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Introduction

This volume begins with Geoffrey Chaucer, whom Dryden called 'the Father of *English* Poetry'.[1] Although there is a distinguished tradition of Old and Middle English poetry, from the eighth-century epic *Beowulf* to the anonymous chivalric romance of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in Chaucer's own time, Chaucer occupies a special place. He had, long before Dryden, been regarded (in the words of the sixteenth-century rhetorician George Puttenham) as holding 'the first place' and 'as the most renowmed' of the earlier English poets.[2] He was one of the first to use the word 'poete' in English, applying it to the Italians Dante and Petrarch, as well as to the classical writers Virgil and Lucan. Though he did not use it of himself, or other English writers, he was called poet by others in the sense in which he himself spoke of the great foreign masters as poets. He is, in J. A. Burrow's description, the first English poet with a distinct personality and a substantial body of work.[3]

Puttenham's *Arte of English Poesie* (1589) appeared four years before Shakespeare's first poem, *Venus and Adonis* (1593), from the same printer, Richard Field.[4] Like other poets of his time, Shakespeare wrote with a conscious awareness of the forms and devices codified in rhetorical handbooks like Puttenham's, an example of the interplay between poetic expressiveness and a set of technical prescriptions which is part of the tension between creativity, convention, and constraint in the poetic process. The application of stylistic formulae and 'rules', as well as the 'imitation' of earlier poets, were seen as strengths in a way not always appreciated in a later intellectual climate, whose standards emphasize the importance of original genius (though Shakespeare is not often denied the possession of that faculty).

Even if the dates had made it possible, however, Shakespeare was unlikely to have been a candidate for extended discussion in Puttenham's treatise, whose brief considerations of drama mention some Greek and Latin playwrights, but reflect a contemptuous view of popular entertainments, of 'the

1

schoole of common players' and the 'lasciuious' matter 'vttered by ... buffons or vices in playes'.[5] The fact that the greatest poet in the language is chiefly admired by posterity for his plays, and that it is in these plays that his greatest poetry is to be found, would not have qualified Shakespeare for official recognition in a learned discussion of poetry. David Bevington points out that writing plays had something of the status of ephemeral scriptwriting for film or television today. It was done for money rather than reputation. Sir Thomas Bodley expressly excluded plays, as 'idle bookes, & riffe raffes', from the Bodleian Library at Oxford (founded 1602), so that a wealth of quartos was passed over in spite of an agreement of 1610 that one free copy of each book registered with the Stationers' Company would be deposited in the library.[6] Though his name on the title-page of a play was sometimes considered a marketable asset, Shakespeare did not attach much importance to the publication of his plays, and seems to have preferred to be regarded as a poet, not a playwright.[7]

Poetry, as the oldest of verbal arts, has always enjoyed a privileged status, above the more popular media. (This may seem paradoxical if we remember that poetry has often been linked with the earliest or most primitive forms of human expression.) When, three centuries after Shakespeare, Thomas Hardy was questioned about giving up novel-writing, he declared that he wanted 'to be remembered as a poet', a position provocatively reversed in Auden's remark in 'A Letter to Lord Byron' (1936) that 'novel writing is / A higher art than poetry altogether'.[8] Auden's witty contrariness tends if anything to confirm a prevailing sense of poetry's elite status, in a downbeat oracular mode to which he sometimes reverted ('poetry makes nothing happen').[9]

The example of Hardy's poems shows the large trace of narrative fiction in poetry, including lyric poetry, ever since the emergence of the novel as a major form of literary expression, a lowly Cinderella medium growing to princely status through creative evolution rather than, as in the case of Elizabethan drama, through a process of critical awakening. Much of English poetry since the eighteenth century, including lyrics by Hardy and Auden, and satirical scenes by Eliot, tell or imply a story with partially visible novelistic contours, in a manner quite distinct from the non-narrative verse of lyric or satiric poets before 1750. The same is true of the wry lyrics of Philip Larkin, the last poet treated in this book, who was also the author of two novels in his early years, and wanted to be a novelist rather than a poet, unlike his friend the novelist Kingsley Amis, who, reversing Auden's words, thought poetry the 'higher art'.[10]

Neither this fact, nor the roll-call of novelistic masters summoned up by Auden's 'Letter to Lord Byron', changes the reality of poetry's special place in the literature of all periods. Shakespeare's wish that his reputation should

Introduction

rest on his poems, though triumphantly overridden by the plays, guided what we know of his chosen mode of self-promotion. The only two works he published with dedications that bear his signature were not his sonnets (now the most admired of his non-dramatic works) but his two Ovidian poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594).

