

**ENGLISH
METRISTS, PP. 1-118**

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English Metrists, pp. 1-118 by T. S. Omond

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ENGLISH METRISTS

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BY
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P R E F A C E .

THE following pages contain what was meant to form part of the "historical and bibliographical sketch of English Metrical Criticism" referred to in the last paragraph introductory to my *Study of Metre* (Grant Richards, 1903).

Circumstances with which I need not trouble the reader compel me to postpone continuing this sketch. As the first part is fairly complete in itself, deals with comparatively unfamiliar books, and includes a fuller list of Elizabethan quantitative writers than has yet appeared, I print it here (Section I.), in hope partly of aiding fellow-students, partly of benefiting by their criticism of its many shortcomings.

Section II. (bibliographical) is carried down to the present day, and forms the skeleton on which I was working. This at least, I trust, will be found useful. Mistakes and omissions are doubtless inevitable. I shall be particularly glad to receive notice of any serious ones, but "de minimis non curandum" must perforce be one's motto.

It will be understood that both Sections are in rough draft, awaiting revision and recasting. Disproportionate space may seem given to pseudo-Classic metres, but till lately our metrical critics concerned themselves mainly with this question. Real phonetic study of our verse belongs almost entirely to the last half-century.

The notes in Section II. are intended as guides to show contents, not as final criticisms. Even so, apology is due for seeming to pass judgment on living writers.

For the benefit of reviewers, let me add that my interest in this subject did not begin yesterday, and need not be supposed due to recent publications, such as Mr. Stone's essay (1898) or Mr. McKerrow's study (1901-2). The former I hailed with delight when it appeared, but differ profoundly from its conclusions. To the latter I owe the identification of "F.S." with Francis Sabie (p. 23), and my knowledge of twelve lines by "L.G." (p. 30). Except where specified, I am not aware of having borrowed from these or other treatises; my facts and views (for what they may be worth) are derived from my own reading.

This impression is printed mainly for private distribution, but any one desiring a copy can obtain it by forwarding nineteenpence (one penny for postage) to my publisher. The demand is not likely to exceed the supply.

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P.S.—My manuscript went to press in May last, though publication had to be delayed. This will explain the paucity of references to recent verse, particularly to that of Mr. Robert Bridges. It is indeed interesting to find such a writer revive the "Classic" heresy; and one may admire the skill and boldness, while predicting the futility, of his attempt. Even from his own standpoint, I must think that he departs from the purity of Mr. Stone's rules, by letting accent sometimes override quantity; and, by adoption of colloquial slurrings, debases our already debilitated vocalisation. In at least one respect, however, his experiments easily transcend those of his many predecessors. No specimens of quantitative verse that I know of in English attain to anything like so high a level of poetry.

SECTION I.—HISTORICAL.

English metrical criticism practically begins with the Elizabethans. Nothing before that date needs notice here. Aldhelm and Bede wrote on Latin verse, nor during the long centuries when our language was making need we expect to find self-conscious analysis. Creation must precede criticism, since the critic does not invent rules, only infers them from practice. Even the work of Chaucer and his followers originated no school of grammarians. The earliest separate treatise on English verse seems to have been the little tract of George Gascoigne (1575).^{*} Books on the subject-matter of poetry—figures, tropes, and the like—were not wanting prior to this date, but I do not know any of these which contains an actual reference to verse-structure.

Even before Gascoigne wrote, however, a movement had arisen which threatened to revolutionize our verse entirely. A serious attempt was made to substitute for native measures the "quantitative" structures of ancient Greece and Rome. The beginnings of our metrical analysis synchronised with and were powerfully affected by this attempt. Nearly every subsequent writer on English prosody has referred to this attempt, and has spent much time comparing English

^{*} For particulars of this and all books mentioned later see chronological list (Section II.)

Wherever possible, my references are to the cheap and handy volumes known as "*Arber's Reprints*," which can be obtained from Constable & Co., Westminster.

with Classical verse in respect of form. Convenience, therefore, as well as chronological accuracy, requires us to deal with this movement first. It will be possible to trace it to its early conclusion before returning to begin with George Gascoigne the more familiar and orthodox developments of regular prosody.

