

John Baxter Shakespeare's poetic styles



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VERSE INTO DRAMA

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For C. Q. Drummond

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J. B.

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I · Verse into drama

If we can disengage ourselves sufficiently, then, from the preconception that 16th century poetry is essentially Petrarchist, to sift the good poems, regardless of school or of method, from the bad, we shall find that the Petrarchist movement produced nothing worth remembering between Skelton and Sidney, in spite of a tremendous amount of Petrarchan experimentation during this period, if we except certain partially Petrarchan poems by Surrey and by Wyatt, and that the poetry written during this interim which is worth remembering belongs to a school in every respect antithetical to the Petrarchist school, a school to which Wyatt and Surrey contributed important efforts, perhaps their best, but which flourished mainly between Surrey and Sidney and in a few men who survived or came to maturity somewhat later, a school which laid the groundwork for the greatest achievements in the entire history of the English lyric, which itself left us some of those greatest achievements, and which is almost wholly neglected and forgotten by the anthologists and by the historians of the period, even by the editors, for the greater part, of the individual contributors to the school.¹

The school of English poetry to which Yvor Winters refers in this sentence produced what he calls elsewhere the native plain style,² and the 1939 essay from which the sentence is quoted initiated a radical revaluation of English poetry in the sixteenth century. Not all subsequent writers on the subject agree with Winters's emphases, but C. S. Lewis and G. K. Hunter, using the terms 'drab' and 'golden' to reassert the eminence of the golden style, agree that there is a distinction.³ Moreover, Winters's claims for the centrality of the plain style have been corroborated and refined by a

number of scholars and critics including J. V. Cunningham, Wesley Trimpi, and Douglas Peterson.⁴ The arguments on behalf of either style now have numerous advocates, and the two styles have been variously called Petrarchan, eloquent, golden, sweet, pleasant, or sugared; and native, plain, drab, flat, didactic, or moral. While there is no reason to suppose that any of the terms on either side is exactly synonymous with any other on the same side, the major distinction is sufficiently secure to support an exploration of a question not yet considered in the debate: namely, the possibility that the style that 'laid the groundwork for the greatest achievements in the entire history of the English lyric' also laid the groundwork for the greatest achievements in the entire history of the English drama. This exploration involves two further questions: first, are Winters, Cunningham, Trimpi, and Peterson right to regard the plain style as the central style and the eloquent style as, finally, an enrichment of it, and second, are the verse techniques developed in writing short poems readily available to the writer of dramatic poetry? Are the two styles that were perfected in the lyric poetry of the sixteenth century germane to the style and form of late Elizabethan poetic drama, especially poetic tragedy?

How does a dramatist make verse into drama? There are certain traps or disadvantages in putting the question in this way. The form of the question suggests that the dramatist must always start with whatever poetic styles are available and then make what he can out of them. It seems to assign an unwarranted priority to style or language. In a related way, the question insists that drama is primarily, even essentially, a form of literature and so minimizes its non-linguistic elements. And finally, to the extent that the model for analysing verse derives from the study of short poems, the question might focus attention on isolated passages without sufficient regard for their interrelationships. In any of these cases, the full complexity of the drama goes unrecognized.

None the less, the question is worth asking, all the more worth asking because of these very objections. However the dramatist begins - whether he begins with elements

other than style, such as plot, character, theme, spectacle, or song – the reader, and for the most part the audience as well, recovers the dramatist's intention by attending to the cumulative effects of his styles. The analysis of style leads out to larger questions, whereas the pondering of larger questions seldom stoops to find proof in the minutiae of style. An author may very well be under pressures of an indefinite variety and kind that bear on his work, but if he is a writer, they get expressed in language. Even if there are non-verbal kinds of drama, drama, especially Elizabethan drama, is still essentially a form of literature because of the central place that language holds in the human world. The imitation of human action can hardly avoid a fact so important. For a similar reason, the language of a play should bear close inspection moment by moment. Passages isolated for analysis should return us, finally, to a renewed sense of the meaning and form of the whole.

The relationship of style and form in drama is a question that can be most sharply defined by referring again to the criticism of Yvor Winters. Though he celebrates repeatedly the achievements in the short poem in English, Winters's infrequent discussions of drama offer some challenging criticisms of the form. From early in his career Winters was suspicious of what he called 'imitative form', the doctrine whereby 'the form of expression is determined by the subject matter'. Following this doctrine, an author attempts to express the confusion of his subject matter by making his form deranged and confused – a procedure tantamount to the surrender of form. Since the dramatist seems to be committed to some kind of imitation, the procedure would appear to be an all but inescapable part of dramatic form, unless he restricts himself to the portrayal of characters whose understanding is lucid and firm at all times. Late in his career, in 'Problems For the Modern Critic of Literature,' Winters, using *Macbeth* as his example, challenged the very heart of drama.⁵ Since the dramatist must differentiate his characters from one another and differentiate the various stages of growth or decline in individual characters, and since he must do these things directly without the intervention of authorial comment, he will be forced at

times to write badly or to express unworthy ideas or sentiments in order to depict characters inferior to himself in perception and expression. And such stretches of inferior writing are not merely an occupational hazard for the dramatist, but an unavoidable part of the medium. Dramatic form is inherently defective.

The problem that Winters here poses for the modern critic has not been answered satisfactorily. While Winters's account of the sixteenth-century lyric has been refined and extended by several other writers, his discussion of dramatic form has received scant notice. A. L. French in 'Purposive Imitation: A Skirmish With Literary Theory' takes up some of the issues and, after discussing the difficulties involved in trying to exonerate bad prose by saying that it is *deliberately* bad, he admits that the difficulties 'become even more formidable when we think of plays'.⁶ But though French acknowledges at the end of his essay that Winters's 'fallacy of imitative form' provided the starting point for some of his reflections, he does not address himself at all to Winters's comments on drama, and he shies away from exploring that question very deeply. His essay remains not a sustained engagement but what he calls it himself, a skirmish.

Jonas A. Barish does attempt a direct and sustained answer in 'Yvor Winters and the Antimimetic Prejudice', and Barish does indeed have some valid points to bring against Winters – most notably the presence of certain mimetic principles even in the poems that Winters most admires, such as Valéry's 'Ebauche d'un serpent', and even in Winters's own poems.⁷ Barish, however, damages his own case by supposing from the outset that the criticisms of drama are a peculiarity of taste or prejudice. He seems to find in the criticisms not so much a challenge as an affront, and in his eagerness to rebuff the affront, he allows Winters to win the argument by default. He attempts the wholly legitimate enterprise of trying to win a hearing for the role of dance, music, ritual, gesture, costume, light, and architecture in drama by the dubious method of denying Winters's claim that poetic drama is primarily a form of literature.⁸

The most one can say is that at certain epochs, when language held a central place in culture, the written

word acquired a temporary working ascendancy in the theatre also. It acquired it a few centuries back in western Europe, and now seems to be on the point of losing it again; increasingly, playwrights today seem to feel themselves to be working in a nonverbal medium. Winters's definition arrogates an unwarranted despotism to language in drama, and denies the independence of the theatre as an art form in its own right, with its own laws of realization.

It is a superficial view of culture that can with such insouciance displace language from the centre. But quite apart from that complex issue, it is no defence of *poetic* drama to argue that the theatre as an art form in its own right is independent of language. There may well be such an art form, but it cannot be called poetic drama since poetry is by definition something made in words. Through a prejudice in favour of theatricality, Barish fails to confront the real question that Winters asks. What kind of poetry is possible within the form of a play?

One should be able to ask this question and still attend fairly to both of its aspects, verse and drama. It may be true, as Barish, following Andor Gomme, alleges,⁹ that Winters is at his weakest when writing about drama. Certainly his comments on the form are comparatively brief and largely theoretical. By comparison, his study of the short poem in the English Renaissance is a matter of complete engagement – the whole man wholly attending – and a model worthy of emulation. There is, then, a kind of tension involved in using Winters's criticism as a way of thinking about Renaissance drama. If we import his methods for analysing verse into the analysis of drama, are we committed to his conclusions about dramatic form?

This question, along with the others raised so far, contains numerous and important implications for the study of Shakespeare. The questions, however, can be set in historical perspective by first considering certain aspects of the work of Sir Philip Sidney and of Fulke Greville, First Lord Brooke. Sidney, in *A Defence of Poetry*, and Greville, in *The Tragedy of Mustapha*, reveal certain crucial ideas concerning form and purpose in Elizabethan drama. Moreover, since both Greville and Sidney fashioned their most impressive achievements in

the form of the short poem, and since both contributed materially to the development of English verse, their ideas about drama have a special relevance for a study of the relation between drama and verse. They are among those most responsible for the sophistication of the poetic styles available to Shakespeare.

The plays of William Shakespeare offer a wealth of material, but two, *The Tragedy of Richard the Second* and *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, are particularly well-suited to this study. *Richard II* is one of the few plays of Shakespeare that is composed entirely of verse, and it was probably written during the period that saw the writing of some or many of the sonnets as well. In addition, the play recommends itself because of intrinsic merit: the action is momentous, the characters are nicely drawn, and much of the verse is extremely fine. It is much admired both for its dramatic and for its poetic qualities. The issues raised by the play are historical in origin and are at least potentially tragic in intensity, so that Shakespeare's subject matter here offers full scope to the rhythmical heightening that is a characteristic feature of poetry. Shakespeare in this play makes use of the whole range of poetic styles that could be discovered or invented in England in the 1590s, and *Richard II*, therefore, stands as a kind of summary achievement of Shakespeare's early period and, in addition, as a kind of prognostication of the style Shakespeare brought to maturity in a play such as *Macbeth*. In the study of *Macbeth*, the analysis of verse serves finally to answer Winters's criticisms of drama. In *Mustapha*, *Richard II*, and *Macbeth* it is possible to see the demands that dramatic form makes of poetic styles and also to see the plenitude produced in the exchange.