The Rape of Lucrece was on a theme Chaucer had also treated, in *The Legend of Good Women*, and written in the stanza-form known as rhyme royal, which Chaucer used in *Troilus and Criseyde*, itself a source of Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* (*c*.1602), his play set in the Trojan War. *The Rape of Lucrece* itself includes an extended account of a tapestry or painting (lines 1366–1568) depicting the Trojan War, which brings out the treachery of the Greek Sinon (lines 1520ff.) and portrays Helen as 'the strumpet that began this stir' (line 1471).[11] This in turn looks forward to the later description of Helen, in *Troilus and Cressida*, as 'a pearl / Whose price hath launched a thousand ships, / And turned crown'd kings to merchants' (II. ii. 80–2), sarcastically rephrasing a famous line in Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*, which is itself probably echoing a Chorus from Aeschylus's *Oresteia*.[12] Shakespeare's critiques of the heroic ethos, expressed especially in his plays on classical themes, are often bitter. They do not constitute an unvarying rejection of grand styles or even heroic themes, but they put the latter under a degree of critical pressure which later made Shakespeare a model for plays by Jarry, Brecht, and Ionesco, creating a more ambivalent 'heroic' standard than the epics of Homer and Virgil had provided, until the eighteenth century, for writers portraying the decline of heroic values in modern times.

Shakespeare himself never wrote or attempted an epic, though his poems were reprinted more often than any of his plays, and he had a serious reputation as a non-dramatic poet in his lifetime. When Shakespeare dedicated *Venus and Adonis* to the Earl of Southampton, he promised that it would be followed 'with some graver labour', a gesture which might be thought to carry some suggestion of a future great work, possibly of the epic kind, though Shakespeare seems to have been alluding to *The Rape of Lucrece*.[13] (The *Sonnets*, 1609, nowadays regarded as his greatest non-dramatic achievement, may have been published without Shakespeare's cooperation.)[14] The Virgilian *cursus*, a poetic progress from the lowly genre of pastoral to the heights of poetic accomplishment in a great national epic, was not Shakespeare's pathway to greatness, though it was a common aspiration for Renaissance poets, and expressly and self-consciously adopted by both Spenser and Milton. As late as Pope, who made his literary debut by publishing four *Pastorals* in 1709, exactly a century after the publication of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, the epic aspiration was visibly advertised, and

3

though Pope never completed an epic either, the ambition remained to the end of his life. In Pope's lifetime, it was Milton, the author of *Paradise Lost*, and not Shakespeare, who had the status of an honorary classic, named and used as a live poetic model alongside Homer and Virgil. At the time of his 'Preface to Shakespeare' (1765), Samuel Johnson thought Shakespeare was beginning, through the passage of time, to acquire 'the dignity of an ancient'.[15] As the classical hierarchy of literary genres gradually loosened, Shakespeare's reputation as the great national poet, not only of England but of humanity (if the paradox may be permitted), began to develop.

Milton was the last great European poet successfully to fashion his career on the Virgilian programme, though his way of doing so was characteristically conflicted, one of several intellectual and spiritual oppositions (between his Puritan religious convictions and a profoundly humanist outlook, or his political radicalism and a deep attachment to classical values and traditional literary forms) which mark Milton's imagination.[16] He expressed at the age of nineteen his ambitions as a poet, the ultimate or 'last' of which was to sing 'of Kings and Queens and Hero's old', on the model of the bard at King Alcinous's court in Homer's *Odyssey*, and spoke more than once of future epic plans, whether on a national (Arthurian) theme or a classical or scriptural subject.[17] When *Paradise Lost* (1667–74) appeared, the last great epic in the Homeric-Virgilian manner, it embodied a stinging attack on the epic for its celebration of martial valour and battlefield carnage. Milton's creation of an epic that rejected the epic was responding to a moment when anti-war sentiment, and a variety of other social and cultural forces, were making it impossible for good poets to write epics, as for example the great poets of the two succeeding generations, Dryden and Pope, also aspired, but unlike Milton failed, to do. Milton's War in Heaven in *Paradise Lost*, VI, where no one gets hurt in human terms because they are celestial beings 'incapable of mortal injurie', provided a blueprint for English mock-heroic, which tended to be more protective of the high epic, with its tarnished militarist reputation, than Milton was himself.[18]