A reference in the *Scholemaster* (Arber's Reprint, p. 144) of Roger Ascham (1515-68) shows us, some forty years before Gascoigne wrote, a band of young students at St. John's College, Cambridge, prominent among them Ascham himself and Cheke (who later "taught Cambridge, and King Edward, Greek"), discussing the possibility of remodelling English metre. 'These men were scholars, but not pedants. Cheke discarded traditional pronunciation of the Classics, substituting that convenient if barbarous vocalisation which still parts us from Continental Hellenists. And he and his compeers were equally ready to abandon "rude beggarly ryming, brought first into Italie by Goths and Huns," and devise other forms of verse.*

Ascham recalls longingly his "sweet time spent at Cambridge," and talks with such men as Cheke and "mine old friend Mr. Watson" (Thomas Watson, not the Elizabethan poet of same name, but the prelate who took active part in the ecclesiastical troubles of his day, and was probably at the time this was written a prisoner in the Tower), and quotes a couplet by the

* Sir Thos. More is said to have favoured the movement, and Cheke's friend Sir Thos. Smith probably helped. About the same time Ronsard and others made a similar attempt in France, while the work of Trissino in Italy was a little earlier, and may have inspired the others. At any rate, the idea was afoot, and scholars in all nations soon caught it up.

latter which may rank as the earliest specimen of English "hexameter" verse known to us—

All travelers do gladly report great praise of Ulysses,
For that he knew many men's manners, and saw many cities.*

No doubt Cheke and Ascham taught orally to their pupils the expediency of adopting quantitative measures. Their teaching spread, and became fashionable. By the end of the Sixteenth Century's third quarter, a society calling itself "Areopagus"—of which Sidney, Dyer, and Drant † were leaders, Spenser and Abraham Fraunce pupils—was making an earnest attempt in this direction, and the *Arcadia* of Sidney (probably written about 1580) contains many pieces framed on Classic models.‡

What was the aim and meaning of this attempt? We read lines like Watson's with a smile at their halting accents, and probably condemn them as doggerel. But this is to prejudge matters. The halting accents were part of the scheme, or at least not inconsistent with it. The scheme itself was no ignoble one. Enthusiastic over the lately rediscovered Greek literature, these men found it recorded that the Romans, already possessing metres of their own, threw them aside on becoming acquainted with Greek verse, and adopted the rhythms and measures of the latter. Why should not England do likewise? Our language was still rude, chaotic, formless. The glories

* *Ibid.*, p. 73.

† Neither Dyer nor Drant left anything to quote in the present connection. The others will be referred to again later.

‡ The late Dr. Whewell (*Macmillan's Magazine*, August, 1882) speaks of the "great mass of elegiacs" written by *Surrey*. Is not this a slip for *Sidney*?

so soon to be revealed were hidden. It was not unnatural to suppose that for us, too, salvation lay in following Greek guidance. Chaucer was our Livius Andronicus; might not our Lucretius, Catullus, Virgil come with the new measures? If a dream, it was greatly conceived; a magnificent ideal, however impossible to realise. We must comprehend its intention before criticising its methods.

Essentially, however, it was a scholars' movement. Pride of caste reinforced love of letters. Inception and execution alike rested with them; they alone had the keys of the new knowledge. Any ignorant person can "easily reckon up fourteen syllables, and easily stumble on every rhyme"; but only the learned can "search out true quantity in every foot and syllable."* This was the weakness as well as strength of their position. Sometimes, indeed, they go further, and seem to claim not merely to discover but actually to create quantity, as if it depended on a master's *ipse dixit*. But, rightly understood, the task of enquiring whether our language might be capable of receiving rules of quantity like the Classic, was an enterprise not unworthy to be attempted. There perhaps was no *a priori* reason to assume its impossibility. We can be wise after the event, but it is not so clear that they should have seen the issue beforehand. At any rate they thought the attempt worth making, and some of the best minds in England agreed with them.

It does not seem to have been noticed that no less a critic than Ben Jonson, quite late in life, upheld this

* *Scholemaister*, p. 146.