Reading Sixteenth-Century Poetry

Patrick Cheney

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Introduction
The Pleasures and Uses of Sixteenth-Century Poetry

Sixteenth-century English poetry is a treasured artifact of world art. 1564 saw the birth of William Shakespeare, author of such world-class masterpieces as the *Sonnets* and *Hamlet*, both originally written in the 1590s. The sixteenth century is also the era of the madcap "Skeltonics" invented by John Skelton, the first self-crowned "poet laureate" in modern English; the revolutionary "Petrarchan" poetry of Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard, earl of Surrey; the breakout national poetry of Edmund Spenser and Sir Philip Sidney; the domestic and civic poetry of the first woman in English thought to have a literary career, Isabella Whitney; and the spiritually haunting love poems of Sir Walter Ralegh, Christopher Marlowe, and John Donne, each of whom registers a voice that sounds distinctly modern: "For God's sake, hold your tongue and let me love," exclaims Donne to open "The Canonization." Yet students encountering this poetry for the first time confront a genuine historical problem: poetry of the sixteenth century may constitute the gold standard for poetry in English, yet over 400 years of cultural change make the famed poetry of Shakespeare and his contemporaries not simply difficult but also alien.

This volume in the Wiley-Blackwell series *Reading Poetry* aims to help students become better readers of sixteenth-century poetry. Since most students possess some familiarity with the problem this entails – perhaps through knowledge of the enigmatic beauty of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* – the book concentrates on a strategy for responding to the problem. In doing so, it argues that sixteenth-century poetry is exceptional in the experience

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it offers readers today: both profound joy and unexpected utility in the process of *identity formation.*

In particular, the strategy offered aims to fuse two methods of analysis often kept separate in literary criticism: close reading of individual poems as artifacts of value, and historical reading of "background" or contextual material as the crucible out of which poems are produced. The fusion of the two methods proceeds from a central assumption: we can read sixteenth-century poems most fully through the lens of their historical making. For instance, we can read Donne's "The Canonization" the way it was read for much of the twentieth century: as a "well-wrought urn" (to borrow a slogan from the poem's fourth stanza), a closed artifact independent of context, unified by its innate form. By such a "formalist" method, we would understand the poem to be about the mystical way in which two lovers jump the gap between self and other to become a timeless "one," and perhaps even about the making of the poem as an artifact. Yet we can augment this reading by knowing something about Neoplatonic love in the late Elizabethan era, about the religious and political crises of the decade, and even about Donne's own literary ambitions. We can go further and say that we need to read the poem in this way because the terms of the poem compel us to do so: from its religious title; to its reference to "the King's real or his stampèd face" (7); to its contemporary Neoplatonic notion of "two, being one" (24); and to its formal literary diction about "verse" specific to the era: "sonnets," "hymns," "legend[s]" (30–5). As we shall see in the conclusion to this book, the poem ends up "canonizing" not just the lovers whom Donne fictionalizes but also, more specially, his own revolutionary poetry in the context of his time.

Equally to the point, Donne's methodology operates by two mutually reinforcing principles, ones that join with meter to make poetry poetry: *figuration* and *allusiveness.* By "figuration," I mean a type of language that is symbolic, not literal – a word, phrase, line, or passage representative of something, as when Donne says to his mistress in "The Canonization," "We're tapers, too, and at our own cost die" (21). This single line contains two figurations and a pun: "We're tapers" is a metaphor that equates the lovers with candles; "cost" is a metonym that uses an economic principle of expense to denote the loss the lovers accrue through sexual union; and "die" is a pun that clarifies the nature of the loss, since the word is Elizabethan slang for sexual climax, a reference to the belief that orgasm shortens life. Metonymy and metaphor are two of the four elemental tropes of poetry, the other two being irony, which says one thing and means another (as when Donne's narrator develops the logic of canonization for his lovers as for saints, without Donne himself expecting the reader to accept the substance of his equation); and synecdoche, which uses a part to signify a whole (as when Donne's opening line uses "tongue" as the part that represents the mouth with which the imagined friend chides the narrator). In brief, Donne communicates figuratively to his mistress that they will consume their lives by having intercourse.

By "allusiveness," I mean language that alludes primarily to another author or work of literature, as when Donne uses his figuration of the spiritual union of male and female to allude to the most authoritative Neoplatonic poetry in English, written by Edmund Spenser. Hence, in the penultimate stanza of "The Canonization," Donne mentions a series of "verse" forms as avenues by which he and his mistress can "live by love" (28) – that is, become eternal: "legend" (30), "sonnets" (32), and "hymns" (35). A case could be made here (we shall make it in the conclusion) that Donne alludes to three major eternizing forms in the Spenser canon: Spenser's "Legend of Holiness" in Book 1 of *The Faerie Queene*; his Petrarchan sonnet sequence, *Amoretti*; and his *Fowre Hymnes*. By alluding to Spenser, we might conclude, Donne offers his poetry as a rival to that of England's national poet.

In this way, figurative poetry like Donne's is almost always allusive poetry. It does not simply represent; it alludes; and what it often alludes to formally is the history of poetry itself. To read sixteenth-century poetry is to acquire information about a lot of things (e.g., politics, religion, and sex), but also to learn how the poets themselves understand their art historically. By remembering this simple formula, we discover a view of what the century's poetry is, how it works, for whom, and toward what ends.

The fusion of historical analysis with close reading registers a shift from much recent criticism: from an emphasis on the "discourse of power" surrounding the "subject" to a focus on the "intertext" of the "author," that is, from focusing on the self fashioned by political institutions to focusing on relations between the poet's poems and those of previous and contemporary authors. While the word "intertextuality" was coined in the late 1960s as a poststructuralist principle for privileging the "text" over the "author" – to support a movement of interpretation known as "the death of the author" – the term has migrated to mean many things, including simply the way texts written by authors interrelate with one another. By featuring a shift from reading for *the subject of power* to reading for *the intertext of the author*, we may see how a poet contributes to the formation of identity, because in our reading method we attend to the author's role in the making of the subject.

The link between identity and poetry has an ancient origin. Greek and Roman writers imagined poetry as the first language of the human. They believed that poetry gives voice to a primal urge – our deepest desires, our most important forms of consciousness – a process that helps us determine what makes men and women human, distinct from stones, plants, and animals. Consequently, they told the story of the first poet, Orpheus, who used his harp to tame wild beasts and move inanimate objects like trees: the poet is the primeval civilizing leader of society. In the nineteenth century, the Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley ends his *Defence of Poetry* on this topic: "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World" (Reiman and Powers 508). Throughout the history of poetry, poets make a case for that acknowledgment. The reason they need to is that the West's most authoritative philosopher, Plato, presents his icon of wisdom, Socrates, banishing the founding poets of the Western canon, Homer and Hesiod, from his ideal Republic, because they violate reason, falsify reality, blaspheme against the gods, and altogether corrupt the minds of the youth. For Plato, the magic of poetry breaks down the reason-based laws of society (*Republic*, Book 10).

Between Plato and Shelley, major writers offer "defences of poetry"; a short list includes Aristotle in the *Poetics*, Horace in the *Art of Poetry*, Boccaccio in the *Genealogy of the Gods*, Julius Caesar Scaliger in the *Poetics*, and, during the Elizabethan era, the first formal treatises in English: most famously, Sir Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poesy* (circa 1582) and George Puttenham's *Art of English Poesy* (1589). Aristotle clearly rejects the judgment of his teacher, Plato, but he never formally states what we are left to infer: that poetry is vital to the state because it brings health to the individual. More interested in the "formative elements" of poetry (1449a8), Aristotle mentions its effect, which he calls "proper pleasure" (1459a20), and which he imagines as having the function of "catharsis," whether purging or refining the unruly "emotions" of "pity and fear" (1449b24–30). Only in passing does Aristotle mention poetry's "moral purpose" (1454a18).

Consequently, the most important spokesman for the civic-building power of poetry for sixteenth-century England is Horace – which might explain why Queen Elizabeth began a verse translation: here we see a sovereign trying to institute the Horatian model. For a full translation, we can turn to Ben Jonson, who emerges late in the queen's reign to become a major author of the early seventeenth century under her successor, James I: "Poets would either profit, or delight, / Or mixing sweet, and fit, teach life the right" (*Art of Poetry* 477–8). For Horace, the poet "can apply / Sweet mixed with sour, to his reader, so / As doctrine, and delight together go" (514–16). Jonson retains Horace's conjunction between delight and instruction, but in another *Defence of Poetry*, from 1579, Thomas Lodge expresses the widely held causal connection succinctly: poets use "pleasure to draw men to wisedome" (G.G. Smith 1: 66). For his part, Jonson's Horace goes on to cite Orpheus as a model for the ideal role of the poet in society:

> Orpheus, a priest, and speaker for the gods,
> First frighted men, that wildly lived, at odds,
> From slaughters, and foul life; and for the same
> Was tigers said, and lions fierce, to tame.
> (479–82)

As a poet-priest, Orpheus speaks the divine language of the gods, which means in part that the gods speak in verse, and poets imitate them. As such, poets are figures of "wisdom" who put their knowledge to work on behalf of society: they "separate" the "sacred" from the "profane," the "public" from the "private," to "abate / Wild ranging lusts; prescribe the marriage good; / Build towns, and carve the laws in leaves of wood" (486–90). Clearly, Horace, like Jonson and many writers of the sixteenth century, lend to the poet a high cultural calling.

The present book will try to tell a story about this calling made historically important by Skelton, Wyatt, Surrey, Sidney, Spenser, Donne, and others. Today, we might benefit from hearing a story about the sixteenth-century poet as world legislator (or civic leader) because it can give us access to humane voices that readers for 400 years have valued when finding the human coming under threat, or the human in need of being made. We might even say that we need this poetry, because the pleasure and meaning it provides help us contend with the often fraught and fractured existence we lead: "When in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes," writes Shakespeare in Sonnet 29, "Haply I think on thee" (1–10). The sixteenth century is not just any century in the history of the English language: evolving from Middle English, it forms the birth moment of modern poetry, and, as we are seeing, the birth moment of the modern human. In reading sixteenth-century poetry, we witness the making of the human, men and women in the process of becoming active agents of civility. Not just the modern subject but also the modern subject made by the modern poem: this is the promised end of sixteenth-century poetry.

Promised, yet not always delivered. For we can take the civilizing function of poetry too far. Thus, other parts in the story of Orpheus exhibit genuine sadness and horror: when he loses his wife Eurydice as he retrieves her out of Hades, or when intoxicated Maenads dismember him and throw his severed head in the Hebrus River, the tongue shockingly continuing to sing. Here we need to confront just what the word "primal" means, for the story of Orpheus suggests that there is something superrational – pre-civil? – about the art of poetry, something intoxicating, even violent, not simply of the human but also of the gods. In addition, then, to what we might call the Horatian-Sidneian model of the poet as civic builder, we discover a second model, which is not as often discussed. I'm going to call this darker, divine aspect the model of the sublime poet, in keeping with the first treatise on the concept, *On Sublimity*, written during the first century AD by the Greek scholar known as Longinus. According to Longinus, the reading of sublime poetry heightens rather than regulates our emotions, producing either terror or rapture, and leaving the human in the exalted condition of the gods: "sublimity raises us towards the spiritual greatness of god" (36.1: 178). Importantly, Longinus agrees that poetic figuration often alludes to other works of literature, but his master stroke is to see figurative allusion as a site for the sublime: "another road to sublimity ... is ... imitation and emulation of great writers of the past" (13.2: 158); "metaphors conduce to sublimity" (32.6: 174). Yet the goal is not civility but "astonishment" (15.2: 159). Hence, Longinus never says that the poet of the sublime civilizes a "democracy"; instead, he says simply that a democracy houses the sublime poet (44.2–3: 185–6), who exists solely in a state of "wonder" (1.4: 143). The Horatian civic-building project of the conventional "Orphic poet" explodes, for the sublime "tears everything up like a whirlwind" (1.4: 144).

In reading poetry during the sixteenth century, when Longinus was first published and translated into Latin, we will need to keep in mind the model of poetry as a civic-building art and the model of poetry as spiritual transport. Yet in the lexicon of the period, the two are not created equal. Indeed, the Longinian model almost never gets articulated, let alone authorized, even though we can find vestiges of it where we might least expect it – in Sidney's Horatian defence, for instance. On the one hand, Sidney calls poetry "the companion of camps," because it proves instrumental to the

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soldier (Vickers 373); but on the other, he can claim what looks like a Longinian effect for the poet, who "doth ... strike, pierce, ... [and] possess the sight of the soul" (Vickers 351). Because the Horatian-Sidneian model is the official registrar of sixteenth-century poetics, we shall emphasize it throughout, letting the Longinian model emerge *as it will.*

During the past hundred years, poets and scholars have continued the discussion about "poetics" advanced by writers from Aristotle and Horace to Sidney and Shelley. According to Seamus Heaney, in his 1995 *The Redress of Poetry*, "Professors of poetry, apologists for it, practitioners of it, from Sir Philip Sidney to Wallace Stevens, all sooner or later are tempted to show how poetry's existence as a form of art relates to our existence as citizens of society – how it is 'of present use'" (Cook 568). Heaney goes on to suggest that the "operation" of poetry

> does not intervene in the actual but by offering consciousness a chance to recognize its predicaments, foreknow its capacities and rehearse its comebacks in all kinds of venturesome ways, it does constitute a beneficent event, for poet and audience alike. It offers a response to reality which has a liberating and verifying effect upon the individual spirit, and yet I can see how such a function would be deemed insufficient by a political activist. (Cook 568–9)

Heaney's comment embeds, separates, and updates the terms of the Horatian and the Longinian models of poetry. Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, poets and critics have been lining up on one side or the other. Adrienne Rich, for instance, sees poetry as "a dialogue between art and politics," and thus she herself writes poetry to "bring together the political world 'out there,'" exhibiting a profound "fusion" of "political struggle and spiritual continuum" (Cook 507–13). In contrast, Helen Vendler sees poetry as "a mirror" of her own "feelings": "Everything said in a poem was a metaphor for something in my inner life" – what she calls "the voice of the soul" (Cook 576). In Renaissance studies, Stephen Greenblatt writes famously that "Shakespeare's plays are centrally, repeatedly concerned with the production and containment of subversion and disorder," creating a profound "meditat[ion] ... on the consolidation of state power" (*Shakespearean Negotiations* 40), while Harold Bloom disagrees vociferously:

> The work of great poetry is to aid *us* to become free artists of our selves. Even if Shakespeare cannot make me into Falstaff or Hamlet, all great poetry asks us to be possessed by it. To possess it by memory is a start, and

> to augment our consciousness is the goal. The art of reading poetry is an authentic training in the augmentation of consciousness, perhaps the most authentic of healthy modes. ("Art of Reading Poetry" 29)

In this well-advertised opposition, we can find vestiges of poetry as a mode of sublimity and poetry as a mode of civility.

Heaney's comment also allows us to discern the way in which poetic theorists from Greenblatt and Bloom back to Horace and Plato appear to work from a single conceptual template, expressive of a particular (often idiosyncratic) relation among the following set of concepts: (1) *imagination*, (2) *world*, (3) *word*, (4) *object*, and (5) *effect*. Expressed as a coherent process, a comprehensive "poetics" might witness the poet using imagination to construct and reconstruct the world out of words, to produce the material object of the poem, for an emotional, intellectual, and activist effect on the reader.

In this book, I work from the foundation of such a poetics. In particular, I propose to concentrate on the pleasures that readers today can experience when they realize the utility of poetry in their lives: a utility that can be *therapeutic*, because it changes the way we think and feel; *activating*, because it changes the way we behave; or simply *transportive*, because it elevates us into ecstasy. In all these ways, poetry is *instrumental*. Readers are here invited to approach sixteenth-century poetry much as some approach music: for what it can do for us – for our feelings and thoughts, our beliefs, and sometimes our actions. Sixteenth-century poetry is not static or passive but dynamic and active; its formal qualities intrinsically create (as if by Orphic magic) the vital energy needed for performing one of life's most pressing challenges: to convert our inner life into a meaningful form, whether of personal contentment, inner vitality, or social engagement. Rather than being simply objects for study and dissection, poems are by nature artifacts of pleasure – even when they are structurally disjointed and topically sad – and as such they constitute mini-reservoirs of meaning that readers can translate into conduits for identity, pleasure, and action.

I do not mean to suggest that the instrumental process of reading poetry for identity formation, transport, or civic engagement is either sure or simple. It is neither. Poetry offers a guide (rarely a single guide), not a doctrine; a form of inspiration, not a rigid model. Intensely personal, sixteenth-century poetry can help us grow as citizens, expanding consciousness, challenging intellection, and impassioning feeling. It does not always help us become the same sort of citizen. The subversive poetry of Christopher Marlowe differs radically from the ethical poetry of Isabella Whitney. Yet we also need to recognize that sometimes poetry might help us grow as private individuals. In both cases, nonetheless, readers might recurrently ask themselves as they read, How is a given poem fashioning me? What kind of identity is it forming for (and in) me? No two people will answer in the same way, nor will one person often answer in a consistent way.

The general project of this book, then, is to suggest that the first form of an "educated imagination" in modern English (to borrow Northrop Frye's phrase) proceeds by "reading sixteenth-century poetry" closely and historically, and that this process can have both a private, a divine, and a civic function. Since, as we have seen, the sixteenth century had its own vocabulary and principles for articulating this project, the proposed strategy makes a segue for discussing both the differences and the similarities between "then" and "now." Readers can expect to encounter a sense of both historical continuity and historical difference, accruing awareness about just how alien the poetry of Shakespeare and his contemporaries can be, but also how familiar. Reading sixteenth-century poetry closely within its own historical context and reading it in the context of lived experience today are not separate endeavors but part of a larger process that can make the past integral to the present and to the future.

I hasten to add that no prescribed method can fully "make us better readers" of sixteenth-century poetry. Reading will always be idiosyncratic, personal, and even mysterious: more an art than a science. Throughout, nonetheless, we will pursue a practical way to read sixteenth-century poetry carefully and contextually. This method, we might further add, can be *transportable* in a different sense: of use to readers when they read other poems, other poets, and other eras.

◆

What, then, does the proposed strategy for reading sixteenth-century poetry look like? Structurally, it begins by dividing the sixteenth century into two eras: "early Tudor" (1500–1558), which covers the reigns of Henry VII (1485–1509), Henry VIII (1509–1547), Edward VI (1547–1553), and Mary I (1553–1558); and "Elizabethan" (1558–1600), which follows the reign of Elizabeth I (1558–1603). The sixteenth century is indeed the century of the Tudors. When 1499 turns into 1500, Henry VII is king; when 1599 turns into 1600, his granddaughter, Elizabeth, is queen. While recent historians tend to study "the long sixteenth century," which begins with the coronation of Henry VII in 1485 and ends with the death of Elizabeth in 1603, I take the phrase "sixteenth century" literally, although occasionally I stray across boundaries at either end. While the 1590s may be the most remarkable decade in English literary history, the opening decades of the century are notable in their own right, and deserve to be understood as continuous with the creative distinction that comes afterward. Whereas most literary histories of the English Renaissance either neglect the early Tudor era or underscore its separateness from the age of Elizabeth, we shall here see how Skelton, Wyatt, and Surrey at the beginning prepare the way for Spenser, Sidney, and Shakespeare at the end. Hopefully, readers will discover the opportunity such a century-long spectrum provides.

Next, to track the twofold structure of the Tudor century into early Tudor and Elizabethan eras, the strategy identifies five major inventions of sixteenth-century English poetry as historically important – inventions that I derive from the author-centered "poetics" identified earlier: *voice*, *perception*, *world*, *form*, and *career*. Briefly, I mean to suggest that sixteenth-century poets are important for inventing distinctive poetic voices in their fictions, revolutionary gendered perceptions of the (sexual) other, fascinating imagined worlds, unique literary forms or genres, and finally literary careers in English. By including chapters on each of the five inventions under both the early Tudor and the Elizabethan eras, we can track the development of voices, perceptions, worlds, forms, and careers throughout the century. Readers can then use this pentad of inventions as engines or crucibles for interpretation, meaning, and perhaps social action. Through the course of the book, readers can learn to find these inventions in the poems we read and to produce informed reactions to them.

Voice, perception, world, form, and career are not the only inventions of sixteenth-century poets. I have chosen these five because they seem to me the most important ones; they allow us to view afresh what is distinctive about the century. Yet the order in which I discuss the pentad is in part arbitrary; while writing the book, I changed the order several times, and throughout I've been conscious that readers may wish to read the chapters in a different order. Nonetheless, by examining the five inventions as a structure, I suggest that we can traverse the significant topics of modern scholarship and criticism. In this way, the book aims to be both structurally eclectic and conceptually unified.

Since I am concerned to read sixteenth-century poetry closely by reading it historically, I try to witness how the pentad of poetic inventions emerges in response to the major cultural revolutions of this tumultuous era. In particular, I foreground five revolutions, as each charts a change in identity formation: (1) ***Renaissance humanism***; (2) ***the Reformation***; (3) ***the modern nation-state***; (4) ***companionate marriage***; and (5) the ***scientific revolution***. First, Renaissance humanism is an educational movement deriving from fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italy, located especially in the poet and scholar Petrarch, that led to a "rebirth" ("renaissance") of classical texts, learning, and finally secular beliefs and values. In sixteenth-century England, this movement greatly facilitated the expansion of grammar schools and the technological spread of print, helping to bring about a massive shift: from private contemplation of God to public service on behalf of the nation.

Second, the Reformation is a religious revolution begun in 1517 by the German theologian Martin Luther, and advanced by his French heir, John Calvin, who rejected "justification by works" in favor of "justification by faith" – that is, the rejection of salvation by human will (such as prayer) in favor of salvation by faith in God alone (exercised through individual conscience acting in accord with Scripture). This distinction radically relocates the source of identity from an exterior authority to an interior one, with the Word of God replacing the pope as the mediator of the individual's relation with the deity. When Henry VIII broke with the Church of Rome in 1534, he legislated belief, requiring citizens to declare their allegiance to the king as head of both the Church and the Crown – a policy his daughter Elizabeth would soften when she wrote to Sir Francis Bacon, "I would not open windows into men's souls" (quoted in King, "Religious Writing" 104): she would not require citizens to declare openly their inward beliefs, only their outward duty to her. While Elizabeth's policy largely worked, it opened a rift between ***inner*** and ***outer*** that is one of the hallmarks of the Elizabethan era.

Third, the modern nation-state is a political centralizing of governmental power in the monarch, the people, and the Parliament (the three primary constituents of the English Constitution), instead of in a feudal array of baronial courts scattered around the country. The Tudors are famous for inventing the modern nation-state, but, taken as a whole, the century constitutes a remarkable contest between two forms of government: that of the monarch, organized around the authority of kings, with its values of duty and obedience; and that of Parliament and the people – popular sovereignty – with its values of consent and freedom. Hence, when Henry VIII based his reign on sacral monarchy, he provoked a series of critiques along "republican" lines, that is to say, along anti-monarchical lines, in opposition to kingship; and one effect during the Elizabethan era was to develop medieval notions of a "mixed government" into what Patrick Collinson famously terms a "monarchical republic": a country governed centrally by a monarch but governed locally by the people, with Parliament acting as a mediator.

Fourth, companionate marriage is a family innovation, also with deep roots in medieval culture (Chaucer, for instance), emphasizing partnership between husband and wife, as newly supported by Protestant belief in the freedom of conscience and the rights of the godly person, including priests, to marry. For the upper classes, the dominant institution during the sixteenth century was arranged marriage, in which the father arranged for his son or daughter to marry someone he or she did not necessarily love, in order to gain wealth, prestige, or power for the family (as in *Romeo and Juliet*). Protestantism helped foster resistance to this "patriarchal" model, and much of the literature of the period – from Spenser's *Faerie Queene* to Shakespeare's *As You Like It* – witnesses support for the budding institution of romantic love.

Fifth, the scientific revolution here includes three "discoveries" not always discussed together: the 1543 Copernican discovery of a heliocentric as opposed to a geocentric universe, which decentered human identity and opened the possibility of a mechanistic cosmos; the 1492 Columbian discovery of the New World or Americas, leading to the sixteenth-century voyages of Sir Francis Drake and others, which expanded the globe beyond the original Christian consciousness set out in the Book of Genesis; and the nearly century-long discovery of a new land in Britain itself, measured through such earth-shifting events as the intensifying "enclosure" of pastureland, the Henrician dissolution of the Catholic monasteries, and, in 1579, Christopher Saxton's inaugural surveying of Britain, all of which ended up relocating national identity away from the monarch and toward the land and its people.

Quite literally, the universe of the sixteenth century altered – beneath, around, and above. Poets wrote their poems amid this era of immense cultural change. Whether we understand the change to be "revolution" or "evolution" remains a matter of debate. Yet it does not seem unreasonable to imagine historical process during the sixteenth century as evolving so far as to become revolutionary. We're then left to assign value to the change. During much of the twentieth century, literary historians found the Renaissance to be a triumphalist time of liberation, but revisionist work in the early twenty-first century argues to the contrary: "the institutional

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