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23. Tudor Versification and the Rise of Iambic Pentameter

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The iamb might be said to have attained the maximum of its authority over English verse sometime in the 1570s. At this, the poet George Gascoigne was mildly abashed. “[W]e use none other but a foot of two sillables,” he sighs,

whereof the first is depressed or made short, and the second is elevate and made long. And surely I can lament that wee are fallen into suche a playne and simple manner of wryting, that there is none other foote used but one ... But since it is so, let us take the forde as we finde it, and lette me set downe unto you suche rules or precepts that even in this playne foote of two sillables you wreste no woorde from his natural and usuall sounde.

(Smith 1967: 1.50)

Gascoigne's pragmatic resolve to take the ford as he found it secured his place in the history of criticism, for his "Certayne Notes of Instruction" – a treatise published with his *Posies* in 1575 – is the first systematic discussion of English versifying. That fact might seem surprising, since poets had been writing English verse for centuries. Why had there been no such manual before? Or, contrarily, why was one suddenly necessary in 1575, if there had been such a long tradition of verse composition? Why is Gascoigne embarrassed about the plainness and simplicity of his native tongue; to what standard of ornament or complexity was he comparing it? And that ford: From what historical bank or shoal was Gascoigne launching himself? And what was waiting for English poetry on the other side?

Answering these questions will require a survey of the relations between poetic theory and practice over the full sixteenth century, the century during which, it is often and justly said, the terms were set for the next four hundred years of English prosody. Such a survey is the project of this chapter, from Wyatt's experiments to the impassioned utterance of Shakespeare's plays. Nonetheless it will be useful to begin in the middle, with Gascoigne, a poet who aspired not to experiment but to establish and exemplify a norm of rhythmic regularity. Consider the opening lines of "Gascoigne's Woodmanship":

My worthy lord, I pray you wonder not
To see your woodman shoot so oft awry,
Nor that he stands amazed like a sot,
And lets the harmless deer (unhurt) go by. (Jones 2002: 196)

To review some of the most commonly used terms in modern metrics: The scansion marks above these lines pick out the stressed (ˈ) and the unstressed (˘) syllables. The alternations of stress define the poem's rhythm, how it keeps time; by listening for that rhythm as we read, we can recognize the poem's meter, the abstract pattern of stress that the rhythm of actual lines will fulfill, temper, or balk. In Gascoigne's case, the operative word is almost always "fulfill." All of the lines above are made up of alternating unstressed and stressed syllables, the repeating rhythmic unit, or "foot," called an iamb (˘ ˈ). Each line has five iambs in succession: Hence, iambic pentameter. That label is not one that Gascoigne or anyone else of his time uses; even the word "scansion" does not enter the language for another hundred years. But in his "Notes," Gascoigne gives verse examples where he uses "/" to mark what we readily hear as a stressed syllable, and "\" to mark an unstressed syllable. His word is "accent," grave and light.

Metrical Contract and Poetic License

Linguists and prosodists today generally agree that syllable stress is produced by a combination of elevated pitch, increased volume and duration, and sharper articulation. All polysyllabic words have native stress patterns (carpenter, not carpenter), and the syntax and meaning of sentences affect how stress is deployed among their words, including monosyllables

(I wouldn't dream of it; I wouldn't dream of it, but she would). A stress – based meter organizes words and sentences so that the stresses they carry have some rhythmic regularity. Gascoigne declares his "accent" to be a matter of "length or shortnesse, elevation or depression of sillables," which is to say, duration and pitch. To the controversial nature of this account, and the submerged conflict between the claims for duration and

pitch, we will return shortly. For immediate purposes what is important is that he considers them both to be functions of the “natural emphasis” of language.

For example of th' emphasis or natural sound of words, this word *Treasure* hath the grave accent upon the first syllable; whereas if it should be written in this sorte *Treasure*, nowe were the second syllable long, and that were cleane contrarie to the common use wher-with it is pronounced.

(Smith 1967: 1.50)

Gascoigne's instructions are intended to save the poet from conflicts between that natural emphasis – stress, as we know it from ordinary use – and metrical expectation. The poet's craft consists in so ordering his sentences that word – stress and metrical stress coincide. The first four lines of “Gascoigne's Woodmanship” accomplish this alignment unimpeachably, and in so doing, they make what the modern poet John Hollander would call a clear, and especially stringent, “metrical contract” (Hollander 1970: 181).

That concept of a metrical contract deserves brief elaboration. It is a way of talking about the poem's implicit commitment, secured primarily by the example of its opening lines, to conform its rhythms to particular metrical expectations. The contract is a local phenomenon, redrawn with each new poem, though it depends heavily on our recognition of such pre – established arrangements as iambic pentameter. Like a legal contract, it is written in the language of its historical moment, so a poem that sounds like the 1570s – when, as we are beginning to see, most of the verse written in England was strictly regular – carries an additional expectation of conformity. And of course, also like a legal contract, the metrical contract involves two parties, the poem and the reader. The opening of “Woodmanship” instructs us to expect the poem to unfold as a chain of iambs. We carry out our side of the bargain when we try to hear subsequent lines as realizations of that pattern.

