

**PUBLICATIONS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF  
PENNSYLVANIA. SERIES IN PHILOLOGY  
LITERATURE AND ARCHEOLOGY. VOL.  
I, NO. 1; POETIC AND VERSE CRITICISM  
OF THE REIGN OF ELIZABETH**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649432912

Publications of the University of Pennsylvania. Series in Philology Literature and Archeology.  
Vol. I, No. 1; Poetic and Verse Criticism of the Reign of Elizabeth by Felix E. Schelling

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Cover @ 2017

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POETIC AND VERSE CRITICISM

OF

THE REIGN OF ELIZABETH.

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PHILADELPHIA:  
UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA PRESS,  
1891.

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## POETIC AND VERSE CRITICISM

OF THE

### REIGN OF ELIZABETH.

#### I.

As must ever be the case, the practice of English poetry long preceded any attempt to formulate the rules and principles upon which that practice was based; and it was not until long after the quickening impulse that rendered modern English verse possible had made itself felt in Sir Thomas Wyatt and his disciple, the Earl of Surrey, that anything like such an attempt at the formulation of critical rules was made. It is the purpose of this paper to treat of the poetical and verse criticism of the reign of Queen Elizabeth, in which will be included not only a consideration of those rules and precepts, which were in common acceptance during the period, and the more purely art criticism of such men as Sidney, but likewise some of the vagaries of that class of poetical innovators, such as Harvey and Standyhurst, each of whom was so diligently engaged in the assuredly praiseworthy attempt of beating out new and untried paths by which English poetry might attain renown. Except that it also includes the consideration of Sir Philip Sidney's *An Apology for Poetrie*, and the various pamphlets of Gosson and others which led to that admirable work, our topic is mainly with that group of writings which, beginning with the critical utterances of Roger Ascham and George Gascoigne's attempt to formulate some of the rules of English versification, expended itself largely in the happily fruitless endeavor to impress upon English poetry the classical versification of the ancients; but left behind it a residuum of unusually rich results to the yet

unformed art of English poetry.<sup>1</sup> The consideration of mediæval verse-principles and verse-theories belongs not here, whether they be based on Aristotle's *Poetica*, or upon spontaneous and later national growths; nor need we be concerned with contemporary estimates of poets such as are contained in Bolton's *Hypo. critica* and elsewhere, or with a discussion of Elizabethan verse-forms, except in so far as their mention concerns the elucidation of Elizabethan theories of verse. Again, notwithstanding Dr. Schipper's excellent and exhaustive treatise on the subject of English versification, which seems to leave little to be desired in the extensive field that it covers, in view of the many existing questions still open to further investigation, we shall seek to set up no absolute standards by which to judge these lucubrations of another age, preferring rather to present them without comment, or, at least, with as little, as is consistent with a plain exposition of them. Finally, we shall not pursue the subject beyond the year 1603, deeming that date a sufficiently late one to include all the essential results of the earlier formative periods, as well as the results of that matchless score of years, from 1580 to 1600, in which the efflorescence of English poetry is generally regarded as having reached its height.

Mr. Saintsbury has vividly represented to us the state into which English poetry had fallen previous to its revival at the hands of Wyatt and Surrey.<sup>2</sup> Two schools existed; the expiring Chaucerian school, which, in the hands of increasingly feeble imitators of the *Roman de la Rose* and the early *Rhétoriqueurs*, was dragging its weary, superannuated limbs to its legitimate end, the grave; and the vigorous, old, English school of "prosaic doggerel," still hobbling its lame dog-trot, but deaf and blind to those finer qualities of the soul of poetry, which alone are capable of preserving a national literature beyond the limits of con-

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Schipper has well defined this group of writers as those "die unter dem Einfluss der Renaissance in England entstanden, und die für uns von grösserem Interesse sind, als die fruchtlosen Versuche, die antiken Metra, zumal den Hexameter, in der englischen Sprache nachzubilden, nämlich der Gruppe der um diese Zeit in rascher Folge veröffentlichten, ziemlich zahlreichen, theoretischen Untersuchungen über englische Metrik und Poetik." *Englische Metrik, Zweiter Theil: Neuenglische Metrik*, p. 9. See also *ibid.*, p. 455 (§ 254) and elsewhere.

<sup>2</sup> *A History of Elizabethan Literature*, Chap. I, *passim*.



temporary interest. Notwithstanding Sackville's qualified success in infusing a sort of dying spurt into the flagging Chaucerian school in his *Induction* and other contributions to the *Mirror for Magistrates*, and notwithstanding the unquestioned vigor of such men as Skelton, it was plain to be seen that no advance was to be made by English poetry along the lines of either of these moribund schools. It was imperative that a new path be made; and Sir Thomas Wyatt, though perhaps unconsciously, was the first to discover the direction it ought to take. Although the statement is somewhat bold, Mr. Saintsbury is perfectly right in saying that Wyatt could have had "no theory of any English prosody before him," and in adding: "So stumbling and knock-kneed is his verse that anyone who remembers the admirable versification of Chaucer may now and then be inclined to think that Wyatt had much better have left his innovations alone."<sup>1</sup> But in the first breaking of the ground we must not look for the finished highway. Wyatt gave abundant promise of the broad daylight of poetry that was to follow hard upon these crepuscular rays. That we may see what was the work of this coryphæus of modern verse, let us take his sonnet in translation of Petrarch's "*Amor che nel pensier mio vive e regna.*"<sup>2</sup>

The longe loue, that in my thought I harber,  
 And in my heart doth kepe his residence,  
 Into my face preaseth with bold pretence,  
 And there campeth, displaying his banner.  
 She that me learns to loue, and to suffer,  
 And willes that my trust, and lusted negligence  
 Be reined by reason, shame and reuerence,  
 With this hardinesse takes displeasure.  
 Wherwith loue to the hartes forest he fleeth,  
 Leauyng his enterprise with paine and crye,  
 And there him hideth and not appeareth.  
 What may I do? when my maister feareth,  
 But in the field with him to liue and dye,  
 For good is the life, endyng faithfully.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Sonetto XCL—109, *Le Rime di Francesco Petrarca con prefazione di Adolfo Bartoli*, in Firenze, Sansoni editore, 1883.

<sup>3</sup> *Tottel's Miscellany*, Ed. Arber, p. 33. Wyatt, Aldine Poets, p. 1.

In this sonnet, which exhibits, according to Dr. Nott, "all the peculiarities of the poet's first style,"<sup>1</sup> we may note the following licenses and metrical faults, to be captious: 1. Conflict between word and verse accent, in the wrenched accents *preaseth*, *campeth*, *appeareth*, *feareth*,<sup>2</sup> *harber*, *banner*, *suffer* and *maister*; <sup>3</sup> a similar, although less reprehensible, conflict in the words *hardness*, *appeareth*, and *leauyng*, explainable as hovering accents (*Schwebende Betonung*).<sup>4</sup> 2. Violence to the rhetorical or syntactical accent in the lines:

The longe loue, *that* in *my* thought I harber,  
And willes that *my* trust *and* lustes negligence,  
What may I do? when *my* maister feareth.<sup>5</sup>  
For good is *the* life, endyng faithfully.

### 3. A line lacking a syllable:

With his hardnesse takes *displeasure*.<sup>6</sup>

unless we read *displeasure* a tetrasyllable; 4. A line of eleven syllables:

Wherwith loue tó the hártes forést he fleéth,<sup>7</sup>

unless *fleeth* be a monosyllable, in which case the rime is destroyed. 5. The riming of *appeareth* and *feareth* with the accent not on the penult but on the already wrenched syllable, *eth*; the riming of either *fleeth*, monosyllabic, with *fearth* or

<sup>1</sup> *Works of Surrey and Wyatt*, by Dr. Nott, Lond., 1815, ii, p. 537, note.

<sup>2</sup> See Schipper, *Neuengl. Metr.* in general, § 34 and § 61, where these cases are referred to. Hovering accent, e. g., "Wherwith loue tó the hártes forést he fleéth; And there him hideth and not appeareth," p. 142.

<sup>3</sup> See *Ibid.*, § 60 and 55, p. 129. Ellis in his *Pronouncing Vocabulary of the XVI Century*, (*Engl. Pron.*, iii, p. 887, E. E. Text Soc.), gives *harbour*, *suffer* and *maister*, (*banner* is not in the vocabulary), all on the authority of Gill. This class of words were mostly in a state of transition in Wyatt's time. See Abbott's *Shakespeare Grammar*, *Introd.*, p. 11, and Schipper, § 56, under *-er* and *-our*.

<sup>4</sup> *Into* (line 3), is not mentioned here, as it was probably pronounced *intó*. Cf. Abbott, *Sä. Gram.*, § 457 a.

<sup>5</sup> A strong caesura after *do*, and the reading of the last three feet as troches, can alone save this line, e. g., "When my maister feareth."

<sup>6</sup> E. g. (") *With his hardnesse takes displeasure*, which is improbable, *With his hardnesse takes displeasure* (?), or, possibly, *disple-a-sure*. See Abbott's *Sä. Gram.*, § 479, and Ellis' *Vocabulary*, as above, p. 887.

<sup>7</sup> See Schipper's scansion of the verse, above, note.

of *fleeth* with *feartth*<sup>1</sup>; the riming of the final syllables of *displeasüre*, *suffér* and *harbér*.<sup>2</sup>

Of course no one can be unaware that it is straining a point thus to judge Wyatt's earlier work by the absolute standard of the metrical verse. As Dr. Nott said long since, "the lines must be read rythmically with a regular cæsura in the middle; and a strong accent is to be thrown on the last syllable. without which the rhyme itself cannot in many instances be preserved."<sup>3</sup> "By the term 'rythmical,' Nott means a verse cast not in the regular iambic decasyllabic form, but one read with a strongly marked cæsura in the middle of the line, containing more, or fewer, syllables than the verses which precede and follow, but agreeing with them in the number of principal accents, generally four, and depending on the use of the pause and the swing of the verse for its conformity to the general rhythm. It might happen, and indeed does, that the line is decasyllabic without necessarily becoming iambic also; and here it is necessary to read the verse, not with the accent bestowed as in an iambic line, but in the older style, with the cæsura strongly marked, and the stress placed on those syllables where it would most naturally fall."<sup>4</sup> Wyatt's earlier verse was a transition verse, affected by the older native influences as well as the newer foreign ones.<sup>5</sup> It was not the want of a prosody that was troubling him, but the confusion of two distinct systems, the rythmical and the metrical, in which the latter finally prevailed. Again, the language was at the time undergoing a change in the accentuation of many words of foreign origin, and in the picturesque phrase of Dr. Abbott: "While the contest was pending, and prisoners being taken and retaken on either side, we must not be surprised at

<sup>1</sup> See *ibid.*, in general § 27, and Guest, *Hist. of Engl. Rhythms*, Ed. Skeat, 1882, p. 141.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>3</sup> *Works of Surrey and Wyatt*, by Dr. Nott, ii, p. 537; note.

<sup>4</sup> Simonds' *Sir Thomas Wyatt and his Poems*. Bost., 1889, p. 66.

<sup>5</sup> "Our heroic verse," says Prof. F. B. Gummere, "is simply the result of forcing the iambic movement (influence of foreign models played its part here) upon some late forms of our old four stress verse." *The Translation of Beowulf and the Relation of Ancient and Modern English Verse*, *Amer. Jour. of Philol.*, vii, p. 62. Alscher also marks this tendency of Wyatt's to confuse four stress with heroic verse. *Wiener Beiträge*, etc., i (1886), pp. 72-75, and 77, where he examines the sonnet quoted above.