

VOICE

The Poetic Style of Character

Plain and Eloquent Speaking

There were ... two styles available – the plain and the ornate.

Thom Gunn, “Introduction,” *Fulke Greville* 18

The structure of all poetry is the movement that an active individuality makes in expressing itself. Poetic rhythm ... is the chart of a temperament.

Mina Loy, “Modern Poetry,” *Cook* 132

[P]oetry itself begins in those situations where the voice has to be raised... The voice has to be raised.

James Fenton, *An Introduction to English Poetry* 7–8

Poetic voice is a miracle of creation, subject to analysis yet rarely to explanation. Consider, for instance, one of the most moving short poems in the English language, perhaps written in the opening years of the sixteenth century:

Western wind, when will thou blow,
The small rain down can rain.
Christ, if my love were in my arms
And I in my bed again.

The poetic voice here is crystal clear, yet a mystery. The poem has come down to us in manuscript, by an anonymous author, written in 1503 or perhaps a bit later. The language is simple and lucid, deploying only two polysyllabic words (“Western” and “again”); and the rhyme scheme,

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a quatrain with a single rhyme, *abcb*, is so basic as to be nearly invisible, yet it rings climactically. The poem also tells a clear story: a speaker, out in a storm, suffers from wind and rain yet prays to “Christ” to embrace his love, back in his (or her) bed “again.” The poem does not specify gender, and thus we can read the speaker as either male or female. We have time for only a single reading, but students might wish to revise the following interpretation, which identifies a male speaker in the embrace of a female beloved. In either case, the voice of the poem is so riveting that we don’t have to think much about it.

Indeed, reading poetic voice here seems to require no work at all. Yet that is to the poem’s credit. We can immediately enjoy the utterance, and experience its poignancy. Perhaps we need do no more. Yet something about the poem calls us back, takes us inward: the haunting eloquence compels us to read again (and again). For instance, something doesn’t quite add up; I find myself wanting to know why. Upon inspection, the relation between the first two lines is elliptical, rather than logical. The poem feels passionate, yet exhibits acute thought; it is an artifact of passionate thinking. Yet such an oxymoron pinpoints what we called in the introduction the sublime: a form of heightened poetry that does not aim to persuade or civilize but rather to astonish and transport.

The first line addresses the “Western wind,” and asks a question, “when will thou blow?” Yet the second line does not answer; instead, it intensifies the wind, from “rain” to pelting “rain.” It is precisely in the ellipsis between the two lines that much of the power resides; the absence of rational speech seems to reproduce the chaos of the storm. Even the question is illogical: caught in a storm, why would the poet ask the wind when it will blow? The question has the force of an exclamation: *O Western wind, thou will blow!* Only poetic speech can capture the violent eloquence of *this* wind.

The speech is poetic on several counts. Line 1, for instance, seamlessly combines no fewer than four major rhetorical devices practiced by sixteenth-century schoolboys as part of their humanist curriculum (more on this in a minute). The easiest to spot is *alliteration*, as the poem’s first four words in a modern edited version all begin with the letter “w.” Yet a second device emerges as well, through the comma (one form that a *caesura* or syntactical pause can take), dividing the four words into two parts, creating a sense of balance: “Western wind, when will.” Yet belying the balance, the meter of this opening phrase is emphatic, as if agitated, beginning with an initial trochee (a stressed syllable and an unstressed one), “Western,” followed by a spondee (two stressed syllables): “when will.”

Even the last two syllables of the full opening trimeter line (three metric units or six syllables) are emphatic and agitated, for they form a second spondee: “thou blow.” The sense of exclamation in the first line, then, contradicts the question form that the line takes, perhaps imitating a whirlwind of energy. Is the wind natural, or psychic, even divine?

The narrator may seem to be caught realistically in an actual storm, but, as we have hinted, he brings to his turmoil considerable education. He is particularly educated in the art of rhetoric, the classical art of persuasion, epitomized for the sixteenth century in Cicero, the Roman champion of political liberty speaking inside an imperial frame. In England, the sixteenth century is the first to formally institute the wide-scale recovery of classical rhetoric for the purpose of training boys to function dutifully to the state. The opening two lines combine two further rhetorical devices, known as *apostrophe* and *prosopopeia*. The poet relies on apostrophe by addressing the Western wind; he relies on a modified version of prosopopeia by personifying that wind (modified because the wind does not itself speak) – addressing it as a person, as if it were human, able to hear his voice. The word “prosopopeia” is Greek for “making a mask,” and is an ancient device for drawing attention to the *literariness* of speech, the fictive making of a poem. By personifying the wind, the poet draws attention to his own making of the verse, and alerts his reader to its literary nature: this is not a meteorology report. The fact that the Western wind rhetorically wears a poetic mask tells us that the poem is really about personhood, *the self, human consciousness, and identity* – a topic to which we will return. Rhetorical handbooks of the English Renaissance discuss apostrophe and prosopopeia together, indicating their close relationship, and suggesting that a self-consciously created voice draws attention to its own fabrication. By combining apostrophe with prosopopeia, then, the poet of “Western wind” formalizes the making of poetic fiction itself.

The second line has attracted much admiration, and rightly so. The word “small” can mean “thin,” and the word “can” can mean “gan” (began), but the repetition of “rain” is a final rhetorical device, known as *antistrophe* (the repetition of a closing word in a phrase): “the small rain ... down can rain.” The repetition has the fine rhetorical effect of *pounding*, as does the meter of the trimeter line: an initial iamb, “The small” (an unstressed syllable and a stressed one), followed by two spondees: “rain down can rain.” It does not rain; it howls. Yet the most astonishing feature of the opening two lines lies in a paradox: even though the

human who is the subject of the fiction is present only through his voice, he appears utterly *naked* – exposed to the raw elements. One thinks of King Lear caught out on the heath, a “poor, bare, fork’d animal” (*King Lear* 3.4.107–8), thundering his speeches sublimely to the tempest that pelts him, and taking off his royal clothes to “expos[e]” himself to “feel what wretches feel” (3.4.34). All the more striking here, then, that the prospect of relief comes in the form of a different kind of nakedness: the nakedness of a man in bed with a woman, safe, indoors, together.

In the introduction, we noted that poetic figuration tends to be allusive figuration. Might we also want to look into what it means to write a poem addressing the “Western wind”? As it turns out, the Greeks personified the west wind as Zephyrus, and both Virgil (*Georgics* 1.43–4) and Ovid (*Fasti* 5.195–224) identify the figure with the coming of spring and renewal after autumn and death, depicted when Zephyrus rapes the nymph Cloris, who metamorphoses into the goddess Flora – a myth famously depicted in Botticelli’s *Primavera* and used by Spenser to open *Prothalamion*. In English literature, Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” is famous for using the figure as a symbol of death, to be turned into a figure of renewal, but also of the poet’s prophetic power of renewal: “Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is: / ... / Be through my lips to unawakened Earth / The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind, / If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?” (57–70). Once we know something about the West Wind in the literary tradition, we can see how the concluding two lines of the early sixteenth-century lyric anticipate Shelley with a two-part structure of natural death followed by poetic renewal.

At the same time, since the poet is simultaneously anonymous and oblique, we cannot be certain that he *intends* an allusion to the tradition of the West Wind. We have, then, a clear occasion for invoking the term “intertextuality” in its original poststructuralist sense, because it allows us to see the poem simply as connected to other poems (past as well as future) without assigning “intentionality” to the “author.” Even so, the presence of intertextuality allows us to define “poetic voice” more formally: it is often directly the voice of the poet, sometimes of his or her speaker-narrator (often not identical with the poet), in dialogue scenically with either an auditor who is present or sometimes just the reader, and in dialogue poetically with the voices of the literary tradition, articulating a point of view or a stance on reality, and thus a more or less fully realized poetic character. Because the topic of our poem is the “Western wind,” it might be more than fanciful to account for the poem’s renown by seeing

it finally as a figure for the creation of poetic inspiration (a link made available in the *OED*'s first example under "inspiration").

If the first two lines of the poem form an apostrophe to a classical figure, the West Wind, the concluding two lines form a prayer to the figure of the Christian Messiah. In these lines, the natural world of the personified storm metamorphoses into the artful world of the bedroom, and the full return of the human: "my love ... my arms ... I ... my bed." Yet the prayer to "Christ" has the feel of an expletive, a breathlessly expressed hope, even a fantasy, the urge of wish fulfillment: "*if* my love ... *were* in my arms." Yet she isn't. The storm's violent embrace of the poet in all his nakedness prompts him to dream of a happier embrace with his beloved, openly sexual.

The Christian prayer, then, is thrillingly erotic. The seamless fusion of Christian love between God and man, on the one hand, and sexual love between man and woman, on the other, intimates a robust candor that differs radically from Petrarchism, which features a coy game of sensitive modesty ending in unrequited love. On the eve of Petrarchism in England – that is, within a few years of Wyatt bringing the Italian poet across the Channel – love poetry looks quite different than it will, exhibiting an erotic naturalist realism that will soon give way to Petrarchism's allegorical courtly game and lament.

In sum, the realism of "Western wind" is fundamentally that of the human voice, expressed through learning and art, a rhetoric that reveals an authorial character, or persona: gentle amid his suffering, understating the power of nature rather than hyperbolic in his outrage (like Lear), yet emphatic in his Christian prayer for sexual union as a form of freedom from torment by the natural world – is this a poem about the exposed loneliness of the human caught in the natural world? Or is it a poem about the power of the human voice to call on the reserve of poetry to protect the self through a return to the warmth of touch with a beloved person: "Christ, if my love were in my arms / And I in my bed again"?



"Western wind" challenges a tidy narrative about the development of modern English poetry in the sixteenth century. Well before Skelton self-consciously claims to institute the modern English "laureate" or national poet, and years in front of the breakthrough metrical experiments of Wyatt and Surrey, an unknown poet throws out four lines of sublime English verse that remain unmatched during the next 500 years. How can that be?

The first point to remember is that poets at the beginning of the century were capable of producing technically impressive poems still thrilling to read today. We never want to forget that. The second point is that “Western wind” is a thrilling but tiny artifact – four lines: twenty-six words of English poetry. Missing is what makes Skelton Skelton, Wyatt Wyatt, and Surrey Surrey, and what makes the sixteenth century a milestone in English literary history: indebted as it is to the Middle English triumvirate of Geoffrey Chaucer, John Gower, and John Lydgate, the fully realized presence of the modern English poet himself, his canon of poetry, written within the context of Christian nationhood, with both classical and medieval origins to his “Renaissance” literary career. During the early Tudor era, men (and some women) were writing poetry, most of it in manuscript, and circulating it among friends, but most of the verse is “courtly,” written by courtiers. In particular, poetry is attached to the Henrician court, as exemplified by Skelton, Wyatt, and Surrey, none of whom much puts their poems in print. Even Skelton remains wary of the medium that Spenser will later champion as the fit vehicle for the nation’s laureate poet. Nonetheless, as we look into the pioneering work of these three early Tudor court poets, we need to remember that they do not write in a vacuum, that poetry is being written, that it has been written during the fifteenth century, that it has once been written by Chaucer, and that there is by 1500 a native tradition of English verse (a key figure is Stephen Hawes, author of *Pastime of Pleasure*, discussed in later chapters).

The problem, as we shall see in more detail presently, is that by the beginning of the sixteenth century, the native line of verse-making back to Chaucer had been broken for complicated historical reasons, having much to do with the hundred-year War of the Roses. For much of the fifteenth century, the House of Lancaster fought with the House of York, and only in 1485, at the Battle at Bosworth Field, was civil war resolved. The Lancastrian Henry Tudor defeated the Yorkist King Richard III, and subsequently Henry married Elizabeth, a York bride, to inaugurate the Tudor dynasty that spans the sixteenth century. During this time of political upheaval, the English language evolved dramatically, most notably through the Great Vowel Change, in which pronunciation of the “e” at the end of a word disappeared (Chaucer’s often two-syllable “sprighte” was read as one syllable). Such a change affected the scanning of English verse, and no longer could readers scan a line of Chaucerian verse metrically. This meant that it fell to sixteenth-century poets to invent an English line that could

compete with those in France and Italy. It is this change that leads us to distinguish between the “Middle English” of Chaucer and the “modern English” of Skelton, Wyatt, and Surrey. The simple meter and form of “Western wind,” for all its technical brilliance, could not sustain a competitive national poetry. Poets like Skelton, Wyatt, and Surrey are not simply great artists; they are great experimental stylists. They work hard to solve the metrical problem, and Surrey usually receives credit for building on Wyatt to stabilize the gold standard of English verse, the iambic pentameter line, which he uses in both the rhyme scheme of his Petrarchan sonnets and the blank verse of his translation of Virgilian epic.

Furthermore, as “Western wind” reminds us, modern English poetry develops in spurts, without clear forward motion, sometimes seeming to stop altogether. As this chapter is trying nonetheless to suggest, the meandering, periodically subsiding quest for an English style of poetry does end up leading to the formation of an English literary character, a human identity speaking in a fiction. The character of the poet speaks to the court or nation about political, religious, and even sexual identity.

For the purposes of this book, we can divide the early Tudor era into two phases. The first runs from 1500 to 1529, the year Skelton dies; this part is *pre-Reformational*: the nation’s religious belief is “Catholic,” its political ideology monarchical, and its sexual identity hierarchical (the male is head of the household, and the female subordinate). The second phase runs from 1529 to 1558, from the death of Skelton to the death of Mary I; this part is *Reformational*, since the Protestant Reformation ushered in during the early 1530s changes England dramatically (even during Mary’s re-institution of Catholicism). By 1558, not only is Elizabeth on the throne, but also the country is Protestant; glimmerings of “republican” liberty are challenging monarchy (see the introduction); and the new religion is not only allowing priests to marry but also vocally encouraging partnership in marriage. If Skelton is the major poet of the first phase, Wyatt and Surrey are the major poets of the second. Let us look into each in turn.



Before the Reformation of the 1530s, the dominant poetic voice is unquestionably written by John Skelton. We can go further and say that Skelton is the preeminent poet of voice in the entire early Tudor era. More than anyone, he invents different poetic voices, and thematizes the making of

Dilemata docta in pedagogio

Sacro vatum, whereof to you I breke;

I pray you, let Parot have lyberte to speke.

(92–8)

Aristippus is a Greek associate of Socrates (fifth century BC), a writer of dialogues and historical works known for his hedonism, while the Latin phrase quoted by Parrot means “from where I produce learned arguments in the sacred school of poets.” Here, figuration works not just allusively but also rhetorically, as a rational mode of thought. Yet the key point is the last, and Parrot uses a version of it two more times during the poem (141, 210): “lyberte to speke.” In other words, Skelton multiplies voices in his poem – and his poetry – to assert his freedom of speech, at the very time that Henry VIII tightens up his censorship. In this way, Skelton’s poetic voice is firmly political, committed to the liberty of the poet to say what he pleases, including against those in power like Wolsey. Poetic style operates in the service of a poet-character self-consciously voicing his authority to address the nation. At this time, with literacy rates low, “the nation” means primarily the court, and principally (though not exclusively) men. Voice itself is double in the sense that Skelton uses the print (and manuscript) literacy of the author to fictionalize the orality of his parrot character.

What, more particularly, is the courtly Skeltonic voice? In *Speke, Parott*, it is learned in language, witty, and even biting; above all, it is figurative and allusive, hence formally poetic. For Skelton uses the mask of the loquacious bird to take jabs at his political and ecclesiastical rival. The change from “Western wind” is striking, for now the voice of English verse takes up residence in a historically identifiable poet, and one we will see in chapter 5 to have a full idea of an English poetic career. England’s self-proclaimed laureate is less engaged in the sublime passionate thought fused by Christian prayer and raw sexual realism than he is in rehearsing the courage of poetic freedom from within the precinct of monarchical power.

Skelton’s poetry is riddled with self-conscious moments about his own art, but arguably the most innovative appears in *Philip Sparrow* (circa 1504–6), which opens with a fiction about the enigma of voice itself:

Pla ce bo,

Who is there, who?

Di le xi,

Dame Margery.

Fa, re, mi, mi,

line, then, someone, perhaps Dame Margery, voices the official funeral discourse of the Church, on behalf of Philip, only to be interrupted by someone in the second line speaking English, as if in an aside, “Who is there, who?” Then in the third line, the Latin rite of the Church continues, “I have loved,” from Psalm 114:1. The insertion of “Dame Margery” in line 4 is perplexing, but line 5 appears to be part of a song, followed in line 6 by the question “why?” Only in line 7 does clarification begin, since the narrative that emerges, about the slaying of “Philip Sparrow,” is clear from the poem’s title. The references to the “nunnes” in line 9 and “our” in line 12 suggest a community of mourners, and in particular female mourners, as intimidated by the churchwomen already identified. Although we cannot tell for sure, it appears that the opening verse stanza attempts to represent a multiplicity of voices sounding at a mock-religious funeral for the dead pet: the Latin voice of the Office of the Dead, itself voicing Scripture, perhaps spoken by Dame Margery; the voice of one or two others, asking questions about who is singing and why; and finally, the voice of the poet himself, who rehearses the full panoply of voices.

As it turns out, voice is not simply the medium of the poem but also its major topic. When Jane continues the second verse stanza by comparing her relationship with Philip to that of “Pyramus and Thisbe” (21), Skelton inserts yet another voice, that of Ovid, who tells the story of the two lovers in his *Metamorphoses*, as Shakespeare remembers in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. The mention of the tragic story is the first indication that Skelton writes within a literary tradition, classical and medieval; and it does not take long to discover that poets have been writing elegies on dead birds for centuries, including Ovid himself in *Amores* 2.6, a mock-elegy on the dead parrot of his mistress, Corinna, as well as Catullus in *Odes* 3, whom Ovid imitates. Clearly, Skelton presents himself as a new English Ovid writing “elegy,” at once playfully funereal and erotic.

Jane may be a young girl residing at an abbey, grieving over her dead sparrow, but Skelton animates her voice with the history of literature itself, including English literature, mentioning not merely “Ovid or Virgil” (756), who head a catalogue of poets that includes Petrarch, Sappho, Homer, Theocritus, Sophocles, and Pindar, but also “Gower,” “Chaucer,” and “Lydgate” (784–804). Only to have Jane claim, “These poets of ancients [antiquity], / They are too diffuse [difficult] for me” (767–8). Here, Jane pauses to deploy Skeltonic couplets when addressing the condition of English poetry in the early sixteenth century:

I am but a young maid,
 And cannot in effect
 My style as yet direct
 With English words elect.
 Our natural tongue is rude
 And hard to be ennewed* renewed
 With polishèd terms lusty;
 Our language is so rusty,
 So cankered and so full
 Of frowards*, and so dull, ill-formed things
 That if I would apply
 To write ornately,
 I wot* not where to find know
 Terms to serve my mind.

(770–83)

Jane’s humility about her “style” is in keeping with her character; but she also speaks to the state of poetry in the early Tudor era: the English language is rude, rusty, cankered, and ill formed, unable to compete with languages on the Continent, not just Latin but also French and Italian. Jane also offers a local explanation, referring to the triumvirate of English national verse: Gower, whose “English is old / And of no value told” (784–5); Chaucer, who, although “delectable, / Solacious and commendable,” has had his work “mar[red]” by “men” who have “amended / His English” (790–9); and Lydgate, who writes in so high a style (“after an higher rate”) that no one can understand him (805). Skelton may in part be joking, but it will become a serious century-long project for the English nation to establish its language as a major European one, able to compete with those of other countries for supremacy, and nowhere more supremely than in vernacular poetry. As we now know, this battle was won, and won by the end of the century, as the evidence of Spenser and Sidney, Marlowe and Shakespeare, and Raleigh and Donne testifies. Today, English is the international language; but the battle to make English central pivoted off of Chaucer, Gower, and Lydgate during the early Tudor era, most notably in John Skelton.

What we might notice is that a second battle is being fought, and right within the terms of Jane’s speech: between the “plain” and “eloquent” styles. This has become one of the major topics regarding sixteenth-century poetry, for literary critics have tracked not simply the development of each style but also the battle waged between them. Most famously, in 1939 Yvor Winters polemically rejected the dominant preference at the time for

what he called the “ornate” style, which he saw produced by the Petrarchan poets (principally Sidney and Spenser), in favor of the “plain style,” written by Wyatt but epitomized later by George Gascoigne and such heirs as Raleigh. In 1954, however, C.S. Lewis rejected Winters’s judgment, and favored the “Golden” poetry of Sidney and Spenser over its “Drab” predecessors. If drab poetry is monosyllabic, clear in syntax, unadorned in natural imagery, and heavy on sententious moral thinking, golden poetry is ornate, colorful, and filled with natural images, classical mythology, and heightened emotion. There really are two “styles” to the voice of poetic character in sixteenth-century poetry.

Jane Scrope claims to write only in the plain style: “My style [i]s yet direct.” And she insists that if she were to “write ornately” she would not know what “Terms” to use. Without question, Skelton’s primary style is “plain,” a simple language aiming to teach readers sententious truths. Yet Skelton can move into the eloquent style, and often does, with recurrent polysyllabic words. If in the first part of *Philip Sparrow* Jane speaks mostly in the plain style, in the second part, when Skelton substitutes Jane’s voice for his own, announcing that he will offer “Commendation” of Jane, he often deploys the eloquent style:

Now will I enterprise
 Thorough the grace divine
 Of the Muses nine
 Her beauty to commend,
 If Arethusa will send
 Me influence to indite* compose
 And with my pen to write.
 (856–62)

Increased polysyllabic verse, more complex syntax, mythological allusion, the presence of natural beauty: Skelton merely winds up the ornate watch of his wit, as he next cites as his “influence” not just the god of poetry, Apollo, but also the “Tagus” River, famed in antiquity as a “golden flood” bearing “golden sands” (875–9; see chapter 5).

In this second half of the poem, Skelton repeatedly thematizes the penning of his own poetic voice:

Truth doth me bind,
 ...
 To write and tell

How women excel
 In nobleness;
 As my mistress,
 Of whom I think
 With pen and ink
 For to compile
 Some goodly style;
 For this most goodly flower,
 This blossom of fresh color,
 So Jupiter me succor.

(977–91)

In chapter 2, we will return to Skelton’s portrait of Jane, but for now note simply that his “goodly style” is an unusual fusion of plain and eloquent verse, combining simple diction and direct syntax with colorful imagery, occasionally of stunning “beauty”: “It were an heavenly bliss / Her sugared mouth to kiss” (1039–40). Skelton may claim to write in a “homely style” (1204), but his golden verse often gleefully belies him: “Her kirtle [skirt] so goodly laced, / And under that is braced / Such pleasures that I may / Neither write nor say” (1194–7).



Wyatt’s poetry also exhibits a debate between the plain and eloquent styles, and he practices both, even though he clearly privileges the plain. Yet Wyatt’s use of the plain style is now regarded as among the most sophisticated voices of poetry in modern English. As such, criticism tends to discuss Wyatt’s style in terms of his poetic persona or character, and to call their intersection *voice*.

As we shall see in chapters 4 and 5, Wyatt’s English Protestant voice is one of “inwardness,” and it tends to operate in three principal literary forms: Petrarchan lyric, Horatian satire, and Davidic psalm. Wyatt was trained formally as a diplomat, which means that he had a day job, and wrote poetry on the side – often, it feels, as a form of therapy about the traumas of being a member of the Henrician court. Toward the end of the sixteenth century, George Puttenham will label him a “courtly maker,” along with Surrey; and our most authoritative recent classification sees both poets as “amateurs,” not “laureates” like Spenser (or even “professionals” like Thomas Nashe), because they did not use the

medium of print self-consciously to write a sustained body of verse addressing the destiny of the nation (see chapter 5). Such a view is simultaneously helpful and misleading. It is misleading because it prevents us from seeing the extent to which Wyatt (along with Surrey) does *write the nation*; yet helpful, because it reminds us, not that Wyatt belongs to an English institution of poetry, but precisely that he does not. His most well-known poetry radically rejects the style and form of Skelton's poetry, as well as Skelton's poetic persona as self-professed poet laureate. Inspired less by medieval tradition than by new poetry on the Continent, especially Petrarchan love poetry and Horatian satire, Wyatt embraces what is new about English "Renaissance" culture, and in the process he finds himself embroiled in trying to discover a fit verse medium for what he wants to say.

The story of Wyatt's re-invention of English prosody, with its weird eccentricities that uncannily manage to break free from the strict iambic pentameter line that Surrey will regularize, is too complex to tell here in detail. The good news is that scholars aren't sure what Wyatt was doing, and why. His poetry is among the greatest achievements in the language, yet it operates in defiance of any metrical system known then or now. While we will have plenty of opportunity in the next five chapters to witness Wyatt's weird metrics, here we might look in on passages that self-consciously reflect on the topic of poetic style.

Arguably, "Mine own John Pains" is the premier poem of the early Tudor era, because, more than its competitor, Wyatt's "They flee from me," it reflects formally on the topic of poetry during the early Tudor era. Yet Wyatt's Horatian satire is a mere 103 lines long, written in 34 *terza rima* stanzas, the scheme of Dante's *Divine Comedy* (rhyming *aba*, with the middle or *b* line interlocking in rhyme with the first line of the following stanza), in roughly iambic pentameter. In particular, what makes "Pains" so valuable here is what classicists call "program," a self-conscious meditation on the art and state of English poetry, including on the role of the English poet – his voice and style – in the religious and political destiny of the nation.

In "Pains," Wyatt inventories a long list of reasons why he has left the public world of the Henrician court for retirement to his family home in the countryside, each item beginning "I cannot." He lists what he cannot do that is courtly because he remains committed to "truth," a truth he can find only outside the court. Here is the first disclaimer, which is on poetic style:

Then, though my songs be somewhat plain
And toucheth some that use to feign,
Blame not my lute.

(10–14)

Here Wyatt identifies his “songs” as sung in the “plain” style, and indeed the largely monosyllabic diction and straightforward syntax back him up. He does not rely on a single ornate feature, not even figurative language. Rather, he tells us his purpose in writing, and the audience he addresses: he aims to write plain-style poetry to those willing to listen to the truth of his lute. He does not concern himself with anyone else. Yet, with characteristic wit and complexity, Wyatt does acknowledge that his plain poetry affects “some” that are “use to feign” – that falsify through the kind of infidelity he goes on to accuse his lady of committing, but also perhaps those who write feigning verse, that is to say, imitative poetry. Unsurprisingly, then, the lute functions impressively as a metonym, a figurative object animated with its own artistic subjectivity.

Wyatt uses such self-conscious verse to create for himself a distinct poetic persona: solemn, inward, intensely self-interested, yet opaque in authorial identity – always inflected with the court. He is a plain-speaking man of truth, critical of duplicitous women, yet eager to write amid their company, originating his verse in neither a divine muse nor a beautiful lady but rather in a poetic instrument that he commands through his spoken voice. Like the later laureate poet Spenser, Wyatt speaks from an inward authenticity that gives voice to the timbre of an outer moral strength:

Blame not my lute, for he must sound
Of this or that as liketh me;
For lack of wit the lute is bound
To give such tunes as pleaseth me.

(1–4)

Singing paradoxically in front of others to please himself, Wyatt gives austere expression to the plain-style voice of modern English poetry.



Even if Wyatt does not often reflect on his own style, he ends up crystallizing what he calls in another poem “my sparkling voice” (“If amorous faith” 6). His voice is so sparkling that it acquires a literary afterlife in the

poetry of his heir, the earl of Surrey. Yet Surrey surpasses Wyatt in this arena by writing no fewer than three complete lyric poems ventriloquizing the voice of the female, two of them in the voice of his wife, Frances de Vere. The practice of sixteenth-century male poets taking over the female voice has been studied in detail during the past 20 years or so, but curiously the major studies neglect Surrey's pioneering work. Whereas some feminists have been critical of the practice as a device for silencing women, others have attended to the ways that male poets rely on the female voice to process the trauma of print authorship.

Surrey did not publish his ventriloquizing poems, and clearly he wrote them for the benefit of his wife (and friends); they do not appear in print until *Tottel's Miscellany* of 1557. Nonetheless, the poems have considerable significance in the development of English poetry: no poet since Chaucer shows such sympathy for women. In contrast, Wyatt had written only a single poem ventriloquizing a woman, and it is satirical. Yet it is in the context of Wyatt bringing Petrarchism to England that we can measure Surrey's achievement.

Most often, critics approach Surrey's poems in the female voice biographically. Unlike Wyatt, who was unhappily married and lived apart from his wife, Surrey lived companionately with Frances, starting in 1533 when they were barely teenagers, and together they produced five children. Despite the arrangement of their marriage by their parents, the earl's infamous high-strung character, his frequent moments of collapse, and the aristocratic arrogance that brought him to the block around the age of 30, Surrey's relationship with his wife seems to have been one of genuine affection. Biographers believe that Surrey wrote both poems to his wife when he was on military command at Boulogne, France, in 1544-6. Intriguingly, Surrey had requested that his wife and children be allowed to join him, but Henry VIII denied the request, keeping the soldier separate from his family, and opening a floodgate to the literary complaint that the poems rehearse.

Surrey's two lyric poems about his wife offer a stunning challenge, not simply to Wyatt, but also to Western Petrarchism, and indeed to the long literary tradition of silencing women; and they even rewrite Virgilian national epic in light of Chaucerian romance, Ovidian elegy, and Homeric epic. Critics recognize that in both poems Surrey models the female voice on Penelope, who endures 20 years of waiting for Odysseus to return from the Trojan War – without registering the ramifications. First, in another poem, "Geve place, ye lovers," Surrey uses Penelope to evoke Homeric and Virgilian epic; in this 30-line poem of five six-line stanzas (rhyming *ababcc*

in tetrameter meter), the poet boldly asserts the superiority of his “ladies beawtie” to those of the men he addresses (3 in Jones, *Surrey* 7). The effect of comparing his wife to Penelope is to miniaturize Homeric epic – a principle that Surrey highlights in the two poems ventriloquizing Frances. Both “O happy dames” and “Good ladies” ventriloquize the female voice as it addresses a community of fellow women, calling to them to bond together as an antidote to separation from their husbands. Both poems share the Petrarchan metaphor of the “ship” at sea (“O happy dames” 9), refer to “dreams” about the absent husband (“O happy dames” 15; “Good ladies” 17 in Jones, *Surrey* 22), and engage in the Petrarchan idiom of “burn[ing]” desire (“O happy dames” 20; “Good ladies” 35). Yet both poems equally feature what “O happy dames” calls Frances’s “restless mind” (32) and “Good ladies” her “unquyet mynd” (34) – that is to say, female inwardness. “Good ladies” is arguably the more remarkable, and we have time to glance at it alone.

“Good ladies” uses a striking vocational metaphor of address: “Stepp in your foote, come take a place, and mourne with me awhyle” (2). The metaphor is that of the dance, yet Surrey uses song to put the dance in motion: a woman (the poet’s wife) calls on a troupe of women to join her in a dance and use their voice to “mourne” with her “awhyle.” Yet we can detect a pun on *metric* “foote”: the dance represents the making of the poem itself. The use of poetic art to combat the loneliness of marital separation is not simply a metaphor but the subject of the poem. Consequently, the poet has his wife repeat the metaphor – and the pun – a few lines later: “Come youe yet once agayne, and sett your foote by myne, / Whose wofull plight, and sorowes great, no tongue may well defyne” (7–8). Here the link with voice is explicit, with the second line wittily denying the therapeutic power of poetry that the poem aims to transact. That the voice speaks in the epic register emerges a few lines later, when the landscape of the *Odyssey* comes into view:

My lord and love ...
 Hath fortune sent to passe the seas, in haserd of his health.
 That I was wontt for to embrace, contentyd myndes,
 Ys now amydd the foming floodds, at pleasure of the wyndes.
 (9–12)

Yet in an aside, the poet has his wife classify her epic style as “plaine”: “although my hope doth tell me plaine / With short returne he comes anon”

(15–6). Indeed, the diction is monosyllabic, the syntax straightforward, and the poem unadorned with mythological imagery or golden color.

In particular, the poem focuses on the Penelope-like spouse recording her “fearefull dreames” of her husband, whom she imagines locked in an embrace – not with her, but with the “roring seas” – and she is left to determine “yf they be trew or no” (17–9). In the process, the poet records a remarkable series of inset voices, beginning with his spouse’s:

And with a kysse me thinckes I say, “Now well come home, my knight;
 ...”
 Then lyvelye doth he looke, and salvith* me agayne, heals, soothes
 And saith, “My deare, how is it now that you have all this payne?”
(24–8)

In addition to the voice of the poet Surrey writing the poem, and the ventriloquized voice of Frances speaking to the “Good ladies,” we witness the dialogue of voices recorded between husband and wife inside the wife’s dream. At the close of the poem, the range of the ventriloquized voice extends when Frances addresses first herself (“And then unto my self I saye ...” [39]) and then “Ye wyndes,” as she tells the elements to bring her husband home “safelye,” so that together they can “cure a wight that lyveth in distresse” (41–4).

While both of Surrey’s Frances poems are subject to critique for their display of narcissism (the highly strung earl voices his arrogance, imagining that his wife misses him), Surrey almost certainly wrote these poems to *help* both his wife and a group of women friends whose husbands had left for battle with him. The poems are pioneering not simply for ventriloquizing the female voice sympathetically but also for representing poetic voice self-consciously during the early Tudor era.



To conclude this chapter, we might turn to a much-anthologized poem outside the canons of the era’s three most notable poets: “I loathe that I did love” by Thomas, Lord Vaux, first published in *Tottel’s Miscellany*. The poem is famous because in *Hamlet* Shakespeare presents his Gravemaker singing a garbled version during the cemetery scene of Act 5, when the Prince and Horatio witness the funeral of Ophelia. In a way that Vaux could not have predicted, the world’s most famous playwright puts the old Tudor lyric center

stage, in a play renowned for creating a watershed model for a new European mind-set. What has not quite been registered is that in Vaux's aristocratic poem, Shakespeare finds the authentic populist voice of modernity.

The aristocratic poet speaks in the popular voice quite technically, since his subject is the great leveler, Death, who, as Hamlet sees when the Gravemaker sings Vaux's poem, makes no distinction between kings and clowns (*Hamlet* 5.1.202–12). On the surface, Vaux's poem is a classic song of repentance in the face of death, expressive of the medieval idea of *contemptus mundi* (contempt of the world), in the voice of the sixteenth-century "amateur" poet:

My Muse doth not delight
Me as she did before;
My hand and pen are not in plight
As they have been of yore.
For reason denies
This youthly idle rhyme,
And day by day to me she cries,
Leave off these toys in time.

(13–20)

The poet identifies himself as an English amateur, for he uses a lyric poem to repent of writing poems as idle toys of youth, anticipating Gascoigne and other Elizabethans. Not simply a recognition of death, the poem is also self-conscious about its own amateur making, and thus at odds with the major national poems published in *Tottel*, especially Wyatt's poems about "Britain" and Surrey's poems about Wyatt (discussed in later chapters).

Vaux's poem is 56 lines long, 14 four-line stanzas in broken poulter's measure, which is a two-line unit with a six-foot line followed by a seven-foot one. Vaux simply divides each line in two, making a quatrain. In keeping with the song idiom, the diction is once more monosyllabic, the syntax direct, and the imagery plain and unadorned. At the center of the poem is the central recognition of maturity: when we're young, we think we're eternal; as we age, we learn we "waste to dust" (56). Like many "medieval" poems of the sixteenth century, "I loathe that I did love" is grounded in abstraction and morality, reaching for a universalizing sententiousness devoid of the particular, although in this case the absence of individuation has a structural force at once grim and witty. Is this the voice of the poet, or of the foe who relentlessly tracks him, "that fell sergeant, Death" (*Hamlet* 5.2.336)? Paradoxically, the poem resonates through concrete

images: “Gray hairs,” “hand and pen,” “pick-ax and spade,” and “barèd skull.” Yet there’s nothing personal about any of them. It is Vaux’s fusion of the concrete with the universal along the road to death that gives the poem its distinctive voice.

By assigning Vaux’s poem to the Gravemaker, Shakespeare appears to find something witty, even comical, in the early Tudor voice. Certainly, it is comical that a lowly sexton would voice the refined courtly lyric of Lord Vaux – a transposition that itself speaks to the Prince’s recognition about the equalizing fate of kings and commoners. Puttenham calls Vaux “a man of much facility in vulgar [vernacular] makings” (Vickers 210), and it seems striking that the poem contains barely a single reference to Christianity (33–4). In terms of diction, the poem is not simply “vulgar” but also secular. Yet Puttenham goes on to say that “his commendation lieth chiefly in the facility of his meter, and the aptness of his descriptions such as he taketh upon him to make, namely in sundry of his songs, wherein he showeth the counterfeit action very lively and pleasantly” (Vickers 212). Puttenham does not mention “I loathe that I did love,” but his comment pertains to this poem: Vaux uses “meter” in a “lively and pleasant” way, creating the poetic voice of character. This character is not simply secular, universalizing, and moral, but, in the face of annihilation, witty and comical. Presumably, this is what Shakespeare saw.

In Act 5, scene 1 of *Hamlet*, the Gravemaker sings three of Vaux’s 14 stanzas: numbers 1, 3, and 8. The Gravemaker repeats the last two lines of stanza 8, making a few changes:

A house of clay for to be made
 For such a guest most meet.
 (“I loathe that I did
 love” 31–2)

O, a pit of clay for to be made
 For such a guest is meet.
 (*Hamlet* 5.1.96–7, 120–1)

If Shakespeare’s achievement in the final act of *Hamlet* is to move the secular into a transcendent key, as some critics argue, we might discern how these are the very features of the poetic style of voice in Vaux’s poem. Not simply does Vaux speak about the landscape of the cemetery, making it apt for the Gravemaker’s song, but he manages to preempt Shakespeare in discovering an English voice that we recognize today.