The question of how and why a reader might *try* to hear a line as, say, iambic pentameter – try to establish its conformity with a local, an authorial, a period contract – goes to the practical challenge of historical metrics, the balancing act between expectation and local innovation. Gascoigne's regularity depends upon a particular set of devices for adjusting the syllable count in his favor, devices whose frequency and accessibility shifted over time. In order to collaborate with him, we have to know them too. The final line of “Woodmanship” poses an exemplary problem: “*A tedious tale in rhyme, but little reason*” (Jones 2002: 200). There seems to be an extra syllable, making for an anapest (˘ ˘ ˘) where the second iamb should be. But we have already seen how the poem has struck a metrical contract unfriendly to anapests; moreover, an experienced reader will come to know the rarity of so – called “anapestic substitution” (an anapest for an iamb) in the pentameter of the period. Fortunately for the integrity of the contract, the anomalous foot can be brought back into line if “– ious” is pronounced as one syllable rather than two. The dropping of an unstressed vowel is called “syncope;” linguists call this particular variety of syncope a y – glide (since the word is pronounced *teed – y us*). It is a tactic Gascoigne uses freely in the poem, dropping a syllable from “*experience*” and “*courtiers*” and even “*Mayor's*” (pronounced “*mairs*”). He can do the same to – *tion* when he wants to, sounding it as one syllable in “*That vain presumption makes my heart to swell,*” but expanding it to two when the regularity of the line demands it: “*My mind is rapt in contemplation*” (Jones 2002: 198). Such shifts suggest why Gascoigne thinks of “poetical license” as “a shrewde fellow” (Smith 1967: 53).

Other common kinds of license abound in his lines. What rhetoricians call “syna-*loepha*” allows for dropping one vowel when two are adjacent across a word boundary: So “the emphasis” becomes “th'emphasis.” Consonants between two vowels may sometimes be dropped by “synaeresis”: The line

“*May shoot amiss, even as your woodman doth*” becomes regular if we hear “even” as the single syllable “e' en.” These techniques exploit elisions and contractions that were consistent features of the spoken language of the time, but linguistic change could be turned to good account as well. The past –tense marker *-ed* was less and less frequently sounded as a separate syllable, yet it remained a resource for poetry. Gascoigne counts it when needed (“*But when his bonnet buttoned with gold*”), and not when not

“Unfeathered there his first affection” [Jones 2002: 197]). Other, more obviously outdated word – forms find their way into verse too: “ydone for done, adowne for downe” (Smith 1967: 1.54), as he says in the “Notes,” or the already old-fashioned-sounding third person singular ending *-eth*. (It is not least for such reasons of metrical expediency that archaic forms tend to last longer in poetry than they do in prose.) Poetic license, then, amounts to a set of resources for “mak[ing] words longer, shorter, of mo sillables, of fewer, newer, older, truer, falsen,” and Gascoigne promises the attentive student that “your owne judgement and readyng will soone make you espie such advauntages” (Smith 1967: 1.53–4).

Spying these advantages does take practice. Hearing verse historically is a dialectical business, in which reading a great many lines gradually shapes your expectations, even as your evolving expectations shape your reading of any particular line. Theory plays a part too – Gascoigne is at pains to tell us how regular he thinks poetry should be, and the modern scholar Eleanor Berry wisely observes that “among Elizabethan theorists ... a view of meter as a *pattern artificially imposed on the words*, rather than as one realized by, and to be abstracted from, the natural pronunciation of the lines, was prevalent” (1981: 117) – but scansion will always be a practical art. With that practicality in mind, one of the reasons to master the repertory of devices by which a poem like “Woodmanship” can be reduced to regularity is so that you can recognize the rare moments when it cannot. Susanne Woods’ excellent study of Renaissance prosody identifies one such,

“And Tully taught me somewhat to discern, / Between sweet speech and barbarous rudeness” (Woods 1984: 123). “Tully” is Cicero, the Roman rhetorician, and Gascoigne records a conventional gratitude for tuition in classical eloquence. The twist is the special contempt for barbarism in the wrenching of “rudeness.” Barbarians, apparently, botch their accents. Another such disruption is occasioned by a vision of Gascoigne’s misspent youth: “Wherein my dazzled eyes only behold / The black hour of my constellation” (Jones 2002: 198). There is a slight perturbation in “only,” perhaps an iamb, more apt to be pronounced as a trochee (˘ ˘). But the real shock is the heavy stress on “hour,” which overwhelms the modest preposition “of that follows. One could call it a trochaic substitution in the second foot, though that description hardly does justice to the sudden congestion at such a harrowing moment. Woods calls such effects “mimetic,” because they try to find some rhythmic equivalent for what the line is about, or the feeling it is filled with. They register with proper force only when we have a sense of the local, authorial, and historical contract that they break. There is no license for such a line, only the excuse its meaning makes for it.

