

English Poetry of the Sixteenth Century

Gary Waller



Longman Literature in English Series

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Longman

London and New York

LONGMAN GROUP LIMITED
Longman House, Burnt Mill, Harlow
Essex CM20 2JE, England
Associated companies throughout the world

Published in the United States of America
by Longman Inc., New York

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First published 1986

BRITISH LIBRARY CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION DATA
Waller, Gary F.

English poetry of the sixteenth century.—
(Longman literature in English series).

1. English poetry—16th century—History
and criticism

I. Title

821'.2'09 PR521

ISBN 0 582 49248 3 c/sd

ISBN 0 582 49247 5 ppr

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING IN PUBLICATION DATA
Waller, Gary F. (Gary Fredric), 1945–

English poetry of the sixteenth century.

(Longman literature in English series)

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. English poetry—Early modern, 1500–1700—History
and criticism. I. Title. II. Series.

PR531. W33 1986 821'.9'002 85–10959

ISBN 0-582-49248-3

ISBN 0-582-49247-5 (pbk.)

Set in 9½/11pt Bembo (Linotron 202)
Produced by Longman Singapore Publishers (Pte) Ltd
Printed in Singapore

English Poetry of the Sixteenth Century

Longman Literature in English Series

General Editors: David Carroll and Michael Wheeler
University of Lancaster

For a complete list of titles see pages viii and ix

Editors' Preface

The multi-volume Longman Literature in English Series provides students of literature with a critical introduction to the major genres in their historical and cultural context. Each volume gives a coherent account of a clearly defined area, and the series, when complete, will offer a practical and comprehensive guide to literature written in English from Anglo-Saxon times to the present. The aim of the series as a whole is to show that the most valuable and stimulating approach to literature is that based upon an awareness of the relations between literary forms and their historical context. Thus the areas covered by most of the separate volumes are defined by period and genre. Each volume offers new informed ways of reading literary works, and provides guidance to further reading in an extensive reference section.

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David Carroll
Michael Wheeler

Longman Literature in English Series

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- * *Already published*

Author's Preface

Whether historians write history or critics criticism (even though never in the way they choose), or whether they are written by them, will never be proved by a single volume, but the process by which this volume of the Longman Literature in English series has been written certainly supports what it tries to exemplify – that the disruptive and contradictory structures that erupt within writing are the product of the interactions of many discourses, not merely the product of the will of its 'author'. As the *scriptor* of this study I recognize many intellectual debts and personal obligations while acknowledging there are many more. When Michael Wheeler, one of the General Editors of the series, asked me to undertake the volume, I had in process a study of the power of the Court over the poetry of the period. Much of that, in turn, had grown from earlier work on the Sidney Circle, and in particular from two studies of the Countess of Pembroke which convinced me (as usual, after they were published) that we needed to rethink radically our way of writing about the period. My original intention was merged into this project – and with it a cumbersome and (as I saw) increasingly archaic methodology. Over a number of years, I tried out a number of essays and conference papers and discovered further frustrations and questions. In order to let some of the answers find me, I had at times to stop reading sixteenth-century poetry, my ostensible subject, until I could find fit words by which it could speak through me. As a consequence, this study has been assembled, or assembled itself, as a process of re-education of its 'author' – as those to whom it is dedicated know (in different ways) to their cost.

My specific debts (authors may not exist, at least in the ways we once thought, but readers and friends certainly do) are many, and only the most important can be acknowledged here. As I read over the final stages of my work, I found myself drawn back to C. S. Lewis's *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* and discovered myself agreeing, though from startlingly different perspectives, with many of his judgements: I commenced my teaching career in the rooms in which he had once taught at Magdalene College, Cambridge, and so my acknowledgement is a doubly appropriate one. His successors in the