2 · Sydney's *Defence* and Greville's *Mustapha*

I

Some of the principles of style and form in tragedy and something of their relationship to poetic style in general are set forth clearly in *A Defence of Poetry* by Philip Sidney and in *The Tragedy of Mustapha* by Fulke Greville. Sidney's own short poems, of course, provide much that is immediately useful to the dramatist. His technical subtlety, especially as developed in *Astrophil and Stella*, provides a means of registering subtle and dramatic shifts in the mental or emotional state of a character. Even more important for the essential purposes of drama, his mastery of the plain style provides a means of registering the moral certitudes within which or against which a character must act out his desires. Greville's similar mastery and, in *Caelica*, his even more pronounced separation of the two styles makes his play a good choice in which to explore the influence of lyric styles on poetic drama. But it is Sidney's *Defence* that most clearly exhibits some of the important tenets of Elizabethan critical theory: it presents both an affective theory of tragedy and a descriptive theory of poetic style.

To begin with, the *Defence* defends each of the two styles. As several critics have observed, Sidney's treatise conforms to the model of a classical oration,¹ and it includes, just before the peroration, a long digression on the state of contemporary English poetry. The main body of the *Defence* is an argument on behalf of the golden style, while the digression argues for the plain style, connecting, as it does so, poetic style with the everyday, practical purposes of oratory.²

For my part, I do not doubt, when Antonius and Crassus, the great forefathers of Cicero in eloquence, the one (as Cicero testifieth of them) pretended not to know art, the other not to set by it, because with a plain sensibleness they might win credit of popular ears (which credit is the nearest step to persuasion,

which persuasion is the chief mark of oratory), I do not doubt (I say) but that they used these knacks [i.e. similitudes] very sparingly; which who doth generally use, any man may see doth dance to his own music, and so be noted by the audience more careful to speak curiously than to speak truly. Undoubtedly (at least to my opinion undoubtedly), I have found in divers smally learned courtiers a more sound style than in some professors of learning; of which I can guess no other cause, but that the courtier, following that which by practise he findeth fittest to nature, therein (though he know it not) doth according to art, though not by art: where the other, using art to show art, and not to hide art (as in these cases he should do), flieth from nature, and indeed abuseth art.

The interest in an art that hides art and in the credit of a 'plain sensibleness' and the objections to using similitudes and to being 'more careful to speak curiously than to speak truly' are all clear demands for the plain style. Alongside this passage can be set Sidney's comments on the difficulty of finding contemporary English poems to commend.

Besides these I do not remember to have seen but few (to speak boldly) printed that have poetical sinews in them; for proof whereof, let but most of the verses be put in prose, and then ask the meaning, and it will be found that one verse did but beget another, without ordering at the first what should be at the last; which becomes a confused mass of words, with a tingling sound of rhyme, barely accompanied with reason. (p. 64)

The concerns for prose meaning and for the supremacy of rational order are once again clear demands for a poetic style that aims to disclose the plain truth, a style that is the instrument of reason.

By contrast, earlier sections of the *Defence* promote the golden style. Against the charge that poets are liars, Sidney replies by claiming that, 'for the poet, he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth' (p. 52), and a little further on he continues in this vein:

If then a man can arrive to that child's age to know that the poets' persons and doings are but pictures what should be, and not stories what have been, they will never give the lie to things not affirmatively but allegorically and figuratively written. (p. 53)

Here allegories and figures (both may be considered as kinds of similitudes) are defended, and the affirmations of truth are irrelevant. As Sidney declares very early in the treatise: '[Nature's] world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden' (p. 24).

O. B. Hardison Jr in his essay 'The Two Voices of Sidney's *Apology for Poetry*'³ has seen quite clearly that Sidney is committed to defending two antithetical schools of poetry, but Hardison's conjectures about the significance of that fact are debatable. In the first place, he is mistaken to conclude *prima facie* that the first voice, the one heard earlier in the treatise, is 'the one that speaks the more effectively for the poetry of the Elizabethan period', when it is in the digression (the second voice) that Sidney addresses himself specifically to the question of contemporary Elizabethan poetry. Second, to stigmatize the second voice as 'incipient neo-classicism' is to make too easy an equation between the plain style of Ben Jonson and the neo-classicism of Dryden, Pope and the eighteenth century, especially in view of the work of Cunningham and Trimpi, who show that Ben Jonson's plain style is the result of a confluence of the classical plain style and the native plain style. Sidney's defence of this school, then, is not necessarily quite the *avant garde* critical outlook that Hardison suggests.⁴ Finally, though one must sympathize with Hardison on this point, it may not be true that 'the contradictions of attitude and precept' in the two voices are so fundamental as to prohibit reconciliation. Curiously, Sidney's *Defence* in its most famous and oft-repeated formulations, what Hardison calls its first voice, cannot stand on its own. Against the charge that poems are sinful fancies, Sidney replies that some poems are indeed infected, but that such examples are an abuse of poetry and that, like anything else, poetry must be judged 'upon the right use,' which in this case presumably means poems of virtuous fancy. In either

case, however, poems are the product of fancy, and both the poet and his reader are left with the problem of sorting out the abuse of poetry from the right use of it. Neither will be able to do this without some recourse to a plain sensibleness and a carefulness to speak truly.

Sidney himself does not make this reconciliation in the *Defence* (though he sometimes does in his short poems). Nevertheless, the *Defence* does set out quite clearly two of the styles available to poets in the last part of the sixteenth century. Moreover, tragedy, which does deal in some measure with the truth of accomplished fact, with the truth of history, may well find the affirmations of the plain style suitable to its purposes. But again, Sidney does not say so. In fact, his brief paragraph outlining an affective theory of tragedy does not say anything directly about what styles are appropriate to the genre.

After discussing comedy, he turns to the subject of tragedy.

So that the right use of comedy will (I think) by nobody be blamed; and much less of the high and excellent Tragedy, that openeth the greatest wounds, and showeth forth the ulcers that are covered with tissue; that maketh kings fear to be tyrants, and tyrants manifest their tyrannical humours; that, with stirring the affects of admiration and commiseration, teacheth the uncertainty of this world, and upon how weak foundations gilden roofs are builded; that maketh us know

*Qui sceptrā saevus duro imperio regit .
Timet timentes; metus in auctorem redit.*

But how much it can move, Plutarch yieldeth a notable testimony of the abominable tyrant Alexander Phraeus, from whose eyes a tragedy, well made and represented, drew abundance of tears, who without all pity had murdered infinite numbers, and some of his own blood: so as he, that was not ashamed to make matters for tragedies, yet could not resist the sweet violence of a tragedy. And if it wrought no further good in him, it was that he, in despite of himself, withdrew himself from hearkening to that which might mollify his hardened heart. (p. 45)

The most important remark of this paragraph deals with the emotional effect of tragedy, which Sidney calls 'admiration and commiseration.' J. V. Cunningham, in his book, *Woe or Wonder: The Emotional Effect of Shakespearean Tragedy*, points out that Horatio's phrase, 'aught of woe or wonder', designating the emotional effect of *Hamlet*, 'is simply a translation from Latin to Germanic diction of Sidney's, with the substitution of the more general and more traditional notion of sorrow for the more special and more Aristotelian notion of pity'.⁵ Cunningham goes on to demonstrate that, in addition to the famous passage on pity and fear, there are three passages in Aristotle's *Poetics* arguing that wonder is an emotional effect of tragedy; that Plato's *Ion* concurs with Aristotle in associating fear, pity, and wonder; and that the same doctrine is discoverable throughout antiquity and the Middle Ages. As Cunningham remarks, 'whatever appears in the scholastic philosophers and at the same time in Aristotle, as well as in Cicero and Quintilian, is likely to appear anywhere in Renaissance literature' (*CE*, pp. 74, 75). Sidney's phrase, then, is almost as traditional as Horatio's and coincides exactly with Horatio's on the subject of wonder.

It is worthwhile to draw attention to Cunningham's argument because many modern students are still in the grip of a misinterpretation of the tradition, and the misinterpretation can cause an insensitive reading of Renaissance literature. For example, Jan Van Dorsten, editor of the Oxford edition of *A Defence of Poetry*, has the following comment on Sidney's paragraph:

Sidney's only, but important, departure from the main (Aristotelian) line of argument is in calling the 'affects' (emotions) stirred by tragedy 'admiration' (great wonder and reverence) and 'commiseration', instead of 'pity and fear'. 'Fear' itself he reserves for the royal spectator (l. 17), or he relegates it to the tragic theme, as in the couplet 'Qui sceptrum etc.'. 'Who harshly wields the sceptre with tyrannic sway, fears those who fear: terror recoils upon its author's head' (Seneca, *Oedipus* 705-6). (p. 94)

Van Dorsten's mistake about 'departure' is perhaps less serious