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Lyric forms

DEFINITIONS AND DISTINCTIONS

Students with a keen sense of curiosity – or possibly merely a keen sense of mischief – could fruitfully exercise either predilection by asking their teachers for a brief definition of lyric. The complexities of responding to that demand, like the problems a similar query about tragedy would generate, demonstrate the complexities of the literary types in question. But despite the difficulty of defining lyric, exploring the forms it took during the English Renaissance can illuminate this mode as a whole, some of its most challenging and exciting texts, and the workings of the early modern era.

Aristotle posits an apparently clear-cut division of all literature into lyric, epic, and drama, basing the distinctions on the mode of presentation: lyric is sung, epic recited, and drama staged. This division remains influential, lying behind the work of Northrop Frye and many other modern theorists. Yet certain successors to Aristotle devise more elaborate subdivisions of poetry, adducing criteria that narrow the concept of lyric and lead to withholding that label from some forms of poetry. Thus, for example, in Book I, Chapter 11 of his *Arte of English Poesie* (1589), George Puttenham distinguishes heroic, lyric, elegaic, and epigrammatic verse and nods toward the presence of other types as well; this list shows the influence of classical writers like Horace.

When they attempt to define and describe lyric, twentieth-century critics replicate the problems earlier writers confronted. Some try to categorize it through formal qualities; lyrics are generally considered to be short, though of course that criterion is frustratingly relative and imprecise. Some argue that stanzaic form is typical of lyric though not necessarily present in all poems deserving that title. Other definitions emphasize the connection between lyric and song, variously citing direct allusions to songs, such as *Carmina* (a title of Horace's poems), the presence of such characteristics as

the refrain, and references to musicality like Keats' famous address to a nightingale.

Another approach is defining lyric in terms of its relationship to time. The claim that it rejects or ignores temporality, though common, is less persuasive than more subtle attempts to anatomize the complex and varied ways the lyric engages with time. Thus, for example, Sharon Cameron's trenchant study *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre* suggests that the mode in question fears time, associating it with death, and works out ways of redefining that potential antagonist. But how does this imputed fear relate to the indubitable presence of history in many lyrics?

Yet another avenue toward a definition is characterizing the lyric speaker. Some argue that this form allows the poet to express his real feelings, but recently most critics have instead asserted that this, like virtually all types of writing, is mediated in so many ways that the concept of actual emotions risks naivete. It is common to claim that the lyric speaker is isolated; yet, as we will see, early modern pastorals, like many other lyrics of the period, not only celebrate community as a value but also are typically situated in a community of shepherds. One group of critics maintains that lyric speakers express universal feelings and represent all of us rather than individualized, historically situated people; another group, however, retorts that such speakers are often, or even necessarily, historicized.

Certain commentators in turn focus on the relationship between the speaker and his audience, with John Stuart Mill delivering the highly influential observation that the lyric speaker is overheard. Similarly, in opposition to the suggestion that lyric is fundamentally a social mode, Helen Vendler defends the isolation and universality of its speaker. The reader is present, she insists, as a kind of mirror: "a lyric is *a role offered to a reader*; the reader is to be the voice speaking the poem."¹

Northrop Frye offers another seminal approach when he discusses lyric in terms of what he playfully terms "babble" and "doodle." Associated with sound or *melos*, the former, he suggests, signals its connections with the charm and is manifest in rhythm, alliteration, and puns. "Doodle," in contrast, is the realm of verbal pattern or *opsis*, and Frye connects it to another blood relative of lyric, the riddle.²

Influenced by the importation of influential Continental theorists such as Derrida, Foucault, and Lacan and by the emphasis on the instability of language that characterizes and arguably defines poststructuralism, in the final three decades of the twentieth century critics have challenged many preconceptions lying behind earlier descriptions of the lyric.³ One of the most common moves of poststructuralist criticism, the dismissal of older conceptions of the autonomous individual as tainted products of humanist

ideology, is manifest in focusing on the rhetoric and performativity of lyric in lieu of the experience of the speaker or author.

Feminism has also informed reconsiderations of the mode in question, with critics variously endorsing and questioning the frequently cited gendering of the lyric as female and of narrative as male. In addition, love lyrics pivot on gender more immediately in the relationship between speaker and object, the first generally male and the second female. Hence many critics have read the lyric as both source and symptom of its culture's suppression of women, pointing to the ways its addresses to the woman may silence her and its descriptions dismember and disempower her; in particular, the blazon, a part-by-part celebration of the female body based on the French *blason*, is seen as an assertion of control under the guise of praise. And the concern for the historical and political that characterizes many critical movements at the end of the twentieth century has variously produced both distaste for the lyric's imputed tendency to suppress historical imperatives and issues rather than merely ignoring them, and demonstrations of its putative participation in historical discourses despite assumptions to the contrary.

Finally, however, the controversies surrounding these and other attempts to define lyric mandate distinctions based on both historical periods and genres. David Lindley, the author of an excellent short overview entitled *Lyric*, brackets his attempts at definition by insisting on historical specificity.⁴ As he and others have pointed out, many discussions of the mode are shaped – and misshaped – by their positing the Romantic lyric as the normative model. How and why, then, do sixteenth-century poets approach that protean form, the lyric?

PRINCIPAL POETS AND STYLES OF THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

Even a brief and preliminary chronological survey of major developments and authors of the period provides some answers to that question – but in so doing generates yet more questions. Though born in the fifteenth century, John Skelton composed most of his important poetry in the sixteenth. His output is varied, encompassing spiritual meditations on death and salvation, a portrait of an alehouse, and a dream vision; one of his best-known poems is *Philip Sparrow*, a thought-provoking example of lyric lament. Equally thought-provoking is Skelton's approach to metrics; his short lines, so idiosyncratic that they are aptly termed "Skeltonics," may well be based on church music, especially plainsong.⁵

Sir Thomas Wyatt, who lived between 1503 and 1542, is not only one of

the earliest poets of the period but also one of the most intriguing. His canon includes several forms that were to be popular throughout the period, such as satires and metrical translations of the Psalms; his love poetry is especially impressive for its often colloquial diction and its intensity. Adapting sonnets by his Italian predecessor Francis Petrarch, he variously fashions poems that are virtually translations and others that reformat Petrarch's lines in a darker, more bitter font. Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, who was born fourteen years after Wyatt, also contributed to the development of the sonnet, working out the rhyme scheme discussed below that came to be called "Shakespearean." In contrast to the irregular metrics and tangled emotions of Wyatt's sonnets, those of Surrey are typically limpid and graceful.

George Gascoigne, indubitably among the most significant writers in the early years of Elizabeth's reign though he is often neglected, includes among his varied canon, *A Hundred Sundry Flowers* (1573) and *The Posies* (1575). These volumes contain skillfully crafted love poetry, some of which is reminiscent of Wyatt's bitterness and wryness, as well as instances of such forms as the epitaph and satire. Among his most moving lyrics is "Lullaby of a Lover," which plays the soothing reassurances associated with the lullaby against its own caustic reflections on aging and desire. Gascoigne's contemporaries in this period experimented with a number of forms that were to become very popular later in the century; George Turberville, for example, translates the pastorals of the Italian monk Battista Spagnoli, often known as Mantuan. These decades also saw the publication of several collections of lyrics, notably the popular book known as *Tottel's Miscellany* (1557); this volume includes love poetry, pastoral, and satire and represents a wide range of authors, including Wyatt and Surrey.

Edmund Spenser's collection of pastorals entitled *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579), a text to which I will return in more detail, is often seen as inaugurating the extraordinarily rich production of poetry that characterizes the final decades of the sixteenth century. Certainly it manifests many characteristics that were to recur in its author's later poetry, such as his self-conscious and complex relationship to his literary predecessors, his engagement with the controversies surrounding English Protestantism, and his delight in stylistic experimentation, which in this instance is especially manifest in his range of verse forms and his use of archaic language. In his sonnet collection *Amoretti* (1595), Spenser laments the tension between working on *The Faerie Queene* (1590; 1596) and pursuing other types of writing; but he continued to produce lyric poetry throughout his career.

Often described as a seventeenth-century poet in order to substantiate a

clear-cut break between the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, John Donne in fact probably wrote many of his love lyrics and elegies during the 1590s. The rapid variations in tone and style from poem to poem, as well as within a single text, render his work as difficult to encapsulate as it is intriguing to read. The approaches commonly associated with him – the argumentative stance, the conversational voice, the witty playfulness, the intellectual knottiness – are famously present in such poems as “The Canonization” and “The Ecstasy,” among many others. Such lyrics thus exemplify certain characteristics generally associated with metaphysical poetry: its philosophical speculations, its interest in abstract ratiocinations, and its so-called metaphysical conceits, startling images that typically link apparent opposites, such as sexuality and spirituality. Yet Donne’s secular verse encompasses many other registers as well, including the lyric simplicity of songs like “Sweetest love, I do not go,” a poem we would not be surprised to find in any Elizabethan miscellany. As such texts as “The Bait” and “The Funeral” demonstrate, Donne’s canon also swerves from bitterly misogynistic poems, notably some graphically bawdy elegies, to ones that celebrate the beloved (or, as some readers claim, in appearing to do so primarily celebrate the speaker’s power over her). (Some critics attempt to negotiate the infinite variety of Donne’s lyrics by positing a chronological movement from the conventional language and eroticism of Petrarchism, a movement discussed in more detail below, to the refined spirituality of Neo-Platonism; but in fact these and other strains coexist in his work.)

The 1590s was a decade of not only extraordinary richness but also extraordinary variety in English poetry; remembering that John Donne may well have written many of his acerbic love poems during the period and that it also saw the development of formal verse satire provides a salutary qualification to generalizations about the lush, graceful verse conventionally associated with these ten years. Love poetry of many types flourished during the decade, drawing particularly on the erotic lyrics of Ovid and the sonnets of Petrarch. In particular, the sonnet tradition enjoyed a great vogue in the 1590s, inspired by the posthumous publication in 1591 of Sir Philip Sidney’s collection *Astrophil and Stella*, which is discussed in more detail in the section on the sonnet below. Contributions to this genre during the 1590s range in tone and subject matter from the predictable but gracefully melodic verse in Samuel Daniel’s *Delia* (1592) to the iconoclasm of Barnabe Barnes’s *Parthenophil and Parthenophe* (1593), which ends in a startling fantasy of a rape.

In addition to love poetry, the 1590s saw the appearance of many other types of lyric. Witness, for example, the career of Michael Drayton, who during that decade alone published scriptural paraphrases, sonnets, pas-

torals, historical complaints, and historical epistles based on Ovid's *Heroides*. Indeed, some of the most intriguing lyric poems in the English language – variously intriguing in the ways they challenge their readers intellectually, impress them aesthetically, and woo them ideologically – date from the 1590s.

LITERARY AND CULTURAL CONDITIONS

Why, then, did the Renaissance lyric develop when and how it did? Literary, social, and cultural conditions in the early modern period inform it, and are in turn informed by it. To begin with, during that era the mode in question enjoyed, or more accurately endured, a lower status than certain other types of writing. Not only the problems of defining lyric but the imbricated challenges of evaluating and justifying it emerge with particular force in Sidney's *Defence of Poetrie* (1595), a treatise manifesting the defensiveness about the mode that recurs throughout the Tudor period. Sidney offers an impassioned justification of lyric: "who with his tuned lyre and well-accorded voice, giveth praise, the reward of virtue, to virtuous acts; who gives moral precepts, and natural problems; who sometimes raiseth up his voice to the height of the heavens, in singing the lauds of the immortal God."⁶ Thus Sidney elevates and justifies the lyric by encompassing didactic poetry, the poetry of praise, and religious verse within the category in question. The text nervously proceeds, however, to answer the charge that lyric poetry includes amoral love poetry by suggesting such texts are an abuse of the potentials of the genre.

Other literary theories in the early modern period further complicated evaluations of lyric. A medieval formulation that remains popular during the Renaissance, the concept of the Vergilian wheel, states that Vergil moves chronologically from pastoral to georgic (literature about agricultural practice) to epic. This model encouraged later poets to define their careers in similar terms, thus spurring the writing of pastoral; yet the widely cited if historically inaccurate trajectory of the Vergilian wheel clearly privileges narrative forms over lyric. We encounter the same preference for narrativity when Aristotle posits a hierarchy of genres with tragedy at the pinnacle, a judgment adopted by many other writers as well; some Renaissance rhetoricians, including Sidney himself, offer an alternative ranking that privileges epic, reflecting the nationalistic aspirations of their era. But whichever of those systems one adopts, lyric does not win the lottery.

As I have already suggested, gender and gendering offer additional explanations for its dubious status. Love has been the subject of lyric

poetry in many different eras, and in the early modern period in particular the connection between the two was intensified by the vogue the sonnet enjoyed in England in the 1590s, as well as by the popularity of love songs throughout the era. But the credo that love, including the activity of writing about it, is effeminate and effeminizing recurs throughout early modern texts. Or, to put it another way, one might say that in Renaissance aesthetics lyric adopts a female subject position to the male one of epic – not only inferior but also in some way threatening, much as female characters in both classical and Renaissance epics threaten the city that must be built, the nation that must be founded.

Yet sixteenth-century culture also offered many justifications for composing lyrics, even ones about love. Nationalism encouraged demonstrations that English poetry could rival the achievements of classical and Continental writers, including those of sonneteers. Attending to the commonplace that the Bible is a compendium of all genres, Renaissance lyricists could claim as their predecessor no less a figure than David, considered the author of the Psalms. Similarly, pastoral writers could dignify their work by adducing the revered Vergil as a forebear, as Spenser insistently does in his *Shepheardes Calender* (1579).

Prosodic developments and disagreements also shaped the aesthetics of the early modern lyric. Essentially English poets inherited two principal possibilities, accentual-syllabic and quantitative verse. The first, the main form of English poetry, grounds its metrical schemes both in where stresses fall and in the number of syllables. In contrast to these patterns, quantitative verse, practiced by Greek and Latin writers, ignores stress, relying instead on the length or quantity of its syllables. It is common – and broadly speaking accurate – to map the history of prosody in the sixteenth century as a movement from rough and unsuccessful experiments with iambic pentameter, the form of accentual-syllabic verse based on a pattern of five units that are typically iambic, to its triumphant execution in the mellifluous poetry of the 1590s. But this schema, while providing a sound overview, resembles the parallel assumption that the English sonnet was gradually moving from less successful rhyme schemes toward its natural form, the so-called Shakespearean sonnet; both trajectories have tempted critics to express a xenophobic nationalism, and both encompass as well the threat of underestimating the achievements of material that does not fit the pattern. Writers who do not achieve smooth iambic pentameter might be marching to, or rather composing for, a different drummer. Witness the debates about the decasyllabic (ten-syllable) lines of Sir Thomas Wyatt. Some read them as instances of crude early sorties into iambic pentameter; alternatively, critics have proposed a whole series of different systems that

Wyatt might be successfully shaping, such as the skillful combination of the versification of Lydgate and Italianate hendecasyllabic (eleven-syllable) patterns that George T. Wright identifies as the drummer in Wyatt's hauntingly irregular lines.⁷

A more extreme alternative to iambic pentameter was the possibility of importing a system of quantitative verse into English. Impelled by their respect for Latin and Greek verse, a number of poets in the period debated and experimented with this option. Edmund Spenser and an academic with whom he was friendly, Gabriel Harvey, exchanged a series of letters, published in 1580, about quantitative verse. Sir Philip Sidney, who delighted in experimenting with verse forms as well as with meter, also wrote some quantitative lyrics.

Debates about alternative metrical systems are closely related to controversies about whether rhyme is an appropriate ornament or a lamentable barbarism, since here too one central issue is whether English verse could and should imitate its classical predecessors. Despite his own success with rhyme, Thomas Campion, associating it with a lamentable neglect of classical principles of meter, mocks it in his *Observations in the Art of English Poesie* (1602): "the facilitie and popularitie of Rime creates as many Poets, as a hot sommer flies";⁸ yet other sixteenth-century poets, notably Samuel Daniel, as vigorously defend rhyme.

Whatever their position on such debates, in practice sixteenth-century poets enthusiastically experimented with a range of stanzaic patterns. Courtly forms popular in the fifteenth century such as the rondeau, a French stanza in which the opening words recur, survive and flourish in the work of Sir Thomas Wyatt in particular – yet another warning of the dangers of stressing the modernity of the period at the expense of acknowledging its continuing affiliations with the past. Later in the century, poets, reveling in virtuoso performance, adopted a number of other difficult forms. For example, both Sidney and Spenser composed sestinas, a devilishly complex system of six six-line stanzas plus envoi that they inherited from Italian writers. The technical triumphs achieved in such challenging stanzaic patterns in turn pose challenges for us as critics: how can we most incisively reconcile – or perhaps most illuminatingly juxtapose – contemporary interpretations of the early modern writer as passive vehicle for cultural anxieties with the recognition that such poets were also agents effecting pyrotechnics of prosody?

The early modern lyric was, of course, shaped not only by rhythm in the literal sense but also by the rhythms of court life. Although the profound impact of the literary movement New Historicism and its English cousin cultural materialism have intensified critical interest in that environment, it

was investigated from different perspectives by earlier students of the lyric. In particular, in *Music and Poetry in the Early Tudor Court*, a study published in 1961, John Stevens relates Renaissance poetry to conditions at the Tudor court, emphasizing in particular practices of setting poems to music and of passing lyrics among a circle of friends in what he terms “the game of love.” Such connections between the Renaissance lyric and courtly music clarify debates about the workings of lyric in general, reminding us that in some important instances it is indeed linked with song – and, more significantly, linked as well with performance and courtly ritual, thus further calling into question generalizations about lyric as a spontaneous overflow of emotion.

The connections between lyric and song manifest the fascination with music that characterizes the English Renaissance, like its Continental counterparts. Philosophical treatises deploy music as a symbol for cosmic orders; the Renaissance schoolmaster Richard Mulcaster movingly advocates teaching it; poetic texts frequently fashion musical imagery. But this sibling art affected early modern poetry more immediately and directly as well. Songbooks were published throughout the sixteenth century, though they became especially popular and prevalent around the turn of the century. Songs ranged in form from the simple monophonic type called an “air,” a form to which Thomas Campion and John Dowland contributed significantly, to the elaborately polyphonic madrigal, a form with Continental antecedents that was developed in England by William Byrd.

Musical settings survive for some well-known Renaissance lyrics, including the songs that were frequently incorporated into plays by Shakespeare and his contemporaries. A manuscript heading reminds us that no fewer than six of Donne’s love poems were set to airs. Other poems allude to musical performance, as Wyatt famously does in “Blame not my lute” and “My lute, awake.” Indeed, among the significant authors of Renaissance lyrics should be listed the composer Campion.

The second question Stevens had raised, the use of the lyric within social interactions, has been pursued from different perspectives by critics at the end of the twentieth century. Exemplifying the New Historicist privileging of politics in its many senses over the private spheres, Arthur F. Marotti’s article “‘Love is not love’: Elizabethan Sonnet Sequences and the Social Order” (*ELH*, 49 [1982]: 396–428) impelled a revisionary redefinition of the functions of lyric. Sonnets that appear to be about love, Marotti argues, should really be read as statements about the author’s struggle for patronage, a link encouraged by that supreme patroness Elizabeth’s predilection for presenting herself as the mistress of sonnets. Marotti’s assertion that struggles for place in the patronage system inform the more

overt struggles for the affections of a disdainful mistress is persuasive. Yet, like many revisionist readings, this essay overstates its case: the insistence that poems that appear to be about love instead encode their primary concern with patronage is far less convincing than the alternative formulation that love lyrics, while centrally and often primarily concerned with romantic relationships, play love against courtly politics in ways that comment on both arenas.

Marotti and others have recently repositioned the Renaissance lyric in a different type of social context. Impelled by the materialist concern for the conditions of production, many critics have been tracing the consequences of the form in which Renaissance lyrics appeared. In particular, extensive and often exciting scholarship has illuminated the consequences of the movement from a manuscript to a print culture, with critics positing a radical change in conceptions of authorship.⁹ As these studies indicate, numerous early modern lyrics were in fact circulated in manuscript, often in collections that included a range of poets and did not identify the authors; others appeared within popular collections such as *Tottel's Miscellany*; and yet others were published in single-author books, the format enjoyed by the posthumous volume of Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*. All these patterns were complicated by the appearance of lyrics in commonplace books, collections compiled by an individual that might, for example, juxtapose poetry and recipes or scurrilous verse with more elevated poetry. Manuscript culture, according to the critics studying it, virtually erases the autonomy of the individual writer: a given poem might be significantly changed a number of times in transmission, and texts are seen as amorphous and permeable in ways that minimize the poet's identification with or control over his work. Print culture, in contrast, both impels and is impelled by a greater emphasis on the individual author, a perspective that such analyses see as tellingly parallel to the development of bourgeois conceptions of subjectivity.

Such arguments carry with them many intriguing implications about not only authorship but also content and style. For example, it is likely that the juxtaposition of disparate texts within a given manuscript both encouraged and was encouraged by the lyric's tendency to explore meaning relationally. That is, lyrics often comment explicitly or implicitly on alternative generic possibilities, which come to represent different perspectives and ideologies; for example, as Rosalie L. Colie demonstrates, the sonnet is on one level the opposite of epigram and on the other a host that welcomes epigrammatic couplets.¹⁰ Moreover, the juxtapositions of texts in the practices of manuscript culture arguably encouraged as well an equally revealing phenomenon in the print culture of the period, the habit of publishing

related but significantly different texts together in ways that invite comparison and contrast. Thus Spenser's *Amoretti* appears with his "Epithalamion" and some short lyrics in the form known as anacreontic.

Yet, despite these and many other important implications of the research that compares manuscript and print cultures, arguments about it need to be nuanced more than is sometimes the case. We have to recognize the coexistence of several models of authorship throughout the period, including very early versions of characteristics attributed to print culture. For example, the elaborate revisions visible on Wyatt's manuscripts suggest a pride in and concern for details of the text not usually associated with manuscript culture even though his poems were circulated in that form and, indeed, the kinds of laborious revision involved in crafting forms like the sonnet also suggest a model of authorship sometimes associated largely or even exclusively with a later period.

LYRIC GENRES

The significance of literary form in the period – a significance as paradoxical as it was profound – helps to explain why genre provides the best perspective on the sixteenth-century lyric. In England as on the Continent, generic classifications were at once studied sedulously and violated repeatedly. Forms not sanctioned by Aristotle, such as the romance, and so-called mixed genres or *genera mista* such as tragicomedy were variously condemned and pursued. Not coincidentally, in this combination of firmly established divisions and frequent violations of them the genre systems of the early modern period resemble its systems of social class and gender.

A wide range of literary types flourished during the sixteenth century. Given its intimate relationship to the sonnet, the epigram should also be read in relation to lyric. The epithalamium or wedding poem tradition, very popular in the seventeenth century, produced only a few sixteenth-century examples; but this select company includes Spenser's *Epithalamion* (1595) and his cognate poem the *Prothalamion* (1596), the latter celebrating nuptials of sisters rather than a marriage. The complaint, a type of poem whose speaker delivers a lament, often though not invariably about love, also proved popular in the period, encompassing such texts as Daniel's *Complaint of Rosamond* (1592). In 1591 Spenser published a group of poems, including "Prosopopoeia," "Muiopotmos," and "Visions of the Worlds Vanitie" under the title *Complaints*; they demonstrate the variety in the genre, with the first a fable; the second a description, sometimes read allegorically, of a butterfly's capture; and the third visionary sonnets influenced by Du Bellay and Petrarch.

The elegy is another sixteenth-century form with complex valences. In classical literature, the term refers to a particular meter, the alternation of hexameter and pentameter lines. In sixteenth-century England, however, the label “elegy” was used loosely for a range of literary types, generally lyric – in particular, funeral poetry and solemn meditations on many different subjects, including love. Hence instances range from Spenser’s funeral lament *Daphnaida* (1591) to a series of Ovidian poems by Donne. The popularity of the elegy in the early modern period and the recurrent, in fact obsessive, references to loss in many other genres signal the intimate relationship between lyric and loss. Although this relationship occurs in many periods, it is particularly marked in the English Renaissance because both the sonnet and pastoral are genres of loss. The versions of repetition – the recurrence of a refrain, a word, an action – that are so characteristic of lyric may be a way of negotiating loss and recovery: subsequent versions of the repeated element remind us of the absence of the original one and yet offer the hope of recovery via substitution.

Although the category of religious poetry is too loose clearly to constitute a genre, it represents another important type of sixteenth-century poetry. It is no accident that the sixteenth-century flowering of the English lyric coincided with the development of Protestantism, for the Reformation’s emphasis on interior states and meditation is clearly very congenial to lyric poetry; tellingly, medieval religious poems often celebrate Mary or Christ rather than scrutinize the soul of the speaker. Protestantism also, of course, informed religious poetry more directly. Thus it generated an outpouring of hymns, the genre to which that deeply Protestant poet Sidney repeatedly alludes in his *Defence of Poetrie*; their influence is manifest, when, for example, Donne deploys the term in three of his divine poems, “A Hymne to Christ, at the Authors Last Going into Germany,” “Hymne to God my God, in my Sicknesse,” and “A Hymne to God the Father.” This is not to deny, however, that the period also encompasses significant religious lyrics by Catholics, notably Robert Southwell.

Like the hymn, the sonnet form attracted many poets writing about religion and spirituality. Some critics have even suggested that a rejection of secular for spiritual love is central to the sonnet, although it is in fact present more intermittently and ambivalently. In any event it is clear that the struggles between the Augustinian concepts of *caritas* and *cupiditas*, which may roughly be rendered as the attraction of the soul toward God and its pull toward the corporeal, were sometimes enacted in the implicit or explicit juxtaposition of religious and spiritual poems; thus Barnabe Barnes published *Parthenophil and Parthenophe*, a highly eroticized collection of sonnets, in 1593, and two years later brought out what was virtually a

palinode, *A Divine Centurie of Spirituall Sonnets*. Another type of religious poetry, metrical translations of the Psalms, was so common in the period that composing such texts has been described as a virtual initiation rite for fledgling poets. Sidney's sister Mary, Countess of Pembroke, participated in that vogue, while another woman writer, Anne Lok, wrote a collection of sonnets based on the fifty-first Psalm.

As such instances demonstrate, while women such as Louise Labé composed sonnets and other types of verse on the Continent, the principal mode of writing for sixteenth-century Englishwomen was religious verse, whether they translated it or, as in the case of Lok, composed it themselves. The argument that this was a less threatening arena for women's voices is persuasive; Lok not only writes spiritual poetry but also quite literally locates her voice within patriarchal strictures by appending her poetry to her translation of Calvin. But equally persuasive is the assertion that such poems demonstrate at least some measure of resistance to and even subversion of patriarchy; female poets were turning to a form whose value was unassailable and in so doing arguably implying as well that a higher audience would attend to their words even if their contemporaries did not.

THE SONNET

Love poetry was of course composed in a range of forms, including that broad category generally called "song." Even – or especially – collections of poems termed "sonnet sequences" frequently encompass a number of other stanzaic forms; *Astrophil and Stella*, for example, incorporates eleven songs. But arguably the sonnet and pastoral were the two most popular and characteristic lyric forms of the period. Hence exploring these two genres in greater depth than others can help us to address many questions about the workings of lyric in the sixteenth century.

One of the few instances in which a genre is defined in terms of a verse form, the sonnet can most safely be categorized as a fourteen-line poem that often, although not invariably, follows one of a handful of specified rhyme schemes and often, although not invariably, concerns love. One mark of the variety and experimentation that characterized the lyric during the early modern period, however, is the instability of even that loose a definition. In 1582 Thomas Watson published *Hecatompethia*, a collection of eighteen-line sonnets, and throughout the period other writers occasionally deviated from the fourteen-line pattern; moreover, the term "sonnet" was sometimes used loosely for love poetry, so that Donne's lyrics were termed *Songs and Sonets* even though few of them have anything like the length or rhyme scheme usually associated with the term.

But normative models were also available and frequently imitated. Thus the so-called Petrarchan sonnet may rhyme *abba abba cde edc*; the first eight lines, the octet or octave, are fixed in their rhyme scheme, while the final three, the sestet, can assume a range of other shapes, such as *cdecde* or *cdcdde*. The sonnet labeled Shakespearean consists of three four-line units known as quatrains and a couplet, so it assumes the form: *abab cdcd efef gg*. All these versions of the sonnet play subdivisions against each other, the octet versus the sestet in the Petrarchan form and the quatrains versus the couplet in its English cousins; in addition, patterns of rhyme and meaning create further subdivisions, so that English sonnets, like their Italian predecessors, often include a significant break after line eight as well as the secondary shifts between quatrains. In the English sonnet these relationships among prosodic and semantic units tend to be varied and unstable. For example, while the Shakespearean sonnet often effects closure on a reassuring note of epigrammatic finality, couplets may undercut what has come before, or they may undercut the apparent neatness of their own unit, as when Shakespeare's Sonnet 35, a poem engaged throughout with the loss of comfortingly predictable patterns, begins its final statement in the twelfth, not thirteenth, line. Thus the form itself may enact an imperiled and often unsuccessful attempt at resolution.

Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, which signals both the speaker's connection with and distance from the author by naming him "Astrophil" or "star-lover," demonstrates the dramatic immediacy and psychological complexity the form could achieve. The sequence also demonstrates its author's delight in experimenting with verse form, rhyme, and rhetorical devices such as complex patterns of repetition. These poems, whose author attained a virtually mythic status after his early death, enjoyed an extraordinary popularity, as did many of Sidney's other writings. Spenser's *Amoretti* (1595) is sometimes contrasted with Sidney's collection as more melodious and descriptive in its style and less troubled in its responses to love and desire, though Spenser does in fact include some extraordinarily bitter invective as well as soaring praise of his lady. Similarly, it is customary to contrast the graceful lyricism of Samuel Daniel's *Delia* with the Sidneyan drama of Michael Drayton's sonnets, but such generalizations also need qualifications. Many of the poems in the first edition of Drayton's *Idea's Mirrour* (1594) are indistinguishable from Daniel's work; some of the putative distinctions in question gradually emerged as Drayton saw the volume through eleven editions, including three significant revisions in the seventeenth century, but the collection remained varied in tone and style. Other poets of the period produced not only some impressive sonnet sequences but also enough indifferent or truly dreadful ones to inspire Sir

John Davies' witty parodies entitled "gulling sonnets" (appearing only in a manuscript miscellany, not in printed form, during the early modern period and speculatively dated 1594). Although many of the other poems in the tradition were indeed as humdrum as Davies' mockery suggests, some distinguished themselves in significant ways. Richard Barnfield, for example, writes homoerotic sonnets. The sonnet became less popular around the turn of the century, though the first English sonnet sequence by a woman, Lady Mary Wroth's *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, appeared in 1621.

English sonnets have multiple and intertwined roots, including the poetry of the troubadours, the idealized visionary love poems in Dante's *Vita nuova*, and Neo-Platonic philosophy. The Italian poet Petrarch's collection, variously known by the revealing titles *Rime sparse* ("scattered rhymes") and *Canzoniere* ("songs"), is, however, the principal source of the English sonnet tradition. Although the *Rime sparse* encompasses a range of verse forms and subjects, most of its poems are sonnets concerning the speaker's relationship to Laura, a woman who may or may not have been fictive. These lyrics model several characteristics that English sonneteers were to imitate: a typically unhappy relationship with a woman who is often idealized but sometimes demonized (feminism has trenchantly glossed the reactive dynamic that structures that paradox), a preoccupation with representation itself, a struggle between a commitment to secular love and an attempt to disavow it, whether in the name of its spiritual counterpart or simply common sense and self-protection. Petrarch contributed as well a number of formal characteristics that recur in English sonnets. From him English poets borrowed the signature trope of the genre, the oxymoron, which combines opposites, generally in the form of an adjective-noun phrase such as "icy fire" or "sweet warrior." They adapted as well images for love that appeared in Petrarch and his predecessors, such as references to a hunt or a careening ship. Their interaction with the author of the *Rime sparse* was, however, mediated not only by his own commentators (his immense popularity generated ten major commentaries, so that his poems often appeared with elaborate and lengthy glosses) but also by the later Italian and French poets who themselves imitated him and thus implicitly commented on him. Four poems Daniel published in *Delia* derive from Du Bellay, for example, and Lodge bases several of his poems on sonnets by Ronsard, sometimes virtually plagiarizing them.

Indeed, nationalism, so central to the English early modern period in England in other ways, shapes its sonneteering as well, with an impulse to appropriate, nationalize, and surpass Continental models among its principal motivations. But, as I have already suggested, this is only one of several explanations for the extraordinary popularity of sonneteering. The

sonnet attracted poets and readers in part because it enacted many of the central struggles of the age, often distancing them through transposition: its swings between power and powerlessness, for example, staged contemporary concerns about the uncertainties of social status.¹¹ Above all, though, Petrarchism served variously to intensify and resolve early modern negotiations about gender. As many critics have demonstrated, the genre provides reassuring scenarios for controlling the threats associated with the female body and female subjectivity; for example, the blazon, that part-by-part description of the female body, can provide an instance of divide and conquer. And yet such generalizations, though widely accepted, risk oversimplification: despite the conventional wisdom about the silencing of women in early modern culture, Petrarchan mistresses not only speak but are praised for their voices, and in fact the sequences most often manifest not the power of the male speaker but an unresolved struggle between power and powerlessness. Indeed, the Petrarchan sonnet models gender relations elsewhere in the culture above all in its complexities, contradictions, and ambivalences.

PASTORAL

Pastoral was also especially popular in and characteristic of early modern English literature. But whereas the sonnet enjoyed a relatively brief but extraordinarily intense vogue during the sixteenth century, pastoral poetry was written virtually throughout the period, being variously deployed for love poetry, funeral elegies, meditations on religious and ethical problems, and satire, especially of the church; Spenser's *Shepherdes Calender* includes all of these approaches to the mode. Important and highly influential precedents to the English tradition include the *Eclogues* of Vergil (which attracted interest in part because the fourth poem was interpreted as prophesying the birth of Christ) and the lyrics of the Greek poets Theocritus, Bion, and Moschus. English poets were also familiar with their Continental predecessors in the genre; for example, Mantuan provided a significant precedent for using pastoral to discuss religion.

Probably the most famous pastoral of the period is Spenser's *Shepherdes Calender*; his choice of this form for his virtual poetic debut (he had previously published some translations) reflects both the continuing power of the model of the Vergilian wheel and the significance of this genre for his culture. Twelve eclogues comprise this collection, each accompanied by a woodcut, a motto, and elaborate notes by one "E.K.," who may or may not be Spenser himself. Among the many pastorals included in Sidney's prose romance, the *Arcadia* (1590), is "Ye goteherd gods"; the poet here skillfully

deploys the repeated rhymes of the sestina to stage the obsessiveness of mourning. Another influential and revealing version of the genre is Christopher Marlowe's "Passionate Shepherd to his Love," a poem whose speaker attempts to seduce a lady by promising her the delights of the countryside; this lyric inspired a number of retorts in its own day, notably Sir Walter Raleigh's "Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd" and Donne's "Bait." In our own century Marlowe's text was turned into a cabaret song in Ian McKellan's cinematic version of *Richard III*, thus figuring the destruction and deformation of the values the poem ostensibly celebrates.

Once one moves beyond the obvious generalization that pastoral concerns the countryside, engaging with the values it represents and playing them against those of court or city, it becomes more complicated to define and describe the form. Certain conventionalized situations and formats do recur in the pastorals of many periods: shepherds often participate in singing contests, and they lament the sorrows of love. Often, too, pastorals describe invasions into the pastoral world, though this characteristic of the genre has not received the attention it deserves; whether effected by the intruders on whose threatened arrival Vergil tellingly opens his collection or by death, such intrusions mime and comment on the presence of other genres within pastoral, such as references to epic and satiric rebukes. Dialogues are common within pastoral, as is the Chinese-box effect of a frame story within which other stories are told. And pastoral, a strikingly reflexive genre, characteristically incorporates commentaries on its own practices, such as the act of writing poetry. Indeed, it is not only metapastoral but also metalyric in that the questions it raises about temporality, loss, and the workings of poetry itself are at the core of the lyric mode.

But what values and ideologies characterize pastoral? Some assert that it focuses on the relationship between man and nature, while others instead draw attention to its eroticism. Some claim pastoral is simple and idyllic, while others stress the complexities and ambivalences exemplified by the statement attributed to death in pastoral, *Et in Arcadia ego* ("I am even in Arcadia"). Some associate it with detachment, while others trace the ways pastoral allegorizes political, social, and religious controversies, as Spenser famously does in his *Shepherd's Calendar*. In a major study of the genre, *What Is Pastoral?*, Paul Alpers negotiates a number of these debates, incisively arguing, for example, that pastoral typically neither denies nor drowns in the threats it engages but rather suspends them. And pastoral is, he suggests, often concerned primarily with the interactions in human communities.¹²

To understand the workings of pastoral in the early modern period, one needs to look more closely at additional characteristics and predilections as

well. Its emphasis on the contrast between the *here* of the country and the *there* of city or court is the spatial analogue to its recurrent temporal preoccupation with *then* and *now*; the former is generally represented as the idyllic time before the pastoral world is threatened, whether by the new inhabitants who displace the shepherds in Vergil's first eclogue, by love, or by that figure who is both enemy and sibling of love in pastoral, death. This contrast between *then* and *now* is sometimes figured in the combination of narrative and lyric elements in pastoral. Pastoral is also typically concerned with the unstable relationship between loss and recovery. Thus, for example, in a sense the pastoral landscape is a second Eden, and yet it too is under threat (a pattern that recurs in dramatic pastorals such as Shakespeare's *As You Like It* as well as their lyric counterparts); and when a shepherd sings a song associated with another shepherd, he both recuperates that lyric and signals the absence of its original author. Pastoral, the genre that on some level represents a lost home, is also deeply concerned with threats to an abode; witness Vergil's telling decision to open his eclogues on a story of a shepherd being dispossessed.

Although these characteristics recur throughout the history of pastoral, they would have been especially appealing in the early modern period. Its interest in time and change attracted an era that was fascinated with history and historicity. Its emphasis on both the loss and restoration of home interested a culture that mythologized itself as a second Troy – and that feared that that Troy, like the first one, was subject to invasions, notably from the Catholic powers in Europe. Seamus Heaney, whose own poems are so often written within, about, and in defiance of history, observes, “A poem floats adjacent to, parallel to, the historical moment.”¹³ Even when pastoral does not comment directly on history and politics, it may trope them, floating adjacent to and thus variously refracting, redefining, and reinterpreting them.

But pastoral is often more directly connected with its culture as well, and this too helps to explain its appeal. Two of the most significant rhetorical treatises of the sixteenth century emphasize its congeniality to allegorical treatments of political and social issues. Although pastoral was seen as a low form during the Renaissance, involving both language and speakers less elevated than their counterparts in, say, epic, Sidney stresses that it could perform an important social function. “Is the poor pipe disdained, which sometime out of Meliboeus' mouth can show the misery of people under hard lords or ravening soldiers? . . . sometimes, under the pretty tales of wolves and sheep, can include the whole considerations of wrongdoing and patience” (*Defence of Poetrie*, p. 116). Sidney does precisely what he describes in his romance, the *Arcadia*. And in Book I, Chapter 18 of his

Arte of English Poesie, Puttenham asserts that the impetus behind pastoral was not in fact the exploration of love “but under the veil of homely persons, and in rude speeches to insinuate and glance at greater matters.”¹⁴ Exploring and expanding the commentaries by Sidney and Puttenham, recent studies have trenchantly traced how pastoral glances at “greater matters” of English Renaissance politics and culture. Thus Annabel Patterson traces references to patronage, while Louis Montrose demonstrates the ways this genre explores, often in safely allegorical form, questions about power, status, and patronage.¹⁵

CONCLUSION

But much as Shakespeare’s sonnets end on ostensible summaries that often instead challenge what has come before, so a survey of the genres of lyric poetry should terminate on an acknowledgment of the instability of that category. Some genres regularly encompass both lyric and narrative modes: witness the range of poems in Spenser’s *Complaints*. The so-called lyric epithalamium dovetails both modes, insistently temporal in its chronicle of the events of the wedding day and lyric in its meditations on them. Similarly, the nymphs’ song in Spenser’s “Prothalamion” signals a change of mode through a change of speakers. But one of the best examples of the interplay between lyric and narrative is the sonnet tradition. Individual sonnets often tell stories; witness the whole host of mythological tales so popular in the genre, such as the seventeenth poem in Sidney’s *Astrophil and Stella*. The tension between the attempt to find a plot in a collection of sonnets published by a given poet and the insistence that the poems in question reject narrativity is manifest in the terms used for such collections: “sonnet sequence” versus “sonnet cycle.” The soundest approach to these debates moderates (in both senses of that verb) the extreme arguments on both sides: we need to recognize that the balance between lyric and narrative elements differs significantly from one group of sonnets to the next, but often a single author’s collection of sonnets will juxtapose poems that are discrete meditations and might as plausibly be arranged in a different order with groups of sonnets that appear to tell a story. In any event, however one resolves the disagreements about the presence of narrative plots, in the sonnet as in many other genres the interaction among lyric, narrative, and dramatic elements stages the tensions among differing visions of problems ranging from temporality to gender.

We are now in a position briefly to return to my initial questions about the problems of defining lyric and relating it to sixteenth-century culture. Not only should definitions and descriptions be historically specific; the

variety lyric manifests even within a single historical period, such as the early modern one, offers further caveats about generalizations. One can, however, say that in the Renaissance the connection between lyric and song is central. One can also assert with confidence that Renaissance lyrics variously qualify and challenge definitions that emphasize an isolated speaker overheard rather than participate in social interactions. To be sure, some poems, notably in the sonnet tradition, are indeed internalized meditations, and often their so-called plots are far more amorphous than critics more accustomed to reading narrative and drama like to acknowledge. But many other Renaissance lyrics evoke a social situation, whether it be that of the shepherd communicating with other shepherds or of the elegiac poet addressing the dead person or other mourners. And even the poems that involve internalized reflection often presume as well an audience who is not simply overhearing private thoughts but rather being indirectly addressed. The lament in a sonnet, for example, may present itself as a private outpouring of sorrow but also function as implicit pressure on the lady and an implicit complaint about her behavior to a male audience. Thus, though this predilection has not received the attention it deserves, Renaissance lyrics frequently address not just a single audience but rather multiple and different audiences.¹⁶ In an age fascinated by rhetoric, the lyric poet is typically a consummate rhetorician, adorned with the literary skills and shadowed with the ethical dangers of that role.

The presence of multiple audiences aptly figures the ways contemporary critics can most fruitfully read the sixteenth-century lyric. We need to eschew generalizations that neglect its own multiplicity, and we need to approach it from many critical perspectives, alert to both technical virtuosity and ideological imperatives and thus to the complex interplay between formal potentialities and cultural history.

NOTES

- 1 Helen Vendler, "Tintern Abbey: Two Assaults," in *Wordsworth in Context*, ed. Pauline Fletcher and John Murphy, (Lewisburg and London: Bucknell University Press and Associated University Presses, 1992), p. 184.
- 2 Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 275–80.
- 3 For a useful overview of these changes, see Chaviva Hošek and Patricia Parker, "Introduction," in *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, ed. Hošek and Parker (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985).
- 4 David Lindley, *Lyric* (London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 22–24.
- 5 For this explanation of Skelton's prosody, see Arthur F. Kinney, *John Skelton: Priest as Poet: Seasons of Discovery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), esp. pp. 46–51.

- 6 The reference is to Sidney, *An Apologie for Poetrie*, ed. Geoffrey Shepherd (London: Nelson, 1965), p. 118.
- 7 George T. Wright, *Shakespeare's Metrical Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 27–37.
- 8 The citation is to Campion, *Observations in the Art of English Poesie* (London, 1602), p. 4.
- 9 See esp. Arthur F. Marotti, *Manuscript, Print, and the English Renaissance Lyric* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995); Wendy Wall, *The Imprint of Gender: Authorship and Publication in the English Renaissance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).
- 10 Rosalie L. Colie, *Shakespeare's Living Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), ch. 2.
- 11 For a more detailed discussion of this and cognate explanations for its popularity, see my study *Echoes of Desire: English Petrarchism and Its Counterdiscourses* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995).
- 12 On suspension see Paul Alpers, *What Is Pastoral?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 68–69, 173; he discusses community in a number of places, but see esp. pp. 81–82.
- 13 Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue: Selected Prose 1978–1987* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989), p. 121.
- 14 I cite Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, ed. Baxter Hathaway (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1970), p. 53.
- 15 See two essays by Montrose: “‘Eliza, Queene of shepherdes,’ and the Pastoral of Power,” *English Literary Renaissance* 10 (1980): 153–82; “Of Gentlemen and Shepherds: The Politics of Elizabethan Pastoral Form,” *English Literary History* 50 (1983): 415–59; Patterson, *Pastoral and Ideology: Virgil to Valéry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).
- 16 Multiple audiences are also common in love poetry in particular, a point Christopher Martin demonstrates, though from perspectives different from mine, in *Policy in Love: Lyric and Public in Ovid, Petrarch and Shakespeare* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1994).

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