Chair of Medieval and Renaissance Literature, the late J. A. W. Bennett and John Stevens, both helped me greatly in those early days, and later, as did other teachers and mentors, including Peter Dane, Mike Doyle, L. C. Knights, and the late J. C. Reid. More recently, I have learnt much from scholars such as the late Diane Bornstein, and Elizabeth Bieman, Ian Donaldson, Maurice Evans, A. C. Hamilton, S. K. Heninger, Jr, Alvin Kernan, Roger Kuin, Mary E. Lamb, Richard Lanham, J. C. A. Rathmell, Thomas P. Roche Jr, and Germaine Warkentin. One group of co-workers deserves particular thanks. At the MLA Convention of 1981 Leonard Tennenhouse announced breezily that I was writing what would be the first revisionist history of Renaissance literature; he, therefore, bears a special responsibility for the work, even though I would deny that this book is quite what he described it as. But if, as I believe, there is indeed a new direction being forged in writing literary history, it is because of him and the following scholars, among others, with whom I have worked and who have contributed materially or given encouragement to me: Kate Belsey, Marion Campbell, Jonathan Dollimore, Antony Easthope, Jonathan Goldberg, Jane Hedley, Bob Hodge, Ann Rosalind Jones, Jim Kavanagh, Jacqueline T. Miller, Louis A. Montrose, Bernard Sharratt, Alan Sinfield, Peter Stallybrass, and Frank Whigham. Among the students to whom in part this book is dedicated and with whom it was to a large extent written (in some cases giving me reason to break the Eighth Commandment): Doug Abel, Lisa Bernstein, Andrea Clough, Steven Denvir, Glen Drummond, Linda Levine, Debra Martin, Margaret McLaren, Susan Rudy Dorscht (who served as a primary research assistant and whose drafting of the Appendices is gratefully acknowledged) and – if I may simultaneously thank and acknowledge one of my General Editors – Michael Wheeler. My colleagues at Carnegie-Mellon have given me a uniquely stimulating intellectual environment. Kathleen McCormick, my collaborator on other projects as well as a reader of some parts of this, is due especial thanks.

Research for this book has been carried out over nearly ten years, with the help of the Canada Council, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, and of short-term grants from Dalhousie and Wilfrid Laurier Universities. I wish to thank, as well, the Humanities Research Centre at the Australian National University for a fellowship which enabled me to spend four stimulating months thinking and writing in congenial surroundings in 1979. It is such necessary material support which represents, finally, the faith of one's colleagues, that often stirs the scholar into producing the most difficult, and on occasions the most tiresome, but necessary work. To all concerned, my deepest thanks.

Parts of this volume have appeared, in different form, as follows: portions of Chapter 1 in the *Dalhousie Review* (1981) and *Assays* (1982);

different parts of the material on Philip and Robert Sidney, Raleigh, and Shakespeare in *Short Fiction: Critical Views*, and *Poetry: Critical Views*, both published by Salem Press (1981 and 1982, respectively); much of the account of *Astrophil and Stella* in the special Sidney issue of *Studies in the Literary Imagination* (1982), edited by William A. Sessions, to whom special debts, personal and professional, must be acknowledged; some of the material on the Sidney Circle appeared first in *The Triumph of Death* and *Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke*, published by the University of Salzburg (1977, 1979); that on Petrarchanism in Chapter 3 in *Sir Philip Sidney and the Interpretation of Renaissance Culture*, edited by Gary F. Waller and Michael D. Moore (Croom Helm, 1984), and parts of the final chapter in *Silent But for the Word*, edited by Margaret Hannay (Kent State 1985). Throughout, ideas and occasional paragraphs have surfaced in editorial material in the *Sidney Newsletter*. My gratitude to its editor, Gerald A. Rubio, is enthusiastically given. In all cases, prior publication is gratefully acknowledged.

My two sons Michael and Andrew helped, as on other occasions, by allowing me to be a revisionist father. However nobody else is responsible for the final product. But then, as some of my colleagues and friends say, neither am I, since, they say, it is discourse that creates us; we do not speak, we are spoken. Nonetheless, the world of scholarship is such that I will want to accept any praise for whatever stimulation this volume may produce in its readers, so I must accept all the blame for its shortcomings.