The rarity of such excuses and the clarity of the contract are what make Gascoigne such a good school for versifying, for us and for his successors. We have to look backward, however, to understand what an important, complex, and perhaps unforeseeable cultural achievement that regularity was. Sir Thomas Wyatt is the man traditionally accorded the honor of being the first poet of England’s late – blooming Renaissance, and his verse sounds quite different from Gascoigne’s:

They flee from me that sometime did me seek
 With naked foot stalking in my chamber.
 I have seen them gentle, tame, and meek
 That now are wild and do not remember. (Jones 2002: 80)

The opening line of the lyric we know as “They flee from me” scans as good iambic pentameter; the second is more awkward, but still seems to have five stresses; the third wants an unstressed syllable at the start (such lines are often called “headless”), but is otherwise regular. What about the fourth? It is hard to hear more than four stresses there, and by the time we get to the end of the poem

“But since that I so kindly am served / I would fain know what she hath deserved”) our faith in the meter is likely to be as precarious as Wyatt’s in the woman who serves him so “kindly.” “Such lines have led generations of readers to wonder if he can be accounted a competent versifier at all: As a reviewer in the *TLS* put it in 1929, “The mystery of Wyatt is simply whether he knew what he was doing or whether he did not.”

That skepticism has sometimes extended to Wyatt’s ability to hear, let alone reliably manage, metrical stress. But

his expert and elegant songs put the lie to that hypothesis:

Forget not yet the great assays,
 The cruel wrong, the scornful ways,
 The painful patience in denays.
 Forget not yet. (Jones 2002: 77)

The four – stress line had been a mainstay of English poetry from its beginnings, and ballad stanzas like this one were the great resource of popular song as well as of courtly poetry. (In Anglo Saxon verse and in the so – called “alliterative revival” of the later fourteenth century, alliteration points up the stresses; one still hears that influence in “painful patience.”) Wyatt handles the form well enough that his fluency with iambs is beyond question. What changes, then, when his line lengthens? The metrical theorist Derek Attridge has suggested that the five – stress line in English developed precisely as a kind of resistance to song, in pursuit of registers high or low, heroic or conversational or meditative, that song cannot easily accommodate (Attridge 1982: 124). So perhaps Wyatt just wants something closer to speech, or closer to thinking, than to singing. But there is a more specific literary historical story to tell, too.

Native, Continental, and Classical Verse Traditions

Wyatt was a prominent courtier in the court of Henry VIII, with a career that carried him in and out of royal favor, and in and out of prison, more than once; he received from his father the sort of humanist education that was still unusual for young men of the time, and his service as a diplomat introduced him to poets from France and Italy. This meant that Wyatt stood at a confluence of the three major tributaries of sixteenth – century English verse, the native, continental, and classical traditions. The first two were most important to his prosody. The dominant figure in the native tradition was Geoffrey Chaucer, who wrote a ten – syllable or decasyllabic line in *The Book of Troilus* and (with somewhat greater liberties) in *The Canterbury Tales*. Most modern scholars agree that his line usually carries five stresses, but the persistence even today of respectable dispute suggests how tricky the question can be. Take these lines from the opening of the *Tales*:

Whan Zephyrus eek with his swete breeth
 Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
 The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
 Hath in the Ram his half cours y-ronne. (Chaucer 1987: 23)

The scansion above treats the lines as though they were regular iambic pentameter, but it will be obvious that keeping that meter – and the syllable count – requires some licenses we did not see in Gascoigne. Most important is the optional sounding of that final –e in words like “swete” and “yonge.” What would be the relatively heavy one – two of “young sun” becomes the sprightliness of “younge sonne” if you hear the grace syllable in between, and the brisk movement that results is a hallmark of Chaucer’s verse. By Wyatt’s time, however, the final –e was no longer pronounced in ordinary speech, and that meant that sixteenth – century readers heard the line differently. Without those e’s, it is much easier to fall into a loose four – stress pattern, like that of the old Middle English half – lines: “The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne.” The fact that one of the five stresses in a Chaucerian line is typically much weaker – if we do count five stresses – makes the shift to four easier still:

“Whan Zephyrus eek with his sweete breeth.” Such lines do not suggest a poet thinking about metrical feet, which is to say, about a sequence of roughly equivalent units of rhythm; Chaucer is more likely to have had the principles of French prosody in mind (about which more shortly). Gascoigne, for his part, thought “Chaucer hath used the same libertie in feete and measures that the Latinists do use” (Smith 1967: 1.50). Such confusion

suggests that his verse is at best an equivocal model for what would become iambic pentameter.

There were other native muses of the ten – syllable line, the most important of whom was probably Chaucer's self – proclaimed student John Lydgate. Lydgate's meter is notoriously ungainly, and he seems to have had an ear for some of the more rare and eccentric of his master's rhythms – for example, what has come to be called a broken – backed line, which wants an unstressed syllable in the middle (“*So as she sat floating in the sea*” [Lydgate 1966: 68]). Many of Wyatt's lines have precedent in Lydgate's gallery of awkward innovations. Wyatt, however, was also a translator – most of his poems in longer lines imitate Italian originals, more or less closely – and the influence upon him of the continental languages was considerable too. French prosody of the period was much more explicitly codified than English, and it was defined by strict syllable count and a rhythm of phrases rather than stress – based feet. The canonical twelve – syllable line or *alexandrine* falls into two halves (hemistichs), with a strong pause or caesura in the middle; the crucial accents fall before the caesura and at the line's end. English lines that particularly privilege those positions often betray a French influence, and Wyatt can be shown to have drawn on works by Jean Marot and others. His deeper engagement, however, was with Italian poetry. He seems to have been the first Englishman to translate Petrarch, and he borrowed heavily from Serafino D'Aquilano and the psalms of Pietro Aretino. Italian prosody is syllabic, like French, though with a greater regard for accentual regularity. Perhaps the most important lesson there for Wyatt was what George Wright identifies as “frequent use of elisions, of lengthenings and shortenings of syllables within the line,” which he used “in order to render in an English equivalent the Italian manner of racing over some syllables and pausing importantly on others” (Wright 1988: 32). Petrarch's rhythms are what Wright calls “expressive,” and in this regard particularly Wyatt was his attentive student.

What does it mean to read Wyatt with this confluence of traditions in mind, native and continental? The final stanza of “They flee from me” makes for a good proof text. The speaker who began the poem by recounting his fall from courtly favor has, in the second stanza, a kind of memory – vision of one lover in particular. Now he reassures himself that she was real:

*It was no dream: I lay broad waking,
But all is turned thorough my gentleness
Into a strange fashion of forsaking.
And I have leave to go of her goodness.* (Jones 2002: 80)

The first line has a strong hemistich feeling to it, with that stark caesura in the middle; maybe French, or maybe the old Anglo Saxon and Middle English half line. Its symmetry insists on the speaker's need to tell himself the same thing twice. The next line, if we count the – *ed* in “turned” and elide “thorough,” is a chain of iambs – perhaps their evenness figures the very ease with which he finds he has been persuaded to let her go? Next is the broken – backed line from Lydgate, which sticks appropriately on

“strange fashion. “The fourth seems to stumble at the end, with what has become, in this poem, the uncanny word “*goodness*” – though then again, perhaps we are to hear a French stress pattern, as in “*finesse*.” (“Germanic disyllables tend to be trochees, French disyllables iambs; and though the influence of French on English pronunciation is waning in the period, its inflections are still available and can carry with them a hint of courtly refinement.) There is no metrical contract to which we can hold Wyatt, except perhaps the promise to stay within hailing distance of ten syllables. But the range of resources he draws upon is remarkably broad, and they are all at the service of a voice that is rhetorically urgent and torqued by strong feeling. The meter is expressive, usually more expressive than it is metrical. The line of five iambs is available, but it is not yet a norm.

The Standard Line

The job of establishing iambic pentameter as a standard line in English poetry – the standard Gascoigne so effectively consolidates – would fall instead to Wyatt's successor Henry Howard, the Earl of Surrey. Later

generations looked back at the two of them as the “courtly makers” who “greatly polished our rude & homely maner of vulgar Poesie” (Smith 1967: 62 – 3). Surrey had a standing at court that Wyatt never had, as heir to a great family (his father was Duke of Norfolk) and a commander in the king's armies. Still, most of his poems circulated as Wyatt's did, passed around on loose sheets and copied into commonplace books among coterie of like – minded aristocrats: Sonnets from the Italian, as well as sixaines (six lined stanzas rhymed ABABCC), songs, and what came to be called “poulter's measure” (rhyming couplets built from alternating lines of 12 and 14 syllables). His five – stress line sounds very different from Wyatt's, as a quatrain from one of his epitaphs for his great predecessor will make clear:

A visage stern and mild, | where both did grow
 Vice to contemn, | in virtue to rejoice;
 Amid great storms | whom grace assured so
 To live upright | and smile at fortune's choice. (Jones 2002: 111)

The pattern of five iambs is unmistakable, and the fundamentals of the contract upon which Gascoigne would insist 30 years later are well established here for the first time. There are hints of what would become the conventional range of variation, too. For example, the trochaic substitution at the beginning of the second line, the most common departure from strict iambic movement (sometimes called an inversion, \bar{u} to \bar{u}). The lines are mostly end – stopped, closing either with a full period or a significant syntactic break. Relatively modest variations of word order are adopted to assure regularity (“in virtue to rejoice”). And perhaps most importantly, the position of the caesura – the pause that happens in almost all long lines – has stabilized. In Wyatt, it roams wherever his rhetorical intensities require it; in Surrey, as marked above (|), it is to be found usually after the fourth syllable, occasionally after the sixth, and infrequently elsewhere. The foot that follows that caesura becomes another licit site for inversion, and keeping that pause near the middle makes end – stopping easier, for the second part of the line can harbor a complete phrase and avoid the spilling over of syntax prosodists call “enjambment.” In all this, an ear for French verse, and for the strong, line – defining caesura of the *alexandrine* (and the decasyllable, as well), has an important part to play.