Neither Dryden nor Pope completed an epic, however, and both displaced the epic impulse in translations of Virgil and Homer, writing epics as it were by proxy, or in mock-heroic poems in which high styles could to some extent be preserved behind a cordon sanitaire of irony. The mock-heroic, in *Mac Flecknoe* and later in Pope's *Dunciad*, attempts (as Dryden suggested in his 'Discourse Concerning Satire' of 1693) to retain the majesty of heroic originals even as it misapplies them to subheroic subjects.[19] Throughout its brief history as a dominant literary form, mock-heroic attempted to transcend the parodic joke that brought it into being, and never quite succeeded, though it achieved exceptional triumphs of its own. As Auden said, '*The Dunciad*

Introduction

is not only a great poem but also the only poem in English which is at once comic and sublime.'[20] The attempt to find a style commensurate with the epic, which could only be found in satirical imitations of the epic, coexisted with an urge to jettison the satiric note. This, in turn, could only be achieved when the epic impulse itself ceased to exercise its ambivalent and contending pressures. We see the result in Johnson's *Vanity of Human Wishes* and the learned allusive gravity of Eliot's *Waste Land*. The grim urban sublimities of Baudelaire's Paris and T. S. Eliot's London have a significant kinship with the lofty disorders of Dryden's Barbican and the London of the *Dunciad*, as Eliot himself recognized.[21]

The epic was a principal poetic repository for elevated styles, which sometimes imitated the grammatical inflections as well as the rhetorical formulae of the Greek and Latin poets. As the sustainability of epic style became problematic, an important resource of eloquence became increasingly unavailable to poets. Milton had every intention of retaining epic grandeur when he rejected epic morality, and he forged a style that accentuated a Latinized syntax and diction whose eccentric majesty proceeded from a combination of archaism, exotically elaborate syntax remote from colloquial usage, and an orchestration of emphases more natural to the periodic structure of Latin sentences than to the forms of English speech.

The opening sentence of *Paradise Lost* runs to sixteen lines:

> Of Man's First Disobedience, and the Fruit
> Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal tast
> Brought Death into the World, and all our woe,
> With loss of *Eden*, till one greater Man
> Restore us, and regain the blissful Seat,
> Sing Heav'nly Muse, that on the secret top
> Of *Oreb*, or of *Sinai*, didst inspire
> That Shepherd, who first taught the chosen Seed,
> In the Beginning how the Heav'ns and Earth
> Rose out of *Chaos*: or if *Sion* Hill
> Delight thee more, and *Siloa*'s Brook that flow'd
> Fast by the Oracle of God; I thence
> Invoke thy aid to my adventrous Song,
> That with no middle flight intends to soar
> Above th' *Aonian* Mount, while it pursues
> Things unattempted yet in Prose or Rhime.   (I. 1–16)

This style, in which the conclusions or finalities are delayed by an intricate syntactical elaboration, has been compared to musical orchestrations. We are held in suspense for the first six lines as to what is to be done or said of man's first disobedience, until the Heav'nly Muse is instructed to 'sing' this

5

great theme. The capacious digressiveness of the entire sixteen-line passage, full of apparent diversions, fresh starts, and afterthoughts, is an extended preparation for the bold finality of 'Things unattempted yet in Prose or Rhime' (16). The claim itself is less an expression of poetic arrogance than an assertion of the grandeur of the poem's theme. It is perhaps the last time such a claim would be made by a serious poet without irony, and it is arguable that Ariosto, the earlier Italian poet Milton was echoing almost word for word, had himself used the words with an extravagant and un-Miltonic flourish of self-irony (*Orlando Furioso*, I. ii. 2).

