

TRANSITIONS AND TRANSLATIONS

1

The Medieval Inheritance of Early Tudor Poetry

Seth Lerer

Among the many poems attributed to Sir Thomas Wyatt that have been preserved in the famous Devonshire Manuscript (British Library MS Add 17,492), the one beginning “Absence absenting causeth me to complain” has largely been ignored. Unlike the sonnets, lyrics, and ballades that have defined Wyatt’s “unquiet” sensibility for generations—poems such as “They flee from me,” “Mine own John Poyntz,” and the Petrarchan translations—this poem lacks what we have come to expect from the poet at his best. Rather than strut in careful iambs, this verse seems to limp along in uneven stresses. Rather than looking forward to the Italianate *sprezzatura* of Sidney or Spenser, this one seems to look back to the aureate diction of Stephen Hawes or John Lydgate. And rather than developing an argument through sinuous logic, the quatrains of this poem appear only to repeat themselves. The poet’s isolation builds through iteration, echoing the final phrasing of each quatrain in the opening words of the next. And while the text is no less clear than that of any other poem in the Manuscript, its verbal insecurities have led one of its most recent editors, R. A. Rebholz, to emend its phrasings for regularization and, most strikingly, to edit its final two lines out of existence (Rebholz 1978, 277, 524).

Readers of late medieval and early modern English poetry will recognize the problems posed by such a poem. Scholarship since the 1980s has revealed that there was no clear break between the “medieval” and the “Renaissance” in English literature (Spearing 1985; Ebin 1988; Lerer 1993, 1997; Scanlon 1994; Trigg 2002; Meyer-Lee 2007; Wakelin 2007). Chaucer, for example, continued to be read and copied, imitated and alluded to, throughout the Tudor age. The Devonshire Manuscript itself (compiled by members of the Howard and Shelton families in the 1520s and 1530s) offers a remarkable poetic exchange drawn from selected stanzas of *Troilus and Criseyde* (Heale 1998). Richard Tottel printed Chaucer’s “Truth” (albeit unattributed) in his *Songes and Sonettes* of 1557. And provincial

anthologists included selections from Chaucer's poetry, as well as that of Lydgate and Hawes, until well into the reign of Elizabeth I (Lerer 1997).

Our categories of medieval and Renaissance are both cultural and retrospective. While we may find Lydgate's *Fall of Princes* or Hawes's *Pastime of Pleasure* to be irrevocably grounded in fifteenth-century allegory and idiom, they were among the most popular texts published by England's earliest printers. Wynkyn de Worde, Robert Copeland, and Richard Tottel kept these authors in circulation well into the middle of the sixteenth century (King 1987; Gillespie 2006). It was only with the Elizabethan rejection of much of this earlier poetry as "papist" and sacramental that it fell out of favor. Roger Ascham's comment, in his *Scolemaster* of 1570, represents changes in literary ideology and taste that firmly demarcated medieval verse for early modern readers:

In our forefathers' time, when papistry as a standing pool covered and overflowed all England, few books were read in our tongue, saving certain books of chivalry, as they said, for pastime and pleasure, which, as some say, were made in monasteries by idle monks or wanton canons. (Ryan 1967, 68)

John Lydgate, known in his afterlife as the "Monk of Bury," could not have been far from Ascham's contempt for these "idle monks," and the reference to those books read "for pastime and pleasure" cannot but evoke the title of Hawes's best known poem. These were, in fact, precisely the writers that the Marian interregnum saw reprinted—as if Mary Tudor's resurgent Catholicism gave permission, after Henry VIII's condemnations, to recirculate those narratives of pilgrimage and chivalry characteristic of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries (King 1987).

For the modern reader coming to Wyatt's "Absence absenting causeth me to complain," there will be much that resonates with the legacy of the Monk of Bury and the author of the *Pastime of Pleasure*. Is this a modern or a medieval poem? Is it a throwback to an earlier, aureate practice or is it an example of how a distinctively forward-looking writer could adapt old idioms to new aesthetics?

This essay begins with a literary text that straddles old and new forms of poetic expression. It seeks to expose our critical presuppositions about literary periods, but also to expose our expectations of aesthetic value in the early modern lyric. What is the relationship between the medieval and the early modern, and how do our categories of authorship inflect our sense of literary history? What are the canons of vernacular verse-making and how do they bear on the social, cultural, and political contexts of, in this case, the early Tudor court? In the course of answering these questions, this essay will look back to the inheritances of Chaucer's vernacular authorship: to his synthesis of Boethius' philosophical laments with contemporary courtly complaint and to the impact of that synthesis on writers such as Lydgate, Hawes, Skelton, and Charles D'Orleans. This is an essay, then, less about shifts from medieval to Renaissance than about how the English verse associated with those periods could coexist and couple.