— GFW
Carnegie-Mellon University
Pittsburgh
December 1984

List of Abbreviations

The following common abbreviations of scholarly journals and series etc., have been used in this study:

<i>ADE Bulletin</i>	Association of Departments of English Bulletin
<i>AUMLA</i>	Australasian Universities Modern Languages Association
<i>CQ</i>	Critical Quarterly
<i>EETS</i>	Early English Texts Society
<i>ELH</i>	English Literary History
<i>ELR</i>	English Literary Renaissance
<i>ES</i>	English Studies
<i>HLQ</i>	Huntingdon Library Quarterly
<i>HMC</i>	Historical Manuscripts Commission
<i>JEGP</i>	Journal of English and Germanic Philosophy
<i>JMRS</i>	Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies
<i>JWCI</i>	Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes
<i>KR</i>	Kenyon Review
<i>MLN</i>	Modern Language Notes
<i>MLQ</i>	Modern Languages Quarterly
<i>MLR</i>	Modern Language Review
<i>NLH</i>	New Literary History
<i>OLR</i>	Oxford Literary Review
<i>PMLA</i>	Publications of the Modern Languages Association
<i>PQ</i>	Philological Quarterly
<i>RenQ</i>	Renaissance Quarterly
<i>Ren and Ref</i>	Renaissance and Reformation
<i>RES</i>	Review of English Studies
<i>SEL</i>	Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900
<i>SLit I</i>	Studies in the Literary Imagination
<i>SN</i>	Shakespeare Newsletter
<i>SNew</i>	Sidney Newsletter
<i>SP</i>	Studies in Philosophy

<i>SpN</i>	Spenser Newsletter
<i>SRen</i>	Studies in the Renaissance
<i>TSLL</i>	Texas Studies in Language and Literature
<i>UTQ</i>	University of Toronto Quarterly
<i>YES</i>	Yearbook of English Studies

This book is dedicated with gratitude to my colleagues and students at Magdalen, Auckland, Dalhousie, Wilfrid Laurier and Carnegie-Mellon, who have listened and argued, celebrated and criticized, and, especially, to J, K, L, M, and to S and the gang at Kalamazoo.

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Chapter 1

Reading the Poetry of the Sixteenth Century

Introduction

When a modern student, even a general reader, picks up a volume of sixteenth-century poetry, what is likely to be his or her impression? When I first started teaching the poetry of Wyatt and Sidney, Shakespeare and Donne, there was a sense of their remoteness from most concerns we have in the twentieth century. Except as a kind of nostalgia, what did delicate love sonnets, songs with refrains like 'hey nonny nonny no', and seemingly artificial, conventional poems dealing with refined upper-class manners have to say to us? Even if one was interested in the history of the time – with its stirring mixture of battles, beheadings, rebellions, and religious controversies – most of the poetry seemed pale and lifeless, or else just crudely versified propaganda, monuments to dead ideas or simply the province of antiquarians. Shakespeare and Donne were, perhaps, exceptions: as F. R. Leavis put it for us, when we reach Donne after a century of dull poetry, at last we can 'read on as we read the living'.¹

Today, all this has changed. The study of sixteenth-century poetry has become one of the most interesting fields in English literature. In part this is because of a greater liveliness in the field of literary criticism in general. In the past two decades, we have discovered so many more powerful tools with which to read our literature. In part, too, it is because we have realized just how similar, in significant ways, our age is to the sixteenth century. Despite real differences in the social, cultural, and ideological practices of the two periods, we seem to face uncannily analogous personal and collective dilemmas and obsessions.

Studying (and, for that matter, teaching) sixteenth-century poetry today can therefore be a very contemporary experience as well as intellectually challenging. Let me give one example – a poem to which I shall return in Chapter 4. My students were asked to read Sir Thomas Wyatt's best-known poem: