therefore “anyone” could give them a name. Such a “linguistic” controversy is utterly new in Italy and is linked to a field that is both scientific and “fashionable,” for its easy impact on the media (also due to the unusual weather conditions). Therefore, it is a suitable ground for a twofold analysis, concerning both the history of the naming of atmospheric phenomena, which can provide the proper framework, and the semantics of the names chosen in such a “popular” way, at which the debate was mostly pointed and which shows a very particular retrieval of the classical tradition.

### Naming cyclones

Tropical cyclones are named to provide ease of communication between forecasters and the general public regarding forecasts, watches, and warnings (Landsea 2010).

[E]xperience shows that the use of short, distinctive given names in written as well as spoken communications is quicker and less subject to error than the older more cumbersome latitude-longitude identification methods. These advantages are especially important in exchanging detailed storm information between hundreds of widely scattered stations, coastal bases, and ships at sea (TCP).

In fact, the custom of naming particularly strong weather phenomena began in the United States during World War II, since US Army meteorologists needed a quick way to identify tropical cyclones (low pressure systems usually generating bad weather, storms, typhoons or hurricanes) and to communicate them to Air Force and Navy troops operating in the Pacific (the first public list was adopted in 1945). It seems that the first use of a proper name for a tropical cyclone dates back to the early twentieth century, when an Australian forecaster gave them names “after political figures whom he disliked” (Dunn and Miller 1960, quoted in Landsea 2010). The military forecasters took the practice of giving female names from the 1941 novel *Storm* by G. Stewart, in which a young meteorologist named storms after his former girlfriends.

The usage was kept in the USA after the end of the war since:

the quick identification of storms in warning messages [...] makes it easier for the media to report on tropical cyclones, heightens interest in warnings and increases community preparedness (TCP).

While the first names were given arbitrarily, regular patterns were soon elaborated. Between 1950 and 1952 a phonetic alphabet (Able-Baker-

Charlie etc.) was followed to identify North Atlantic cyclones, and in 1953 the US Weather Bureau decided to start using female names again. It is well known that feminist protests succeeded in including male names in the official list (since 1979).

Nowadays, cyclones are named differently according to geographical areas, but follow common rules. For instance, for both Caribbean/Mexican/North Atlantic and Eastern North Pacific hurricanes, there are six alphabetic lists used in rotation, and in each list there are 21 (A-W) or 24 (A-Z) entries alternating male and female names. When the annual list is exhausted, due to the occurrence of more hurricanes than expected, Greek alphabetic letter names are exploited (in 2005 they were used up to Zeta).<sup>3</sup>

### Naming European weather

In Europe, the practice of naming cyclones/anticyclones is quite recent. Since its main aims are easy communication and quick warning about potentially dangerous phenomena, for both civil and military purposes there was no real need to adopt it in a geographical area basically lacking in such conditions.<sup>4</sup> However, following people's natural tendency of knowing (and therefore controlling) things by naming them,<sup>5</sup> even here, the tradition of giving proper names to "highs" and "lows" (as they are called according to the meteorological jargon) started. As we can read on the website of the Institut für Meteorologie of the Freie Universität Berlin:

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<sup>3</sup> A weather system naming history can be found in Lankford (2001: 7-15), Barnes (2007: 35-38), Schwartz (2007: 15), Landsea (2010) and TCP. For all the tables see the *Tropical Cyclone Programme* website (<http://www.wmo.int/pages/prog/www/tcp/Storm-naming.html>). For the more complicated Japanese system for Western North Pacific and South China Sea typhoons see the *Digital Typhoon* website, within the section "Typhoon Names (Asian Names)" by A. Kitamoto (<http://agora.ex.nii.ac.jp/digital-typhoon/help/tcnames.html.en>). See also Padgett (2011) and the "Tropical Cyclone Names" section of the *Atlantic Oceanographic and Meteorological Laboratory-Hurricane Research Division* website (<http://www.aoml.noaa.gov/hrd/tcfaq/tcfaqB.html>).

<sup>4</sup> "Hurricanes are the only type of weather system with a formal naming convention. A name is applied when a tropical depression develops winds of at least tropical storm strength, 39 mph or greater. The World Meteorological Organization, an agency of the United Nations, maintains separate alphabetical lists for eight hurricane-prone areas of the world" (Schwartz 2007: 15).

<sup>5</sup> For the main issues about naming things, see Astori (2012: 36-38) and also, from a philosophical viewpoint, Jeshion (2004, 2009).

[i]n 1954 Karla Wege, who was a student at the Institute for Meteorology of the Free University (FU) Berlin and later weather moderator at the ZDF (Second German Television), suggested to name all vortices, both lows and highs in Central Europe. At that time the Institute of Meteorology of the FU Berlin was in charge of issuing comprehensive weather forecasts for the Berlin region. Since 1954 the Institute named lows with female names and highs with male names to track pressure systems in the weather charts more easily [...] Until the 1990s this practise was used exclusively by Berlin's newspapers, local radio stations and TV-media. Severe storms, such as "Vivien" and "Wiebke" changed this habit and since then the names have been commonly used by German [i.e., national] media.

Somewhat earlier Americans shifted to naming tropical storms in an alternating way, i.e., giving male and female names, but only when the storms reached a threatening stage. Things being not quite the same here, FU meteorologists traditionally name all vortices, termed lows and highs, that influence the Central European weather.

In 1998, a debate began as to whether it was discrimination to name the highs with "good weather" with male names and lows with "bad weather" with female names. The issue was resolved by giving the lows male names and the highs female names in odd years, and vice versa in even years.

In November 2002, "Aktion Wetterpate (Adopt-a-Vortex)" was born. Now the public had the opportunity to [...] adopt highs or lows. Since March 2002, we don't use the names from our old lists. We make an alphabetical list of all the suggested names. To suggest a name (or to adopt a name), a fee has to be paid [...] [W]ith this regular income we are able to maintain "the Students Observation Service" at the Weather Station 10381 (Berlin-Dahlem) [...].

The names that are given (= adopted) are published in the "Berliner Wetterkarte" and are available for use by any weather services or media (newspapers, radio, TV, internet). This practice has been well established for over 50 years and maintaining it is requested not only by the German Weather Service or by the commercial service providers but also, by the public. Apart from the US-Weather Service, the Institute of Meteorology is the only source for named vortices worldwide.<sup>6</sup>

It was around the second week of April that such a practice began to be famous in Italy, due to the attention devoted by mass media to one of the atmospheric disturbances catalogued by the German institute as "lows" with female names (2012 is indeed an even year)—*Lucia*, named on April

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<sup>6</sup> *History of Naming Weather Systems*: <http://www.met.fu-berlin.de/adopt-a-vortex/historie/> (original German version, *Geschichte der Namensvergabe*, at: <http://www.met.fu-berlin.de/wetterpate/historie/>).

12 after the proposal of one Lucia Schmidt.<sup>7</sup>

### The Italian controversy

Therefore, it was somewhat surprising that the following “high” (anticyclone), coming from Morocco (where it started on April 24) and officially known as *Ignaz* in Berlin,<sup>8</sup> began to be called *Hannibal* by a popular Italian weather forecast website (*IlMeteo.it*). This fact immediately caused the polemical reply of a famous Italian forecaster, Colonel Mario Giuliacci, who wrote of a “random invention” (“Si chiama IGNAZ—e non Hannibal, nome inventato a casaccio da qualcuno,”<sup>9</sup> quoted in Caridi 2012c), followed by other meteorological sites, which explained that the anticyclone

[...] si chiama “Ignaz” e non affatto “Hannibal,” frutto della libera e gratuita invenzione di altri siti di meteorologia a cui i mass-media generalisti danno fin troppo credito.<sup>10</sup> (Caridi 2012d; cf. also Marchetti and Gervasi 2012)

But how and why was *Ignaz* renamed *Hannibal*? As regards the naming methods, it was not a random invention but the result of a proper poll announced by the website *IlMeteo.it* among its registered users, who were able to choose between two different names proposed by the site managers. As regards the name itself, though someone thought it was inspired by Hannibal Lecter—the cannibalistic serial killer of the famous film *The Silence of the Lambs*—probably due to the expected “violence” of the hot anticyclone (Caridi 2012b<sup>11</sup>), the reference was to the historical

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<sup>7</sup> For the Italian reception of the name *Lucia* see Caridi (2012a); for the meteorological description of this cyclone see Ilmer (2012). The full 2012 cyclone names list can be found at: <http://www.met.fu-berlin.de/adopt-a-vortex/tief/#aktuell>. For a general introduction to meteorology in Italian mass media (particularly television), see Riso (1999).

<sup>8</sup> The name has been chosen by a commercial brand (see the 2012 anticyclone names list at: <http://www.met.fu-berlin.de/adopt-a-vortex/hoch/#aktuell>); for the description of *Ignaz* see Treinzen (2012).

<sup>9</sup> [Its name is Ignaz—and not Hannibal, a name randomly invented by someone].

<sup>10</sup> [[...] its name is “Ignaz” and not “Hannibal” at all, fruit of the free and gratuitous invention of other meteorological websites, held in even too high esteem by generalist mass media].

<sup>11</sup> The cited article quotes another Italian meteorologist, Lt. Colonel Massimo Morico, who said: “questo nuovo anticiclone Africano [sic] è stato chiamato Hannibal, ma non preoccupatevi, non sarà come Hannibal Lecter, assassino seriale



Carthaginian leader who fought against the Romans (Brizzi 1994). This is clearly shown by the name of the second hot anticyclone that arrived in Italy on June 16, called *Scipione* (Scipio) after the Roman winner of the Second Punic War, who was nicknamed *Africanus* (Scullard 1930). Just like *Hannibal*, *Scipione* too came from Africa (Cascioli 2012; Vitali 2012).<sup>12</sup>

The “invention” of *Scipione* (actually *Stefan*, according to the Berlin Institute) triggered (besides the joy of people keen on the ancient Roman army [see *RomanArmyTalk* 2012]) a further, deeper controversy, concerning not only the name itself but also the scientific value of such a practice. Caridi (2012e), for instance, after recalling the authority of the Berlin Institute, wrote:

Ci chiediamo quindi che senso abbia continuare a chiamare le figure bariche in modo autonomo, senza alcun tipo di autorizzazione, completamente a piacere e per fantasia, senza rispettare invece i precisi regolamenti internazionali.<sup>13</sup>

The possible answers to this question might go very far from the original purposes of naming weather systems (Cascioli 2012 wrote about media strategies aiming at increasing people’s fears and economic

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con l’ossessione di mangiare carne umana. Sarà un Hannibal buono che porterà sole e temperature superiori di 8/10°C rispetto alla media del periodo. Potevano chiamarlo Biancaneve [...]” [This new African anticyclone was named Hannibal, but do not worry, it will not be like Hannibal Lecter, serial killer with the obsession of eating human flesh. It will be a good Hannibal, which will bring sunny weather and temperatures of 8/10°C above the average of the period. They could have named it Snow White [...]].

<sup>12</sup> A further interesting issue is the reason why the first anticyclone was called *Hannibal*, i.e., with an English spelling, and not *Annibale*. It is very likely due to the well-known Italian fashion of giving things English names to let them bear an exotic charm: it is worth noting that the “official” name of the aforesaid cyclone *Lucia* was wrongly reported as *Lucy* by several media (Caridi 2012a; vd. infra). Since all the following phenomena were given an Italian name, it is conceivable that *Hannibal* could have been a sort of test of public opinion (I thank Dr. Margherita Centenari for having suggested such an interpretation). For the impact of anglicising Italian words (and of analogy) on the wider public, see the case of “outcipit,” wrongly coined as the opposite of “incipit,” studied by Astori (2008).

<sup>13</sup> [We therefore wonder if it makes sense to go on naming baric systems autonomously, without any kind of authorisation, completely to someone’s liking and fantasy, not respecting any precise international regulations instead].

business<sup>14</sup>). At the same time, the managers of the accused website claimed their freedom (if not their right<sup>15</sup>) to name weather phenomena, since the German practice appears to be a customary tradition and not a binding authority (“Saleo” 2012).

But, keeping (pseudo-)legal and scientific matters apart, the debate has been focused mainly on the naming process, so much that a neologism has been coined by its detractors to express such a practice—“meteonomia” (the word does not exist in English; see the Etymological Appendix for further notes about it). As Colonel Giuliacci ironically wrote:

È appena nata una nuova disciplina scientifica: la meteonomia [...]. Gli esperti di questa materia, i Meteorologi, sono quotidianamente impegnati nella difficile ricerca di assegnare un nome agli anticicloni provenienti dall’Africa. È evidente a questo punto l’inutilità dei Meteorologi, i quali perdono il loro tempo invece a descrivere quale tempo porteranno questi anticicloni una volta giunti sull’Italia (Giuliacci 2012a; cf. Pascucci 2012, and more polemics against impressing

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<sup>14</sup> “[...] dare un nome a una perturbazione evoca subito una minaccia, un pericolo da cui ci si deve in qualche modo difendere, il che spinge l’opinione pubblica alla richiesta di maggiori informazioni che, a loro volta, tendono a essere sempre più estreme, sempre più catastrofiche [...]. Da giorni [...] si susseguono servizi tv sulla grande ondata di caldo in arrivo, e dargli un nome aiuta ad evocare scenari da emergenza planetaria: la scienza ridotta a strumento del circo mediatico. È un circolo vizioso che alimenta da una parte le ansie e le paure della popolazione e dall’altra gli affari di chi sull’ossessione meteo ci sta costruendo una fortuna” [Naming a disturbance immediately evokes a threat, a danger against which people have to defend themselves somehow, so that public opinion is urged to ask for more and more information which, in turn, tends to be more and more extreme and catastrophic. For days, TV reports about the forthcoming great heat wave follow one another, and giving it a name helps to evoke scenarios of planetary emergencies: science is reduced to a media circus. It is a vicious cycle that nourishes, on the one hand, people’s anxieties and fears and, on the other hand, the business of those who are getting rich thanks to meteorological obsessions]. See also Caridi (2012f).

<sup>15</sup> See the title of a press note by AdnKronos’ portal *ItalyGlobalNation* on June 20: “*ilMeteo.it ottiene il diritto consuetudinario di assegnare i nomi alle alte e basse pressioni per l’Italia*” [ilMeteo.it got the customary right of naming highs and lows for Italy] (<http://urly.it/1gu8>). This is completely wrong; it seems that the site’s lawyers wrote to the Berlin Institute to ask for clarifications and they were answered that such a practice is customary, but since German meteorologists do not hold any right they cannot give it to anyone else. It was also wrong to say that *ilMeteo.it* has a “customary” right to name weather phenomena, since its practice started no more than two months before. This is a clear example of how the meteorological controversy spread together with evident imprecisions, as in *BlitzQuotidiano* (2012a), where it is said that the Berlin Institute allows European states to choose any names they want.

naming in Marchetti and Gervasi 2012).

Sono evidenti i vantaggi: conoscere il nome dell'anticiclone africano in arrivo sull'Italia conta molto di più degli effetti del medesimo sull'Italia [...] (Giuliaci 2012b).<sup>16</sup>

### Further on in the controversy

The main point of the diatribe is the highly evocative power of the names chosen by *IlMeteo.it*, which retrieved historical (and later mythological) classical figures in contrast with the aseptic sobriety of the “scientific” tradition, relying on “common” proper male names, compared to which the former rise to the status of impressive—and impressing—nicknames (*BlitzQuotidiano* 2012b: “i nomi delle ondate di caldo [...] ispirano tutto tranne che simpatia”<sup>17</sup>). Such a status of undoubted and strong impact on mass media and public opinion clearly showed itself on the occasion of the third important high pressure vortex that came over Italy from Africa on June 29 (*Volker*, according to the Berlin Institute). This one was called *Caronte* (Charon), after the ferryman of the dead in Etrusco-Roman religion and in Dante Alighieri’s *Commedia* (Vagni 2005; see also Sullivan 1950).

The “invention” of *Caronte* came with the utmost controversy: meteorologist Andrea Corigliano published a false poster announcing the death of meteorology (Caridi 2012g) and many other websites, both of weather forecast services and important newspapers, reported the debate (Caridi 2012h; *Corriere.it* 2012; Cristofari 2012; “Milo” 2012; Ottaviano 2012; Scutiero 2012). There was also a direct reply by *IlMeteo.it* editor A. Sanò (Cortellari 2012). People began to pay attention to the cultural *milieu* from which the names were taken: Pieretti (2012) spoke of “i colossi della mitologia classica” [colossuses of classical mythology], and Vitali (2012) wrote about the “neoclassical trend” of Italian meteorology, briefly explaining the historical or mythological background of Scipio, Charon and Minos, the name (*Minosse*) chosen for the new heat wave of the

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<sup>16</sup> [A new scientific discipline has just been born: “meteonymy”. Experts on such a subject, “Meteonymists”, daily devote themselves to the difficult study of naming anticyclones from Africa. At this point, the uselessness of Meteorologists is salient, as they waste their time describing what kind of weather such anticyclones will bring in Italy. Advantages are evident: knowing the name of the forthcoming anticyclone matters much more than its effects on Italy]. See the reply on the *IlMeteo.it* forum (<http://forum.ilmeteo.it/showthread.php?t=177061>).

<sup>17</sup> [Heat wave names inspire everything but liking].



second week of July,<sup>18</sup> which led to the now usual debate (e.g., Mercalli 2012; Pieretti 2012).

In fact, the name *Caronte* seems inspired by Dante's poem rather than by the classical antiquity (as A. Sanò himself said in Cortellari 2012<sup>19</sup>; the image of fire is clear in Dante's description of Charon's eyes; see Vagni 2005: 579). Though in Greek mythology Minos was a king/judge of the Netherworld (Homer XI 568-571), it is in Dante's *Inferno* that the hell (in which he acts as a judge, cf. Padoan 2005), full of fire, conveys the idea of terrible heat: "come il giudice dell'Inferno dantesco, [Minosse] deciderà da qui a giorni la nostra rovente 'punizione'"<sup>20</sup> (Pieretti 2012). This is the basis of the analogy on which the entire system of meteorological nicknames is built: they should recall, at least in the creators' intentions,<sup>21</sup> traditional sources of heat (Africa and hell):

Prima di lui, Caronte occhi di bragia ci aveva traghettato negli inferi di un'estate bollente. L'antenato è Scipione, quello africano, che ci ha messo in ginocchio come fece con Annibale, ma a colpi di giornate torride.<sup>22</sup> (Pieretti 2012)

And while some provocative proposals suggested to name forthcoming anticyclones after Greek-Roman gods related to fire and heat (*Ephaistos*: *MeteoLive* 2012; *Vulcanus*: Giuliacci 2012b), the trend was further confirmed by *Ulisse* (Ulysses), which seemed to be Dante's character rolled up in a

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<sup>18</sup> The anticyclone recorded in the Berlin list after *Volker* is *Wolfgang*; it started on June 30.

<sup>19</sup> "Il nome Caronte è legato alla figura del traghettatore dell'Ade presente nell'inferno dantesco. Caronte 'dagli occhi di brace' [sic], come il caldo che infiamma le nostre città in questi giorni, ma anche l'anticiclone che ci traghetta, appunto, nel cuore dell'estate" [The name Charon is linked to the character of the infernal ferryman in Dante's *Inferno*. Burning-eyed Charon is like the burning heat we are having these days, as well as the anticyclone that ferries us in the heart of the summer].

<sup>20</sup> [Minos, the judge of the Dantean "Inferno," will decide the red-hot punishment for us in a few days].

<sup>21</sup> An interesting misunderstanding is that in *BlitzQuotidiano* (2012b), where Minos' dreadfulness is recalled through the image of the Minotaur, and not that of the infernal judge. In fact, there seems to be a difference between the Homeric Minos, the king/judge borrowed by Virgil's *Aeneid*, and thence by Dante's *Inferno*, on the one hand, and Minos the well-known king of Crete, on the other (at least according to Forsdyke 1952: 17).

<sup>22</sup> [Before him, burning-eyed Charon ferried us in a burning summer's underworld. Their ancestor was Scipio, the African one, who brought us to our knees as he did with Hannibal, but striking us with sweltering days].

flame (Fubini 2005) rather than the Greek hero. “Più che un’Estate sembra la Divina Commedia” [Rather than summer, it looks like the *Divine Comedy*], as someone posted on Twitter at the time. Francalacci (2012) was more explicit, writing about the “temperature bollenti descritte nell’Inferno della Divina Commedia” [burning temperatures described in the *Divine Comedy’s* “Inferno”].

In fact, it is worth noting that in the poll related to this anticyclone (<http://forum.ilmeteo.it/showthread.php?t=176834>) a choice had to be made between *Ulysses* and *Cerbero* (“Cerberus”), and the winner was the latter (65.44% vs 43.56%). Many users claimed that “Cerberus” was more appropriate, since the infernal dog was as dreadful and untameable as the new heat wave would be, and Ulysses was seen as a “good” character, even though some people suggested a sort of continuity with *Circe*, a prior cyclonic vortex from Finland.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, “Cerberus” would have been clearly linked to the same infernal environment as *Charon’s* and *Minos*,<sup>24</sup> but *Ulysses* was passed to the media despite the poll results. Was this for its commercial appeal or for the Dantean trend?

A shift is registered in the following “high,” called *Nerone* after the Roman emperor Nero who was allegedly charged of having burnt Rome (Cizek 1982: 306-309). It is somewhat surprising that the next one was named *Caligola* (Caligula), a Roman emperor well-known for his madness and cruelty (similar to a tradition about Nero; cf. Cizek 1982: 16-19), but in no way connected with heat or fire (SMTV 2012, however, speaks of “filone neoclassico,” a ‘neoclassical trend’).

The Dantean trend continued with *Lucifero* (Lucifer, cf. Ciotti 2005), the last heat wave of the summer (August 20-24<sup>25</sup>), and *Beatrice*, the following low pressure system (feminine, in compliance with the aforesaid rule<sup>26</sup>), which according to the symbolism of Dante’s character (Vallone 2005), “saved” Italy from the infernal heat from August 24 onwards (“L’infernale Lucifero verrà spazzato via dalla fresca Beatrice” [infernal

<sup>23</sup> *Circe* occurred around July 24, and its relationship with the powerful magician of the *Odyssey* (also cited by Dante, cf. Martina 2005) is probably to be found in the fair strength of the expected storms (see the related forecast on *IlMeteo.it*, July 19, at: <http://urly.it/1gtr>). For the Berlin Institute, the name recorded was *Rhiannon* (July 17), after a certain Rhiannon Smith.

<sup>24</sup> It is noteworthy that someone suggested using the English spelling “Cerberus,” because it “fa più effetto” [is more impressive]. See above for statements about *Hannibal*.

<sup>25</sup> For the Berlin Institute, the name was *Achim* (August 16), after a certain Hans-Joachim Grunert.

<sup>26</sup> For the Berlin Institute, the name was *Aurelia* (August 22), proposed by an anonymous contributor.

Lucifer will be swept away by fresh Beatrice] is the title of a corresponding forecast on *IlMeteo.it*, available at: <http://urly.it/1gtn>).

### Charon's semantics

The successful outcome of this series of nicknames is undoubted, even outside Italy.<sup>27</sup> If one tries to search for *Caronte* on Twitter, the most popular social network, about 1,600 hashtags will occur for the week between July 5 and July 13. They partly recall Dante (speaking of “i mostri dell’inferno di Dante,” quoting *Inf.* V 4: “Stavvi Minòs orribilmente, e ringhia [...],” asking “dopo Caronte e Minosse quale personaggio dantesco ci arroventerà?”) and partly classical mythology (“Eolo spazza via Caronte,” “ieri sembrava ci fosse Zeus,” “mitologia e storia antica per il caldo”<sup>28</sup>), but the mostly evoked imagery is that of the ferryman of the dead: “Caronte traghettatore dell’Ade di morti; dilla tutta, ti hanno chiamato per sterminarci con il caldo boia”; “Caronte il traghettatore delle ‘anime migranti’ nel Mediterraneo”; “altro che Caronte questo ci sta traghettando in un’altra dimensione [...] quella africana”; “il prossimo anticiclone potete chiamarlo Schettino nel caso sia peggiore di Caronte” (joking about the name of the infamous captain responsible for the shipwreck at Isola del Giglio); “Caronte mi ha buttato in acqua mentre mi traghettava,”<sup>29</sup> and so on. Moreover, according to *BlitzQuotidiano* (2012b), anticyclone *Caronte* is dreadful because it recalls *Charon* as “traghettatore dei morti” [ferryman of the dead] with no reference to heat; and even where the latter idea is expressed, the image of the ferryman, albeit metaphorical, is still salient: “sarà proprio Caronte che, come il traghettatore infernale dagli Occhi di Brace, ci porterà dritti al cuore dell’Estate” (*NonBlog* 2012), or from Twitter: “Caronte è scappato dall’inferno, le anime dovranno attraversare l’Acheronte a nuoto.”<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> An American Twitter user posted: “Europeans much better at naming extreme weather events than US. Charon, Nero, Lucifer vs Stan, Edna, Fifi.”

<sup>28</sup> [Monsters of Dante’s *Inferno*; After Charon and Minos, which Dantean character will make us red-hot?; Aeolus sweeps Charon away; it seemed that there was Zeus yesterday; Mythology and ancient history for the hot weather].

<sup>29</sup> [Charon, you ferryman of the dead, tell it all: they called you thus so that you’ll kill us off with this scorching heat; Charon the ferryman of the souls, migrant over the Mediterranean; Charon, no way, he is ferrying us to another planet [...] the African one; You can give the next anticyclone the name “Schettino” in case it will be worse than Charon; Charon threw me in the water while he was ferrying me].

<sup>30</sup> [This will be like Charon; just as the infernal burning-eyed ferryman, it will take us to the heart of the summer; Charon ran away from hell, souls will have to swim across the Acheron].

This is in line with the traditional Italian imagery about Charon, which usually carries, rather than the negative idea of hell's heat, the neutral one of either "crossing" or "conveying."<sup>31</sup> Indeed, it is the name of a company that operates ferries across the Strait of Messina (<http://www.carontetourist.it>), and though the latter is the seat of the monsters Scylla and Charybdis, the reference to Charon must not convey the idea of "hell" as it is generally understood. The same remarks can be made about a company of land transport that chose *Charon* as its own brand name (<http://www.caronte.eu>). It is worth citing two 2012 police operations, both named *Caronte* and related to illegal sea transports, i.e., drug smuggling (*Latina*, May 3, 2012: <http://www.latinatoday.it/cronaca/operazione-caronte-droga-transportata-formia-3-maggio-2012.html>) and trade in human beings (*La Spezia*, July 11, 2012: [http://www.gdf.it/gdf/it/rss/ultime\\_notizie/info1294929017.html](http://www.gdf.it/gdf/it/rss/ultime_notizie/info1294929017.html)). The old Etruscan demon appears also as the firm name of various funeral agencies<sup>32</sup> (retrievable after a quick search on *Google*), and it is clear that in this case the analogy relies on the positive (or, anyway, not negative) idea of the journey to the afterlife.

Nevertheless, after the outbreak of the "meteorological" fashion, we can find Charon associated with the negative image of hell (in Twitter posts): "Che Caronte sia tornato all'inferno?"; "con Caronte e Minosse abbiamo esaurito l'inferno"; "ho il sospetto che casa mia sia l'anticamera dell'inferno, Scipione Caronte e Minosse sono tutti riuniti in salotto"; "altro che Caronte [...] il demonio ha scatenato l'inferno!"; "prima Scipione, poi Caronte, mo' Minosse, ce manca solo il diavolo in persona," "la prossima settimana voglio Ade in persona,"<sup>33</sup> and so on.

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<sup>31</sup> An extreme example of such an imagery is provided by Marius (2012), administrator of a website devoted to "mysteries" (very *à la mode*), who after having quoted a passage from *Wikipedia* about Charon as the ferryman of the dead, cryptically writes: "Dopo questa lettura, si può affermare che sia solo un caso che gli è stato dato il nome di Caronte al caldo estivo di questi giorni? o in realtà sotto sotto c'è qualcosa di più? ricordiamo che gli illuminati si divertono ad usare nomi e date precise per certi avvenimenti che stanno per arrivare" [After such a reading, can we state that it is an accident that they gave the name Charon to the summer heat of these days? Or on the contrary, on a whispering tone, could we presume there is something more? Remember that the Illuminati enjoy using particular names and dates for certain forthcoming events].

<sup>32</sup> Caronte is also the name of a piece of software for this field (<http://www.intersail.it/scheda-prodotto/caronte>), but also of a police operation (at Lucera in 2009) against frauds in cemeteries (<http://www.funerali.org/?p=3742>).

<sup>33</sup> [Maybe Charon went back to the hell; With Charon and Minos, hell broke loose; I guess my home is the waiting room of hell: Scipio, Charon, and Minos are all together in my living room; Charon, no way! [...] the devil caused hell!; First

Our investigation has revealed how such a media campaign partially changed the Italian imagery about Charon from a prevailing analogy with “crossing” and “ferrying” (mostly by sea), to the negative idea of “hell” and “heat.” The entire practice of giving impressive/impressing names to weather systems altered the very purpose of such a tradition—media visibility (either of meteorological phenomena or of the name givers) rather than efficient communication and early warning. Nevertheless, the classical background of this new onomastic field is very interesting; the rediscovery of ancient Greek-Roman history and mythology, which are reinterpreted and filtered through the work of the “father” of the Italian language, Dante.<sup>34</sup>

### **Etymological Appendix: “Meteonomia” vs “meteoronimìa”**

As said before, a neologism has been created to ironically refer to the new fashionable Italian practice of giving weather systems impressive, mostly classical names—“meteonomia.”<sup>35</sup> It is an “erudite compound”<sup>36</sup> in which the first part is taken from the typical beginning of words related to weather, just as in *meteorologia* “meteorology” or *meteoropatia* “meteoropathy.” The original first term, *meteoro-*, has simply been abbreviated according to a common practice (in Italian the word *meteo* usually identifies, in an abbreviated form that is similar to a “clipping process,”<sup>37</sup> anything concerning

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Scipio, then Charon, and now Minos: all we need now is the devil himself; For the next week I want Hades himself].

<sup>34</sup> This statement is valid for all the cases, including *Lucifero* and *Beatrice*. For the following phenomena, naming turned to pure Roman culture. *Poppea*, Nero's wife, was used after *Beatrice*, and the following anticyclone was named *Bacco*, after Bacchus, the Roman god of wine (Petri 2012). For the reception of classical themes in Dante, see, e.g., Villa (1995).

<sup>35</sup> The term is unattested before Col. Giuliacci's web post (see above). English occurrences of “meteonymy” found online are just mistakes for “metronomy.”

<sup>36</sup> ‘Erudite compounds’ (“composti dotti”) are those “creati combinando in modo originale unità lessicali e morfologiche proprie delle lingue classiche” [created by means of combining lexical and morphological units peculiar to classical languages in a new way] (Bombi 1993: 159).

<sup>37</sup> A “clipping process” is the wrong division of a lexeme to create a new affixoid/suffixoid or a new word; see Bombi (1993: 165ff). On the formation of *meteo* in Italian see, e.g., Thornton (1996: 87), Fanfani (2001: 102) and Radimský (2007: 113-114). For current definitions of both *meteoro-* and *meteo* see *Vocabolario Treccani* (ibid.). It is worth noting the occurrence in common use of the wrong form *meteopatia* for *meteoropatia* (roughly more than 12,000 instances, easily



weather forecasts).

The suffixoid<sup>38</sup> is related, in the creator's intentions, to the practice of naming. Indeed it sounds like Italian *nome* "name," making the word mean something like "weather naming." But the terms ending in *-nomia* have a very different meaning; such a term, linked to the ancient Greek *νέμω* "to rule":

[è] impiegato ... nella denominazione di alcune discipline con il valore di 'studio dell'insieme di regole che governano un ambito, una struttura, un sistema' (*astronomia, economia, gastronomia*)<sup>39</sup> (Iacobini 2004: 93).

*Vocabolario Treccani* is more detailed in defining it:

**-nomìa** [dal gr[eco] *-νομία*, der. di *νέμω* 'amministrare, reggere']. – Secondo elemento di parole composte, derivate dal greco (come *autonomia, astronomia, economia*, ecc.) o formate modernamente (come *agronomia, biblioteconomia, tassonomia* o *tassinomia*, ecc.), nelle quali ha il sign[ificato] di 'governo,' 'modo di amministrare,' 'modo di distribuire ordinatamente' e sim.<sup>40</sup>

Such a compound is therefore a clearly wrong analogical re-composition,<sup>41</sup> influenced by the speakers' common use; if we look for an ending related to onomastics, we have to refer to *-onimìa*, which is in fact very similar to *-nomia*, but in its derivation from Greek *ὄνομα* "name," it is defined by *Vocabolario Treccani* as follows:

**-onimìa** [der[ivato] di *-onimo*]. – Secondo elemento di parole composte che rappresentano il sost[antivo] femm[inile] astratto dei corrispondenti composti

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traceable on performing a Google search). For the parallel case in French see Hug (1971: 99-100), Trescases (1976: 704-705) and Armitage (1990, 1029).

<sup>38</sup> See Bombi (1993: 162-163) and Iacobini (2011). On the difficulty of defining such combining forms see Iacobini (2004: 70-71).

<sup>39</sup> [It is used in the names of certain disciplines with the meaning of "study of the set of rules which control an ambit, a structure, or a system" (*astronomy, economy, gastronomy*)].

<sup>40</sup> [From Greek *-νομία*, derived from *νέμω* 'to rule, to govern.' Second element of compounds, derived from Greek (like *autonomy, astronomy, economy* etc.), or a modern formation (like *agronomy, biblioteconomy, taxonomy* etc.), in which it bears the meaning of 'government,' 'way of administrating,' 'way of distributing according to an order' and similar ideas].

<sup>41</sup> "Re-composition" designates the extrapolation of combining terms and their reuse in a new compound (Bombi 1993: 161ff.).

in *-onimo* (per es[empio] *anonimia*).<sup>42</sup>

**-ònimo** [dal gr[eco] *-ώνυμος*, der[ivato] di *ὄνομα, ὄνυμα* ‘nome’].— Secondo elemento di parole composte, derivate dal greco (come *anonimo, eteronimo, omonimo, pseudonimo*), o formate modernamente (ecc.), che significa ‘nome’, variamente determinato dal primo componente. Alcuni di questi composti hanno un corrispondente sost[antivo] femm[inile] astratto terminante in *-onimìa* [...], di derivazione greca (come *anonimia, eteronimia*); in rari casi, *-onimia* è usato come suffissoide autonomo (per es[esempio], in *odonimia*).<sup>43</sup>

Therefore, a neologism referring to “names” would have been *\*meteoronimia*,<sup>44</sup> yet it would be not completely appropriate, since—as explained before—such an ending rather implies the idea of “defining a kind of name” or a “set of names” (like *-onomastica*), and sometimes of the “study of names” (i.e., particular applications of *onomastics*), as in the examples of *odonimia* (streets), *antroponimia* (people), *zoonimia* (animals) (see *Vocabolario Treccani*, *ibid.*). Anyway, Thornton (2004) seems to use *antroponimia, toponima* and *econimia* (“names of commercial brands”) with the meaning of “naming” as well. It is clear that it is not easy to find a single, exact term to identify the practice of naming weather systems. However, the most scientifically correct one, should anyone want to define such a concept, would be “*\*meteoronimia*”, that is, “*\*meteoronymy*.”

<sup>42</sup> [Der. from *-onimo*. Second element of compounds being the abstract feminine noun of the corresponding compounds ending in *-onimo* (for example *anonymity*)].

<sup>43</sup> [From Greek *-ώνυμος*, der. from *ὄνομα, ὄνυμα* ‘name.’ Second element of compounds, derived from Greek (like *anonymous, heteronymous, homonymous, pseudonym*) or a modern formation (*hagionym, cryptonym, hydronym, toponym*), meaning ‘name,’ variously determined based on the first component. Some of these compounds have a corresponding feminine abstract noun ending in *-onimìa*, derived from Greek (like *anonymity, heteronymity*); in rare cases, *-onimìa* is used as an autonomous suffix (for example, in *hodonymy*)].

<sup>44</sup> “*Meteonimia*” has three occurrences on the Internet, but two of them are Spanish mistakes for *metonimia* “*metonymy*”: <http://www.xuletas.es/ficha/el-chico>; <http://foros.monografias.com/archive/index.php/t-20574.html>; <http://tellsPELL.com/spanish/metonimia/57220> (the last one belongs to a list of common misspellings for “*metonimia*”).

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ONOMASTICS  
*in*  
CONTEMPORARY  
PUBLIC SPACE

Edited by

OLIVIU FELECAN and  
ALINA BUGHEȘIU

# Onomastics in Contemporary Public Space

Edited by

Oliviu Felecan and Alina Bugheşiu

**CAMBRIDGE**  
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