Surrey's real departure from Wyatt, however, is a result of his classicism, the third of the traditions that converged upon the courtly makers. Wyatt translated bits of Seneca and Horace, and his ethical postures have Stoic lineaments, but his prosody mostly tangles native and romance strands. Surrey's greatest poetic labor was his translation of Virgil's *Aeneid*, and the heroic line he forged for the task aspires to be an English equivalent to the Latin hexameter. The following passage is from his rendering of Book IV, where Dido begins her steep descent into lovesickness, taking Aeneas's son as a momentary surrogate for his father:

Alone she mourns | within her palace void,
 And sets her down | on her forsaken bed;
 And absent him she hears, | when he is gone,
 And seeth eke. | Oft in her lap she holds
 Ascanius, | trapped by his father's form.
 So to beguile | the love cannot be told. (Jones 2002: 108–9)

Many of the marks of mid – century pentameter are here, the caesura after the fourth or sixth syllables, the occasional trochaic substitution (at the beginning of the last line, and after the caesura in the fourth and fifth). There are also effects that might transgress Gascoigne's stricter proprieties, like the painfully sharp enjambment of “holds / Ascanius.” Still it is impressively regular, and most strikingly, there is no rhyme. Without rhyme as a herald, the line requires greater rhythmic assurance to declare its boundaries, and Surrey supplies that assurance.

There was some Continental precedent for unrhymed verse, but in English Surrey's innovation was unprecedented, and it was above all a tactic for drawing nearer to Virgil. Perhaps for drawing nearer to Aeneas, too: Surrey's idea of Englishness was vested in the ancient prerogatives of the nobility, and his biographer William Sessions suggests that as his fortunes at court waned he may have come to identify himself with Virgil's outcast hero. He was executed by Henry VIII in the paranoia of the bloated king's final year, but he left the heroic potential of blank verse as his legacy (Sessions 2003).

The story of English verse between Surrey and Gascoigne is mostly a story of the consolidation, even stiffening, of this new regularity. As Gerald Spiegel (1980) observes, the principal charge against vernacular poetry was that it was rude and rough – hewn. Roger Ascham's judgment was both typical and influential: In his *Schoolmaster* (1570) he disparages “barbarous and rude Ryming” (Smith 1967: 1.30), and tells the much – repeated story of how the custom of rhyme had been founded by the Goths in the ruins of the late, lamented Roman Empire. (*Rithmi* was used in medieval Latin to mean accentual verse, but the word entered English, via Old French, as *rime*; hence a deep connection, not to say confusion, between rhyme and stress – based rhythm: See Attridge 1974: 94.) As if in answer to such criticisms, poets like George Turberville and Thomas Churchyard tick like a metronome. Even Wyatt became regular when his poems were printed in Richard Tottel's *Songes and Sonnettes* (1557), where they were revised to sound like Surrey. (Tottel supplies the new ending, “But since that I so kindly thus am served, / How like you this, what hath she now deserved?” [Rollins 1965: 1.52]) One practical objective of these mid – century writers, and editors, seems to have been to equalize stress across the line as much as possible. There is a reluctance to use polysyllables, and a discomfort with the idea of secondary stress – the stress that falls on the *a* of “secondary” itself – as though a word should not be expected to carry more than one accent. (This tendency conspires with a general preference for nativist English diction, even in a classicist like Surrey; English words of three or more syllables tend to be Latinate.) Poulter's measure and fourteeners, couplets of fourteen syllables, also prosper during this period as fleeting but potent rivals to blank verse. Such lines were ultimately too close to song to become enduring answers to the Latin hexameter, as a couplet from Thomas Phaer's *Aeneid* will suggest:

“A wood with bushes broad there was, begrown with bigtree boughs, / Whom thick entangling thorns and briery brambles filled with brows” (Jones 2002: 135). Add line breaks after syllable eight and you end up with a ballad stanza. That effect may have doomed such lines in the long term, but c. 1560, the very strength of the caesura and the authority of the four – stress line ensured a formidable regularity.

Quantitative Verse

It is important to observe, however, that such accentual regularity in practice did not imply correspondingly clear statements in theory. The modern recognition that these English meters are accentual – syllabic – that is, that they honor imperatives both of syllable count and stress pattern – was not decisively articulated until the eighteenth century. Discussions of meter were much more likely to default to the “measure” of simple syllable count. And if Gascoigne was the first Englishman to think systematically about “natural emphasis,” his equivocation between pitch and duration (“depressed or made short ... elevate and made long”) betrays an uneasy relationship to another raging controversy: the debate over English quantity, and the authority of Latin (and, to a lesser extent, Greek) prosody over English poetry. Terms like “iamb” and “trochee” and the apparatus of foot scansion itself are classical in origin, but in Latin what they measure is not stress, but syllable length, or quantity. Humanist scholars trained to admire and imitate the eloquence of Virgil saw great promise in the idea that English verse too might be counted in longs and shorts. Such a prosody – with its variety of feet and ancient fluency – would liberate the language from the tyranny of the iamb, a tyranny even Gascoigne had allowed himself to regret, as we have seen. The only difficulty was deciding how to assess the duration of vernacular syllables. The dispute over whether and how to do so is an intricate business, but history has tended to conclude that the rules of Latin quantity – based not only on the tenseness or laxness of vowels, but on their position in words and sentences – have no native purchase on the English language. What counts as “long” or “short” on any of the quantitative schemes devised by Englishmen is nearly arbitrary with respect to natural emphasis, and lines that follow those schemes are effectively impossible to hear as verse. As Derek Attridge puts it, quantitative meter is “an intellectual apprehension, not an aural one” (Attridge 1974: 76). The smoothness it achieves is a smoothness of the eye.

These difficulties did not stop the experiments, however. In his translation of the *Aeneid*, Richard Stanyhurst is

driven to desperate extremes of diction by his commitment to strict principles of Latin quantity: “And a seabelch grounting on rough rocks rapfulye frapping” (Jones 2002: 327, l. 8). Of perhaps more durable interest to literary history is the fact that two of the century's best poets, Philip Sidney and Edmund Spenser, both tried their hands at quantitative verse. There are several such poems in the eclogues of Sidney's first *Arcadia*, and Spenser was at least briefly taken with the idea, even after writing his *summa* of English accentual experiments, *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579). In a 1580 letter to his friend Gabriel Harvey he extols the new prosody of Sidney and Edward Dyer, who “have proclaimed ... a generall surceasing and silence of balde Rymers” (Smith 1967: 1.89). The subsequent exchange is partly taken up with trying to get the rules of the new school straight. Spenser seems to be prepared to adopt an alternative pronunciation for quantitative verse, which would allow the emphasis on a word like “carpenter,” normally stressed on the first syllable with an optional, secondary stress on the third, to fall on the second (because, applying one of the most important quantitative rules, the *e* precedes two consonants). Harvey revolts: He will not countenance making the word “an inche longer or bigger than God and his Englishe people have made him” (Smith 1967: 1.117). The dispute would not turn out to mean much for the future of English prosody, but the modern scholar Richard Helgerson has shown how much its language reveals about the politics of verse. Spenser writes with enthusiasm about how Sidney and Dyer have “prescribed certaine Lawes and rules of Quantities;” Harvey accuses his friend of “tyranny,” insisting that whatever rules might be introduced they should not contravene the “common allowed and received PROSODYE, taken up by an universall consent of all, and continued by a generall use and Custome of all” (Smith 1967: 1.89, 121). It is not clear how Harvey could ever achieve the reconciliation of quantity and native accent that he recommends; Spenser may have consistency on his side. But Harvey's recourse to a language of commonwealth and common law, bridling at his friend's autocratic idiom, reminds us that the making of English verse was part of the challenge of making an English nation.

Sidney and Spenser

Of course neither Sidney nor Spenser is best remembered for his quantitative experiments: What abides are their contributions to the resources of an English versification that had become in practice, if not yet in theory, definitively accentual – syllabic. The first eclogue of Spenser's *Shepheardes Calender* is squarely in iambic pentameter:

All as̄ the Shēepe, | sūch was the shepeheard's looke,
 For pale and wanne he was, | (alas the while,)
 May seeme he lovd, | or els some care he tooke;
 Well couth he tune his pipe, | and frame his stile.

Thō tō a hill | his faynting flocke he ledde,
 And thus him playnd, | the while his shepe there fedde. (Spenser 1999: 36)

The caesura here falls after the fourth or sixth syllables; there is, as usual with Spenser, frequent syntactic inversion in the service both of rhythm and of rhyme. The first line, however, requires some consideration: Are there trochaic substitutions (as marked here) in the first and third feet? The line could be read as straight iambs, and Spenser inclines strongly toward regularity; but trochees would reinforce the parallelism “all as” / “such was.” “Here we fall back upon the metrical contract again, which in this case (and to this reader's ear) allows such variations where there is evidence that they are rhetorically motivated. Elsewhere in the *Calender*, however, the contract is very different, as in the rollicking, syllabically liberal songs (“There it ranckleth ay more and more, / hey ho the arrowe” [Spenser 1999: 111]). There are also passages that fall somewhere in – between pentameter and four – stress song, as in the “February” eclogue:

For Age and Winter accord full nie,
 This chill, that cold, this crooked, that wrye.
 And as the lowring Wether lookes downe,
 So semest thou like good fryday to frowne. (Spenser 1999: 41)

How to describe the rhythm here? The lines have nine or ten syllables each; there seem to be four strong stresses, harkening back to Middle English and to the ballad tradition. One could speak in terms of anapestic substitutions, but it seems more in the spirit of the experiment to say that the lines are accentual without being syllabic. As a matter of decorum, they fall tendentiously between the humble style of the shepherds' singing contests and Colin Clout's tragically or mock – tragically ennobled pentameter. Along with the elaborate stanzas of “April,” Spenser seems to be using his calendrical scheme to explore a wide spectrum of vernacular possibility. Surrey's heroic line stands at one end, the shepherd boy Willy's jigs on the other.

The whole spectrum might, however, be compassed in the category Susanne Woods labels “aesthetic”: metrical styles whose appeal rests primarily in their total effect, rather than in local rhythmic responses to the meaning of the lines. Spenser is relatively unlikely to ruffle his iambs for passing emphasis, and when he does the variations are highly conventional. It is Sidney who is the great master of such perturbations, the effects Woods calls “mimetic” and Wright “expressive.” He too uses pastoral as a space of experiment in his *Arcadia*, where quantitative poems are to be found alongside sonnets, sixaines, sestinas, and still rarer specimens. His expressive legacy, however, is transmitted principally through the sonnet sequence *Astrophil and Stella*. The vigorous speech rhythms and emotional turmoil of *Astrophil* are constantly putting the iambic line in jeopardy:

Fly, fly, my friends, I have my death wound, fly;
 See there that boy, that murd' ring boy I say,
 Who like a thief hid in dark bush doth lie,
 Till bloody bullet get him wrongful prey. (Jones 2002: 306)

You need a great deal of confidence in the iambic line, and in your own virtuosity, to *start* a poem with a phrase as rhythmically equivocal as “Fly, fly;” particularly where the line also offers, in addition to the authorized caesura after the fourth syllable, as many as three other possible pauses. The second line reins things in rhythmically, without losing the feel of spontaneous speech, but the third may be even more adventurous than the first. It is easy to hear “hid in” as a trochaic substitution, and the near – spondee that follows, “dark bush,” keeps the line angrily off – balance. Then the fourth line is perfectly even: Sidney also knows when to reaffirm his fundamental contract. Such acrobatics occur throughout the sequence, and more important than any particular figuration of such effects – the claim, for example, that that spondee or spondaic iamb “dark bush” carries a contemptuous emphasis – is the sheer fact that they keep tempting readers to guess at their significance. The actual range of variation remains relatively small, for there are no anapests, and notwithstanding a few startling enjambments the lines are mostly end – stopped. Searching out differences from his peers and predecessors, it could be said that Sidney is more comfortable with varying levels of stress than Gascoigne; though that would be true of Spenser, too. The signal difference is perhaps the way that conventional variations are made responsive to the vagaries of an urgent speaking voice, even as the fundamental contract of five iambs is preserved.

Sidney never wrote a heroic poem. His revisions of *Arcadia* move toward epic, but the skeleton and most of the flesh of that work are prose, while *Astrophil* stays within the courtly territory staked out by Wyatt's reading of Petrarch and its development in Tottel's *Miscellany*. But Spenser did, and *The Faerie Queene* (1590 and 1596) is a benchmark in the history of the pentameter line as a medium for high style and noble purpose. The poem's most

remarkable achievement may be the form of the stanza where that line is housed, that intricate, double – thinking, nine – line perpetual motion machine, with its mix of cross – rhymes and couplets:

For round about, the wals yclothed were
 With goodly arras of great majesty,
 Woven with gold and silke so close and nere,
 That the rich metall lurked privily,
 As faining to be hid from envious eye;
 Yet here, and there, and every where unwares
 It shewd it selfe, and shone unwillingly;
 Like a discolourd Snake, whose hidden snares
 Through the greene gras his long bright burnisht backe declares. (Jones 2002: 255)

Some of Gascoigne's poetical licenses are evident here, the syncope of “envious,” the metrical convenience of the old form “yclothed” (which also depends on that sounded –*ed*), and – more than Gascoigne would have liked – syntactic inversions (like “yclothed were”). The fourth line might just be read as beginning with a pyrrhic and a spondee, to avoid stressing the article; the caesura moves around with greater freedom than it tended to 15 years before. Altogether, however, the stanza is still impressively regular. Then there is that last line, the alexandrine. The end of the stanza is partly Spenser's nod to the classical hexameter and its epic lineage. But like all six – or seven – foot lines in English, it is at risk of breaking in half and lapsing into the sing – song of ballad meter. Sometimes Spenser keeps control by varying the position of the caesura (“The utmost rowme, | abounding with all precious store” [Jones 2002: 255]); sometimes he allows the even split in the service of rhetorical balance (“Yet was thy love her death, | and her death was thy smart” [Jones 2002: 257]). In the stanza above, the line is so full of stress that the iambic expectation barely subdues it to patterned accents. The reader can decide whether to think of this excess as an expressive effect, say, the snake raising its back above the level of the line. It certainly suggests how Spenser – to be sure, less dramatic than Sidney – nonetheless can put his own kind of pressure on the line that *The Faerie Queene* did so much to canonize.

Verse on Stage

That word “dramatic” brings us belatedly to a tradition parallel to all this poetry of the page, the verse of the theater. Surrey's unrhymed iambic pentameter was destined to become the great English heroic line, but it was little used for that purpose before Milton took it up in *Paradise Lost*. Where blank verse flourished was on the stage, and there the line's developing norms were tested and extended by the passionate utterances of performance. The history play *Gorbuduc* (1561) – written by Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville – is the first to exploit this new resource. Its five acts feature more strenuous speechifying than banter, and its verse is as regular as Sackville's contemporaneous contributions to the *Mirror for Magistrates*, which was one of most popular verse collections of the moment and a great consolidator of the mid – century style. Still, it was a fundamental departure from what George Saintsbury called the “doggerel alexandrines” (Saintsbury 1923: 1.342) of much contemporaneous dramatic poetry. And it prepared the way for the strong line of Christopher Marlowe, as spoken here by his Scythian conqueror Tamburlaine:

Nature, that framd us of four elements
 Warring within our breasts for regiment,
 Doth teach us all to have aspiring minds. (Marlowe 1986: 132–3)

These lines are mostly regular, with conventional if emphatic first – position inversions in the two lines preceding. The alliteration of “framd” and “four” – that old technique for reinforcing stress – might incline toward the pyrrhic and spondee combination suggested in the scansion above. But Marlowe is clearly thinking in terms of disyllabic feet, and his syllable counts are strict, two cardinal characteristics of his “strong line.”

It is Shakespeare, however, who was the great multiplier of the resources of dramatic prosody. That cannot be said yet of his early plays, where the instance of rhyme is much higher and the iambs are relatively stiff. Even Mercutio's flight of fancy about Queen Mab does not stray too far from Gascoigne's precepts:

She is the fairies' midwife, and she comes
 In shape no bigger than an agate stone
 On the forefinger of an alderman. (Shakespeare 1988: 342)

An inverted first foot again, to start; and perhaps that pyrrhic – spondee combination in the third line. But as his career proceeds, Shakespeare gives himself greater latitudes. George Wright emphasizes an increase in what he calls the playwright's “syllabic ambiguity” (Wright 1988: 157), a recurring uncertainty about just how many syllables the line contains, and just when to use licenses that were contractually obligatory in the 1570s. With this ambiguity, potential anapests begin to slip into the line, especially in the middle (with what the French would call an “epic caesura”: the opposite of a broken – backed line, with a weak syllable both before and after the pause). There are also more feminine endings, and freer enjambment, with less obligation to craft the phrases of four or six syllables that occupy the two halves of a standard line. The resulting contract is in many ways more liberal than English poets would draft again until the later nineteenth century.

One more example, from a late play, will show how far Shakespeare is willing to go. Here is Leontes in *The Winter's Tale*, as his passion pushes the verse almost to the breaking point:

Inch–thick, knee–deep, o'er head and ears a forked one!
 Go play, boy, play. Thy mother plays, and I
 Play too; but so disgraced a part, whose issue
 Will hiss me to my grave. Contempt and clamour
 Will be my knell. Go play, boy, play. There have been,
 Or I am much deceiv'd, cuckolds ere now. (Shakespeare 1988: 1105)

The surfeit of stress on the monosyllables at the beginnings of the first two lines makes it difficult for them to recover their balance, and the sharp enjambment “I / Play” does not help steady the lurching. The fifth line is tricky, too, with the disruption moved now to the middle, and two strong caesuras to break the utterance into pieces. But it may be that the fragile presumption of iambs is nonetheless a shrewd pointer to the king's rhetorical

emphasis. Leontes reassures himself that “*there have been*” cuckolds before him; he is not the first! Or, then again, perhaps “*There have been*” is an anapest? Or are there perhaps even six stresses in the line? Jealousy is hard on the pentameter, and so, by the end of his career, is Shakespeare.

Conclusion

If we are looking for further late – century departures from Gascoigne's regularity, we could turn to John Donne. But Donne's rough line is a singular phenomenon, and Woods is probably right to say that its power lies in its barely contained demotic vigor rather than in its dialectical play with verse norms. Other poets – Drayton, the early Raleigh, Greville – stay closer to the conventions as Gascoigne defines them, and are better representatives of the state of verse at the end of Elizabeth's reign. There is a late, powerful defense of quantitative meter in Thomas Campion's *Observations in the Art of English Poesie* in 1602, and his songs are uniquely artful in finding rhythms that reconcile quantity and stress. But Samuel Daniel's *Defense of Rhyme* (1603) makes clear which way the wind is blowing: Though English “doth not strictly observe long and short syllables,” he says, “yet it most religiously respects the accent” (Smith 1967: 2.360). He also voices a new century's impatience with the whole debate: “Number, Measure, and Ryme, is but as the ground or seate, whereupon is raised the work that commends it” (Smith 1967: 2.381). This insistence that the real stuff of poetry is its “conceits” and “inventions” (Smith 1967: 2.359, 364) harks back to Gascoigne, the first champion of accent, who insists that without “some depth of devise in the Invention” a poem will be “but a tale of a tubbe” (Smith 1967: 1.48). The limitations of metrical theory in the sixteenth century may simply reflect the extent to which the making of English verse was a pragmatic enterprise, with poets exploring the language's rhythmic resources as they went along, bending it to their inventions. We learn a great deal looking back with the systematic apparatus of modern metrics to help us, but we do well to remember that the Tudor poets – influenced though they were by the well – developed prosodies of other languages – nonetheless took the form as they found it.

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