Absens absenting causithe me to complaine
 my sorowfull complaints abiding in distresse
 and departing most pryvie increasithe my paine
 thus lyve I vncomfortid wrappid all in hevines

In hevenes I am wrapid devoyde of all solace
 Nother pastyme nor pleasure can revyve my dull wytt
 My sprites be all taken and dethe dothe me manace
 With his fatall knif the thrid for to kitt

Ffor to kit the thrid of this wretchid lif
 And shortelye bring me owt of this cace
 I se yt avaylith not yet must I be pensif
 Sins fortune from me hathe turnid her face

Hathe turnid with cowntenance contrarious
 And clene from her presens she hathe exilid me
 Yn sorrowe remaining as a man most dolorous
 Exempte from all pleasure and worldelye felicitie

All wordelie felicitye nowe am I private
 And left in deserte most solitarilye
 Wandring all about as on without mate
 My dethe aprochithe what remedye

What remedye alas to reioise my wofull herte
 With sighis suspiring most rufullie
 Nowe welcome I am redye to deperte
 Fare well all pleasure welcome paine and smarte

(Devonshire Manuscript, 81v–82)

To read Wyatt's poem not in a modernizing paperback but in an edition faithful to this manuscript is to read it through in the legacy of late medieval poetics (see *A Social Edition*). Absence here is a personification, a kind of embodied condition on a par with the personifications of late medieval complaint. Old Age, Sorrow, Fortune—all stand, in the poetry from Lydgate through Charles D'Orleans, as instigators of the poet's complaining. Here, in a bit of repetitive verbal trickery, the poet affirms what Absence does: it creates a state of absence. The poem also affirms what Fortune does: turns her face away and generates a heaviness and lack of comfort in the poet. His "dull wit" (a touchstone phrase of post-Chaucerian abnegation; see Lawton 1987) cannot be revived by "pastime nor pleasure"—a verbal collocation that, much like Ascham's rebuke half a century later, evokes Hawes's courtly allegory. Fortune has turned her face "with countenance contrarious," an alliterative pairing worthy of Skelton, whose character Counterfeit Countenance in the play *Magnificence* embodies all that is duplicitous about the courtly life. But such duplicity hearkens back to the *Consolation of Philosophy* itself, whose prisoner laments that Fortune's "clouded, cheating face has changed" (*fallacem mutavit nubile vultum*) (Stewart, Rand, and Tester 1973, 132–133). The poet's exile from felicity recalls, too, the terms of the Boethian prisoner's opening condition, while the request for a remedy similarly brings to mind the figure of Lady Philosophy as the soul's physician. The narrator's is now a "dolorous" state, and that word chimes with the laments of Lydgate, Skelton, and Hawes throughout their poetry. Indeed, a search of this poem's key words against the online databases of medieval and early Tudor verse firmly enmeshes the text in the verbal net of Chaucer's heirs. There is, here, a pervasive aureation, an insistent repetition, and a use of alliteration far less evocative of Langland or *Sir Gawain* than it is of Skelton.

“Absence” had emerged as a characteristic term of Chaucerian and post-Chaucerian lament. It shows up as early as the *Book of the Duchess*, when Alcyone fears the worst when her husband, Cyex, does not return: “His absence filled her with alarm” (Benson 1987, line 81). This sense of abandonment—by a lover, a friend, a ruler, a set of joys and rewards—inspires the complaints of Lydgate, and the word “absence” appears repeatedly in just about everything he wrote, from devotional verse to courtly lyrics to historical epic to social satire. Chaucer’s son, Thomas, for example, in the poem Lydgate wrote on his departure to take up the French ambassadorship, generates a sense of mourning and loss on his leaving: “His absence eke ye aught to compleyne For he absent, farewell youre reconfort” (MacCracken 1934, 659). In the *Complaint for My Lady of Gloucester and Holland*, the poet writes of “A solytarye, soore compleyning,” who along with others “wepped for hir long absence / And cryed owte on false Fortune” (MacCracken 1934, 608–609). In the *Fifteen Joys and Sorrows of Mary*, the poet opines: “Of hevynessys Oon the moost grievous / Is of Absence the importable peyne” (MacCracken 1911, 276).

Absence is everywhere in Lydgate. It is everywhere, too, in Charles D’Orleans (who, in his English poetry, reveals himself a careful reader of post-Chaucerian tradition). It crystallizes the condition of the bereft lover. It collocates with such words as “complain,” “comfort,” “dull,” and “heaviness.” It stands on the fulcrum of courtly longing, political and epistemological confusion. It bridges the Chaucerian and the Boethian conditions. As Charles would aphorize it at the close of one of his ballades:

Wo worth is me to be thus in absence
Go dulle complaint my lady þis report.
(Arn 1994, 354)

But for the poets of the fifteenth century, the greatest absence was of Chaucer himself. So much verse from Lydgate through Hawes begins with a lament for the death of Chaucer and his absence from the worlds of poetry and making that it seems a trope of authorship itself (Lerer 1993; Meyer-Lee 2007). Hardly anybody writing between 1400 and the mid-1500s in English could begin a text without avowing the simple fact that Chaucer is missing. “Chaucer is dead,” wrote Lydgate in one of his earliest poems, *The Floure of Courtesye* (c. 1400–1402; MacCracken 1934, 417). So, too, was Chaucer’s contemporary, John Gower. So too, by the middle of the fifteenth century, was Lydgate. By the 1460s, George Ashby could begin his *Active Policy of a Prince* with their names, “Maisters Gower, Chauucer & Lydgate,” and praise them for “embelysshing” the English language and writing poems that serve as “oure consolation” (Bateson 1899, 13). But they are now all gone: “Alas! Saufe goddess will, & his pleasaunce, / That euer ye shulde dye & chaunge this lyffe.” In the 1510s, Stephen Hawes began his *Conforte of Louers* by reflecting on how Lydgate, Gower, and Chaucer “are deed / & theyr bodyes layde in chest” (Gluck and Morgan 1974, 27). Fifteenth-century verse-making lives in these idioms of elegy. Taken together with the language of Boethian loss, the phraseology of Romance departure, and the political conditions of exile or imprisonment, this sense of having been abandoned—of having to fill a gap in literature as well as life—may well be what makes late medieval English poetry “late medieval.”

By hearkening back to late Middle English Boethianism and the complaints of the post-Chaucerian tradition, “Absens absenting” shows us how alive this “late medieval”

was for courtly readers in the first third of the sixteenth century. But this late medieval poetics was as much Boethian as Chaucerian (Minnis 1993). Boethius shaped Chaucer's writing from its start: in the laments of the Black Knight and the remedying dialogue of the *Book of the Duchess*; in the emotional imprisonment of Troilus, and the mock pedagogy of Pandarus, in *Troilus and Criseyde*; in the imaginative conditions of the paired lovers in *The Knight's Tale*; in his many short lyrics that adapted allegorical and mythological figures; and, of course, in his own translation of the *Consolation*. Chaucer had given English voice to the bereft Boethian prisoner, turning him into a courtly lover whose meditations on departure, loss, and above all, absence, provided later writers with a governing literary model. King James I's *Kingis Quair*, Lydgate's *Lament of the Black Knight*, and John Walton's verse translation of the *Consolation* have their cultural meaning largely in the ways in which they sustain a Chaucerian tradition of transforming Boethius' epistemological conditions into the social and affective conditions of the courtier (Johnson 1997). The English poetry of Charles D'Orleans is as much Boethian as it is Chaucerian. So, too, is George Ashby's *A Prisoner's Reflections*. The fact that both poets were imprisoned or exiled only enhances the fictional self-presentations of their literary personae. The *Consolation* may have been a guide for the politically wronged. But it was also a guide for the poetically aspirational.

The "dullness" of the fifteenth-century poet—so brilliantly exposed by David Lawton (1987) as both a cultural and political state—is, in addition, a philosophical condition. Chaucer's brilliance may intimidate his imitators. But Chaucer's largely Boethian subject matter provided them with the language through which they could express their ineptitude. The excuses of ineptitude in the face of Chaucer's example are more than versions of a modesty topos. They are the language of the Boethian prisoner, incapable of sustaining the poetic flourishing of his youth, unable to see clearly, unable to give voice to virtue and to verse:

*Carmina qui quondam studio florenti peregi
Flebilis heu maestos cogor inire modos.*

Once, I wrote verses flowing with knowledge;
Now I must begin by writing sad meters.
(Stewart, Rand, and Tester 1973, 130)

And the poet responds to himself, in John Walton's English of the first metrum of the *Consolation*, "But owt! Allas! How dull & deaf he esse" (Science 1927, 14). In "Absens absenting," the poet's wit is "dull" precisely because he is bereft: "my sprites be all taken." The "vncomfortid" condition of this poem's speaker, ready to depart this life, brings back the idioms of the Boethian prisoner, in Walton's phrasing:

Thys wrecchid lyf þat is vncomfortable
Wyll draw a-long and tarieth now allas.
(Science 1927, 15)

And Charles D'Orleans, in the couplet I quoted earlier, makes up his "dull" complaint precisely out of the condition of loss that is both amorous and philosophical. Elegy becomes

self-elegy. Laments for Chaucer's passing become laments for the loss of inspiration. The poet looks back on an earlier, florescent youth and now sees only *maestos modos*: the sad meters of a tearful self; the dull wit of an uncomforted lover.

Of course, complaints of loss did not end with the late medieval tradition. Wyatt, most pointedly, is a poet of abandonment. Yet, even at his most characteristically Wyatt-like, he remains Chaucerian. Compare, for example, "Absens absenting" with another, far more famous poem of Wyatt's, "They flee from me" (the modern edition is Rebholz 1978, 166–167; the diplomatic edition, with manuscript reproduction, is in *A Social Edition*). This, too, is a poem about distance and distress. It locates its speaker in the uneasy space between companionship and loneliness. But the unsureness of this locale—has it all been a dream? No, I lay broad waking—has led modern readers to see the poem as quite unlike anything that had gone before. Some have found in the strange passivity of the narrator a deliberate shift away from fifteenth-century male identities. Others have found in it a transformation of old, Chaucerian idioms (gentleness, "newfangelness") into something powerfully Petrarchan. Stephen Greenblatt, over 35 years ago, crystallized these critical perceptions into aphorism. "Petrarch's idealism is not *replaced* by Wyatt's sense of weariness and emptiness but rather *fulfilled* by it" (Greenblatt 1980, 150). For Greenblatt, and the critics in his wake, "They flee from me" is Wyatt's "greatest achievement" precisely because it fulfills the Petrarchan ideal in this way. "Power over sexuality," he noted, "produces inwardness" (Greenblatt 1980, 125). And, unlike what Greenblatt called the "relatively slight lyrics in the Devonshire MS," Wyatt's most powerful verse ("They flee from me" included) lives in the "blend of playfulness and danger that marks them as the product of the court" (for a challenge to this critical tradition, see Solomon 2014).

For all its innovation and achievement, "They flee from me" has longer legs in the Chaucerian inheritance than we might wish to think. True, the poem shares much with what we have come to expect from the Wyatt canon: a lithe rhythmical control; a tension between sentence endings and line endings finessed through arresting enjambments; a barely restrained eroticism; and a first-person voice consistent with a notion of the poet as an introspector of the self, a chronicler of the unquiet heart (Greenblatt 1980; Crewe 1990; Heale 1998). True, too, many of these expectations have been conditioned by centuries of editorial ministrations: cleaning up the pentameter, regularizing the spelling and grammar, punctuating for particular effect (Crewe 1990; Solomon 2014). "They flee from me," in the Devonshire Manuscript, appears only a dozen folios away from "Absens absenting," written in the same scribe's hand. Reading it in this version, old idioms leap out. The line "beselye seeking contynuall chaunge" hearkens back to Chaucer suspicious, frequently in short poems, of "business" and "change." "Newfangelness," whatever its mutations, returns us to Chaucer's Boethian rejection of things new for newness' sake. There is much of Chaucer's "Lak of Stedfastnesse," here, much as there is a reflection of his "Gentelnesse," and even *The Merchant's Tale*, in the "armes long and small" of the beloved ("Hir myddel small, hire armes long and sklendre" *Merch. Tale*, line 1602).

But the Chaucerian short poem that stands behind this, as well as the range of Wyatt's amorous and courtly critiques, is the one known as "Truth." It was without question the most popular of Chaucer's lyrics, appearing in 24 different manuscripts throughout the

fifteenth and the sixteenth century and, in six printed versions, running from Caxton's *Temple of Bras* (c.1477) to the Chaucer edition of John Stowe of 1561 (Pace and David 1982, 52–53). The poem famously begins:

Flee fro the prees and dwelle with sothfastnesse.

This opening injunction instructs readers in Boethian stability. Be happy with what you have; control your temptations; take what you receive gratefully; do not wrestle for worldly goods; you are pilgrim, a beast who can attain true human, spiritual virtue by recognizing that your true home is in the heavens. All of these paraphrases look back to the prose teachings of Lady Philosophy and the exemplary, mythological poems of her tutelage. In Wyatt's hands, Chaucer's injunction becomes a guide to the art of courtiership, and echoes of this lyric's opening appear in no fewer than seven of Wyatt's surviving poems (I list here only those in which the form "flee" appears; "fleeth" appears five times; "fled" appears seven times; "fleeing" appears once—clearly this is a verb central to Wyatt's poetics):

If thou wilt mighty be, flee from the rage
(Rebholz 1978, 120)

What vailleth truth? Or by it, to take pain?
To strive by stedfastnesse, for to attain
How to be just and true and flee from doubleness?
(Rebholz 1978, 72)

And from this mind I will not flee;
(Rebholz 1978, 279)

Now am I proof to them that list
To flee such woo and wrongful pain
(Rebholz 1978, 245)

Flee therefore truth (Rebholz 1978, 193)

If that for weight the body faile, this soul shall to her flee
(Rebholz 1978, 112)

Mine own John Poyntz, since ye delight to know
The cause why that homeward I me draw
(And flee the press of courts whereso they go
Rather than to live thrall under the awe
Of lordly looks) ...
(Rebholz 1978, 186)

These radical departures from desire or deceit or truthfulness all hearken back to the defining opening of "Truth." Someone is always, it would seem, about to flee, or fleeing, or fled in Wyatt's verse. The sense of distance and distress is everywhere. Chaucer's legacy of philosophical counsel becomes Wyatt's charge for courtly service. And if the court is but a place of untruth and duplicity, the poet must find a more secure home.

These themes pervade the courtly poetry of the first decades of the Tudor age. But nowhere do they so pointedly address the Chaucerian heritage as in Wyatt's satire to John Poyntz. This is a poem about relocations, about tensions between physical and moral homelands. Such tensions lie at the heart of the Consolation's counsel—know your true home, Lady Philosophy iterates—and they lie at the heart of Chaucer's "Truth." "Her is non hoom, her nis but wilderness," the poem enjoins toward its close. This world is not our true home, but only a form of exile from spiritual belonging. Wyatt turns this cosmic instruction into domestic statement. His phrase about the thralldom of lordly looks recalibrates the image of the yoked beast at the close of "Truth" ("Forth, beste, out of thy stal!").

The satire to John Poyntz is shot through with such courtly transformations of Chaucerian instruction, to the point where, 50 lines into the poem, Wyatt can poke fun of the courtier who would, mistakenly, "Praise Sir Thopas for a noble tale / And scorn the story that the knight told." And at this poem's end, the Chaucerian critique comes full circle:

But here I am in Kent and Christendom
 Among the Muses, where I read and rhyme,
 Where if thou list, my Poyntz, for to come,
 Thou shalt be judge how I do spent my time.

Ensnconced in the Home Counties, Wyatt reads and rhymes, and he invites Poyntz to judge these private efforts of verse-making. To spend one's time here is not just to take time reading and writing, but to make meters. Spending time is making verse, and if we had any doubt about this metaphorical association, we need only look at the version of this poem in the Parker Manuscript (Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, Parker MS 68, long regarded as an authoritative text of this poem, especially for its first 52 lines) to see how Wyatt once again is steeped in Chaucerian poetics: "Thow shalt be judge how I dispende my tyme." In breaking off that horrible *Tale of Sir Thopas*, Harry Bailly had accused Chaucer of dispensing time exactly in this way:

"Thou doost nought ells but despendest tyme.
 Sire, at o word, thou shalt no lenger ryme."

To invite John Poyntz to judge how Wyatt now dispends his time is (in the restored reading from the Parker Manuscript) to seek his playful impersonation of the Host to Wyatt's inept Chaucer. Behind this final line now lies the Chaucerian moment of failed poetry: a moment of radical mis-taking of poetic intention and performance. Such a moment is the comic foil for the satire to Poyntz.

But it is, as well, the foil for many of the early Tudor poet's poses. For whether we flee the press or flee the truth or watch those who flee from us, we remain in a condition of departure and absence. They flee from me. Such a line could be voiced about unrequiting lovers, dismissive or dismissed courtiers, or the muses that have left us by our bedside.

Absence is a condition; fleeing is an action. What Chaucer did in "Truth" was to provide a later courtly readership and writership with a new trope of departure. The fifteenth-century condition of absence is precisely that: a condition. It is the state of

loss or longing left by Chaucer's death, or the lover's departure, or the distance of the friend or patron. It is a state of being, and so much of the fifteenth-century reflection on that state contributes to the static quality of much of its verse. But fleeing is a verb of action. It is the result of will or agency. Its power in the poems written in the wake of Chaucer's "Truth" lies in the ways in which it crystallizes people making decisions and doing things. It requires not the static lament of the dulled but the active responses of the alert. Indeed, the very condition of the Boethian prisoner had been a dullness that Lady Philosophy seeks to alleviate: wake up, look up, grow up. Her initial diagnosis of his state is one of lethargy, in Walton's translation: "This man is wip litargie arrest" (Science 1927, 22). And so, Lady Philosophy, like Chaucer in his "Truth," advises action. Absence and fleeing might be thought of as the two poles of the post-Chaucerian poetic voice, whose words may leave the reader only with lament or may enjoin us to movement.

Wyatt is but the most canonical and most sophisticated of the early Tudor poets to negotiate these tensions, but he is not alone. The poetry of Stephen Hawes, only recently reassessed for its political and social acumen and its technical achievement, often balances between complaint and action—between the tropes of a post-Chaucerian dullness and a more immediate, courtly will to action (Gluck and Morgan 1974; Edwards 1984; Lerer 1997; Wakelin 2009). His *Conforte of Louers* (printed by Wynkyn de Worde sometime between 1510 and 1511) explores the imbalance between loss and fulfillment in a dream-vision format that had a demonstrably wide readership throughout the first half of the sixteenth century (all quotations are from Gluck and Morgan and cited by line number). In language resonant with "Absens absenting," Hawes's *Conforte* bridges Chaucer's world of Boethian advice with the Tudor world of courtly service. "Conforte yourselfe / and muse not so alone," his poem counsels (152). In words that echo the advice of Chaucer's "Truth" ("the wey is slider"), Hawes states: "Clymbe not so fast / lest sodenly ye slyde" (157). Hawes offers a verbal fulcrum on which Chaucer and Wyatt balance. His phrasings chime with both: "my body had but lytell rest" (173); "many one wrytest throuthe / yet conforte hath he none" (558); "beware / The snares and nettes" (903–904). And in a moment comparable to Wyatt's own engagement with the Psalms, Hawes translates from Psalm 129 and expounds: "though many a one / vnhappely do rage / They shall haue sorowe that shytted me in a cage" (564–565).

Hawes's *Conforte* is as much a poem of the unquiet heart as anything by Wyatt, and Greenblatt's influential formulations about power, inwardness, and courtly performance could be as applicable to this as to any sustained verse of the first decades of the sixteenth century. The point is not that Hawes is something of a proto-Wyatt here, or that "Absens absenting" shows the latter poet as regressing to the former. The point is that all of these texts—and many others, well known and forgotten—constitute a poetry of courtly counsel in a period of competing and contested literary and linguistic voices.

If Wyatt and the Devonshire Manuscript offer what we think of as the forward-looking, flowering of "Renaissance poetics," the contemporary manuscript assembled by the Staffordshire lawyer and bibliophile Humphrey Wellys presents what seems to us as dusty antiquarianism (Wilson 1990; Jansen and Jordan 1991; Lerer 1997). This compilation (now Bodleian Library MS Rawlinson C. 813) brims with strange

things: bits and pieces of Chaucer, Lydgate, and Hawes excerpted into lyric outbursts or assembled into centos of amorous and courtly fantasy; political poems of satire and complaint; verse letters of colloquial intimacy; and a sustained transcription of the bulk of Skelton's *Why Come Ye Nat to Courte*? Read not for its individual entries but in the arc of its literary accomplishment, Wellys's manuscript illustrates that, for a sophisticated reader of the 1530s and 1540s, the poetry of the previous century and a half was still vital. But that vitality lay largely in the possibilities of new assemblies and transformations. Each line of late medieval verse finds a new place when collocated with others. Its fragments and quotations reassemble themselves into a personal statement about courtly love and courtly fear: the work of someone who, so rattled by the reforms of the age of Thomas Cromwell, went back and forcibly crossed out the word "Pope" whenever it appeared in the text.

Wellys's assembly may be distinctive, but it is far from unique. Manuscripts from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries often brought together stanzas from Chaucer, Gower, and Lydgate into new compositions, or excerpted sections into free-standing, lyrical utterances. Such manuscripts show not just copying but compiling in all senses of that word: bringing old things together into new contexts. Devonshire, too, worked something of this alchemy, as I have already mentioned, excerpting poetry contained in Thynne's 1532 Chaucer edition and placing them in sequence to create amorous narratives of exchange.

But what distinguishes Wellys is his taste for Stephen Hawes and his sensibility that, well into the last years of Henry VIII's reign, the poetry of late medieval Boethian elegy still had power to comfort. On several occasions in his manuscript, Wellys copies out selections from Hawes's poetry that were, in their original longer narratives, self-contained lyric utterances, letters, or complaints. One "poem" in his manuscript is made up of the stanzas of *The Pastime of Pleasure*, running from lines 3951 to 4076, that offers a letter written by the figure of Sapience to the poet lover. Wellys has recast some of the wording of this text to make it a free-standing amorous, verse epistle. In the process he illustrates how a long, allegorical, and didactic poem such as the *Pastime* could be read as something of an anthology of potentially excerptable love lyrics. Hawes may, in the words of the scholar Daniel Wakelin, have turned "the literature of leisure into the literature of learning" (Wakelin 2009, 57). But what Wellys did was turn this literature of learning into the lyrics of courtly loss:

To yow, swete-harte, thys byll ys presentyd
 By your true loue, whose harte yn-dures.
 Ye haue fast fetterd, nott to be absentyde
 Frome your person with mortall heuynes,
 His hart and seruyce. With all gentylnes
 He to yow oweth as to be obeyente
 For to fulfill your swete commandemente.

(Jansen and Jordan 1991, 132)

One way of reading such a stanza in Wellys's manuscript would be to say that it is the characteristic mark of an anthologizing commonplace-book maker: a way of *reading for use* that had become a central feature of the culling habit of mind of the sixteenth-century

compiler (Grafton and Jardine 1990; Crane 1993). But another, more literary way of approaching this selection is to say that it represents Hawes read through the lens of Wyatt: a reconsideration of old allegorical instruction with an eye for inwardness. And from that inwardness comes the vocabulary of absence and constraint, of heaviness and gentleness, of owing and obedience.

Such is the language of “Absens absenting.” For, by all the poems I have offered here together, we may see that lines between the “medieval” and the “Renaissance” are not as clear as we might once have wished. These verses would not have been discerned as archaic. The distinction we now make between Middle English and modern English was not sensed until the later sixteenth century, when a printer such as Richard Tottel could smooth out Wyatt’s pentameters in the late 1550s, or an editor such Thomas Speght could gloss Chaucer’s verbal archaisms in the late 1590s. Historians of English have come to realize that, well into the first decades of Henry VIII’s reign, the language of Chaucer, Gower, Lydgate, and Malory was far from incomprehensible (Machan 2006). Nor was the language of Skelton and Hawes necessarily seen as deliberately old-fashioned (in contrast, for example, with the way in which Spenser’s language of *The Faerie Queene* was deliberately archaic for the 1590s). Humphrey Welles seems to have had little trouble copying and manipulating their language in a knowing way. So, too, members of the Howard and the Shelton families who copied selections from William Thynne’s 1532 edition of *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* into the Devonshire Manuscript had little difficulty with their exemplars. Portions of Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* and *Anelida and Arcite*, of the Chaucerian *Remedy of Love*, of Hoccleve’s *Letter of Cupid*, and of Richard Roos’s *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* appear on its pages. In fact, in both the Welles and Devonshire manuscripts, it is clear that the medieval inheritance lived in print for them: Thynne’s edition capped over 50 years of publishing Chaucer (from William Caxton and Wynkyn de Worde on); Lydgate was in printed book form since the 1470s; and Hawes, for whom we have no surviving contemporary manuscript copies, seems only to have circulated in the printed books brought out by Wynkyn de Worde from 1509 until 1530.

The literary inheritance of Middle English was not swallowed passively and whole by early Tudor literates. This body of work was there for the reworking. It offered opportunities for literary creativity shaped through pastiche and posturing. Early Tudor writers and readers were, often, ventriloquists of the medieval literary imagination. By adapting texts for new purposes, they took up the voices of the old poets and made them live in particular courtly, amorous, political, and social contexts.

The relationship between the Wyatt that we want (“They flee from me”) and the one we do not (“Absens absenting”) may therefore be a relationship not of the poet on a good and bad day, but of the poet trying out different voices. The relationship of Hawes to Wyatt may not be one of late medieval to early modern. “Absens absenting” may be seen as something of a ventriloquism of a fifteenth-century, Boethian complaint, much as a poem such as Wyatt’s “Whoso list to hunt” may be understood as a ventriloquism of a fourteenth-century Petrarchan sonnet.

Such an approach may move us away from the teleologies of medieval to Renaissance and may help us understand how a variety of voices and poses could coexist on the manuscript page, in the courtly audience, and in the printed book. It is important to engage

with the decades of early Tudor England not as a period of transition (from something to something else) but as a time of multiple media. Script and print, the old Chaucerianism and the new Petrarchism, Boethius and his legacies, absence and fleeing: all contribute to the lively insecurities of these neglected literary decades. To begin a volume with a review of the medieval legacies is, therefore, not to show how later writers moved beyond the past, but instead to expose how that literary past informed a present and how the writing and the reading of vernacular poetry went on with old books on the table and familiar words from new pens.

REFERENCES

- A *Social Edition of the Devonshire MS (BL Add 17,492)*. 2014. https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/The_Devonshire_Manuscript. Accessed June 2, 2017.
- Arn, Mary-Jo. 1994. *Fortunes Stabilnes: Charles of Orleans's English Book of Love*. Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies.
- Bateson, M., ed. 1899. *George Ashby's Poems*. Early English Text Society Extra Series 76. London: Oxford University Press.
- Benson, Larry D., ed. 1987. *The Riverside Chaucer*. 3rd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Crane, Mary Thomas. 1993. *Framing Authority: Sayings, Self, and Society in Sixteenth-Century England*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Crewe, Jonathan. 1990. *Trials of Authorship: Anterior Forms and Poetic Reconstruction from Wyatt to Shakespeare*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ebin, Lois. 1988. *Illuminator, Makar, Vates: Visions of Poetry in the Fifteenth Century*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Edwards, A. S. G. 1984. *Stephen Hawes*. Boston: Twayne.
- Gillespie, Alexandra. 2006. *Print Culture and the Medieval Author*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gluck, Florence W., and Alice B. Morgan, eds. 1974. *Stephen Hawes: The Minor Poems*. Early English Text Society 271. London: Oxford University Press.
- Grafton, Anthony T., and Lisa Jardine. 1990. "'Studied for Action': How Gabriel Harvey Read his Livy." *Past and Present* 129: 30–78.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. 1980. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hawes, Stephen. 1928. *The Pastime of Pleasure*. Edited by W. E. Mead. Early English Text Society Original Series 173. London: Oxford University Press.
- Heale, Elizabeth. 1998. *Wyatt, Surrey and Early Tudor Poetry*. London: Longman.
- Jansen, S. L., and K. H. Jordan. 1991. *The Welles Anthology: MS Rawlinson C.813*. Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies.
- Johnson, Ian. 1997. "Placing Walton's Boethius." In *Boethius in the Middle Ages: Latin and Vernacular Traditions of the Consolatio philosophiae*, edited by M. J. F. Hoenen and Lodi Nauta. Leiden: Brill.
- King, John N. 1987. "The Account Book of a Marian Bookseller, 1553–4." *British Library Journal* 13: 33–57.
- Lawton, David. 1987. "Dullness and the Fifteenth Century." *English Literary History* 54.4: 761–799.
- Lerer, Seth. 1993. *Chaucer and His Readers: Imagining the Author in Late-Medieval England*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Lerer, Seth. 1997. *Courtly Letters in the Age of Henry VIII*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- MacCracken, H. N., ed. 1911. *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate*, vol. 1. Early English Text Society Extra Series 107, Original Series 192. London: Oxford University Press.
- MacCracken, H. N., ed. 1934. *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate*, vol. 2. Early English Text Society

- Extra Series 107, Original Series 192. London: Oxford University Press.
- Machan, Tim William. 2006. "Early Modern Middle English." In *Caxton's Trace: Studies in the History of English Printing*, edited by W. Kuskin, 299–322. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Meyer-Lee, Robert J. 2007. *Poets and Power from Chaucer to Wyatt*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Minnis, Alastair J., ed. 1993. *Chaucer's Boece and the Medieval Tradition of Boethius*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer.
- Pace, G., and A. David. 1982. *The Minor Poems, Part I. A Variorum Edition of the Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*. Vol. 5. Part 1. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Rebholz, R. A., ed. 1978. *Sir Thomas Wyatt: The Complete Poems*. Baltimore, MD: Penguin.
- Ryan, Lawrence V., ed. 1967. *Roger Ascham, The Schoolmaster*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Scanlon, Larry. 1994. *Narrative, Authority, and Power: The Medieval Exemplum and the Chaucerian Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Science, M., ed. 1927. *Boethius: De Consolatione Philosophiae*. Translated by John Walton. Early English Text Society Original Series 170. London: Oxford University Press.
- Solomon, Deborah C. 2014. "Representation of Lyric Intimacy in Manuscript and Print Versions of Wyatt's 'They Flee from Me'." *Modern Philology* 111: 668–682.
- Spearing, A. C. 1985. *Medieval to Renaissance in English Poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stewart, H. F., E. K. Rand, and S. J. Tester, eds. and trans. 1973. *Boethius: The Theological Tractates. The Consolation of Philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Trigg, Stephanie. 2002. *Congenial Souls: Reading Chaucer from Medieval to Postmodern*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Wakelin, Daniel. 2007. *Humanism, Reading, and English Literature 1430–1530*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wakelin, Daniel. 2009. "Stephen Hawes and Courtly Education." In *The Oxford Handbook of Tudor Literature, 1485–1603*, edited by Mike Pincombe and Cathy Shrank, 53–68. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wilson, Edward. 1990. "Local Habitations and Names in MS Rawlinson C.813 in the Bodleian Library, Oxford." *Review of English Studies*, n.s. 41: 12–44.