There is no sign of self-irony in Milton's righteous confidence in 'the highth' of his 'great Argument' (I. 23–4). Nor is there any self-doubt in the prefatory claim that his poetic 'measure', namely 'English *Heroic Verse without Rime, as that of* Homer *in* Greek *and of* Virgil *in* Latin', is an affirmation '*of ancient liberty recover'd to Heroic Poem from the troublesom and modern bondage of Rimeing*' ('The Verse'). Milton was experiencing irritation at the growing vogue of the heroic couplet which had acquired a revived currency, and a fresh allure of polished correctness, partly modelled on the urbanity of seventeenth-century France, which Milton regarded as a 'jingling' courtier foppery. Milton deplored this new correctness, which he identified with a post-Restoration Frenchified tyranny. His militant adoption of 'English *Heroic Verse without Rime*' for *Paradise Lost* was not only a return to classical decencies (Homer and Virgil, he reminds us, did not use rhyme), but a cry of freedom from a '*troublesom and modern bondage*'. Pope, referring some forty years later to two contemporaries of Milton who wrote couplets, spoke by contrast of the urbane freedom of the couplet, of 'the *Easie Vigor* of a Line / Where *Denham*'s Strength, and *Waller*'s Sweetness join'.[22] The 'easie vigour' of couplets coexists with, and depends on, a tight metrical order. It differs from Milton's rigorously controlled syntactical elaborations, but the verse of *Paradise Lost* displays an almost ostentatious fluidity of its own in avoiding the couplet's end-stopped metre. The enjambment (or continuation of the sentence beyond the end of the line), a metrical looseness proscribed by French purists like Boileau and discouraged among the practitioners of 'correct' couplets in English, is used with determination from the start.

Pope subjected Milton's practice of enjambment to genial loyalist parody. Describing his heroine Belinda's two locks of hair, one of which is going to be 'raped' (stolen), he wrote:

> This Nymph, to the Destruction of Mankind,
> Nourish'd two Locks, which graceful hung behind
> In equal Curls, and well conspir'd to deck
> With shining Ringlets the smooth Iv'ry Neck.
>
> (*Rape of the Lock*, II. 19–22)

6

Introduction

The trick is in contrast to the self-contained sense structures expected of the couplet, and exemplified here in the relaxed but disciplined closure of the fourth line. A more audacious mimicry occurs in the cloacal episode in Book II of the *Dunciad*, quoted below in another connection.[23] Neither *The Rape of the Lock* nor the *Dunciad* is attacking Milton, who is treated in both poems, alongside Homer and Virgil, as a primary model for a loyalist parody, deriding not the epic itself, but a lowered modern reality exposed by grandeurs of style which are no longer appropriate to it. But in mimicking the Miltonic trick, Pope is also signalling that his own correct couplets are a norm which he could playfully violate in affectionate parody, though it is only right to observe that when, at the very end of his life, Pope contemplated an epic on Brutus, the mythical founder of Britain, the few lines that survive of the attempt are in a Miltonizing blank verse, modified by some end-stopped unrhymed pentameters.[24]

Pope, the greatest master of the English couplet, rephrased Milton's claim to 'justify the ways of God to men' (*Paradise Lost*, I. 26) in the 1730s with all the tight syntactical, metrical, and rhyming symmetries Milton himself had deplored almost seventy years before:

> Laugh where we must, be candid where we can;
> But vindicate the ways of God to Man.
>
> (*Essay on Man*, I. 15–16)

Pope was being corrective rather than subversive of Milton. Milton's scorn of being 'tagged' in this manner would have matched all the arrogance of couplet superiority implied by Pope's practice.

Auden spoke of blank verse as the heroic couplet's 'only serious rival in English verse as a standard form'.[25] Shakespeare and Milton used both in varying degrees, and both are forms of the decasyllabic or ten-syllable line which has long been the normative metre in English poetry. T. S. Eliot once observed that much English verse, however 'free', is written in its shadow or played off against this presumptive norm.[26] Its notional iambic beat (in which each 'foot' is accented in the second syllable) exists, like all prescribed rhythms, in tension with the natural cadences of speech and the movement of feeling. This is true even (or perhaps especially) within the stricter constraints of the rhymed couplet, which seems first to have been used in the *Canterbury Tales*, but was brought to its most exquisite perfection by Pope. This tension becomes evident if we try to read Pope's couplets according to strict metronomic prescription, accenting each second syllable as below:

> Know thén thysélf, presúme not Gód to scán;
> The próper stúdy óf Mankínd is Mán.
>
> (Pope, *Essay on Man*, II. 1–2)

7

No one with an ear for the English language would read the lines strictly according to the stresses indicated by the presumed iambic beat. At the same time no natural reading of the lines is free of an unspoken relation to this presumed beat, and the unceasing silent conversation between the prescribed and the actual or natural cadences is an essential element of the vitality of poetic expression.

Eliot's view that metrical 'freedom is only truly freedom when it appears against the background of an artificial limitation' is put under acute pressure in the chapter on that poet.[27] Such sweeping pronouncements can never be absolute. Eliot occasionally contradicted himself on such issues. Nevertheless the principle retains a broad validity, even in relation to so-called 'free verse', whose rhythms, when not formally played against an identifiable traditional metre, are shaped by nuanced imitations of such metres, 'unheard' cadences that answer to the emphases of meaning and emotion. Eliot said in 1917 that any 'so-called *vers libre* which is good is anything but "free"'.[28] Eliot's own best poems, from 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' to *The Waste Land*, show a constant dialogue between strict metrical forms and more variable and unprogrammed rhythms. Of the poets discussed in this volume, Lawrence, as Marjorie Perloff writes, was the most insistent in complaining that 'the constriction of fixed verse forms was inhibiting', but his own poems often accept the constrictions or are played off against them.[29]

The English couplet, in the form in which Pope perfected it, and stamped it as the dominant style for his age, had become fashionable in Milton's day, in the teeth of Milton's dislike of it, in the work of Waller, Denham, and Dryden. As Milton seems to have felt, it was to some extent a French import. Although the metre had existed since Chaucer, it acquired some of its formal allure (symmetry, antithesis, strictness of metre and rhyme) from the twelve-syllable alexandrine practised by Racine and Boileau, and served as a manifest icon of correctness, urbanity, and order. The famous sketch by Boileau of French poetic history (*Art Poétique*, I. 111–46) was rewritten with English examples by Dryden and Soame (1683). Boileau's announcement of the arrival of correctness ('Enfin Malherbe vint', I. 131) was changed in the English narrative to: '*Waller* came last, but was the first whose Art / Just Weight and Measure did to Verse impart.'[30]

In reality, the couplet differed from the alexandrine as much as it resembled it, and English attitudes towards the French model were ambivalent. It served as a cultural analogue, evoking order and politeness. But Dryden thought the French metre was intrinsically weaker than the English. The use of occasional alexandrines by English poets, including Dryden himself, as an ornamental flourish or as closure for sequences of pentameter couplets, was sometimes mocked.[31] Swift parodied the 'licentious Manner of modern

8

Introduction

Poets' (meaning especially Dryden) for their use of rhyming 'triplets', in which 'the last of the three [lines], was two … Syllables longer, called an *Alexandrian*'.[32] Adam Smith noted that the alexandrine, the official serious metre of French poetry, which is the French counterpart to the English heroic couplet, generally produces bathos in English verse, as the pentameter often does in French.[33]

There is a sense in which the Augustan couplet, for all its French allure, was thought of as an English metre. Samuel Wesley, who took pride in 1700 in belonging to 'our *Augustan* days', affirmed the superiority of the English metre: 'More *num'rous* the *Pentameter* and *strong*'.[34] By this he meant the modern refined and metrically stricter version. Like Pope and others, he found Chaucer's couplets unpolished.[35] The normative pressure of the pentameter in English has been such that other metres, both shorter and longer (the eight-syllable tetrameter, for example, as well as the alexandrine, or the eleven-syllable, hendecasyllabic, line often practised in English 'light' verse, notably by Swift),[36] have, with certain exceptions, tended to be restricted to less serious genres.[37] Roland Greene describes how, 'between the death of Chaucer *c*.1400 and the publication of *Tottel's Miscellany* in 1557, iambic pentameter, the dominant line in English verse, was often unsettled as poets – knowingly or not – experimented with varying arrangements of stresses and syllables'. Wyatt, whom he describes as 'perhaps the last poet of that phase', seemed 'ignorant or clumsy' to contemporaries, and his poems were subject to metrical regularization in Tottel's anthology.[38]

In fact, the tug of war between metrical constraint and deregulation has never ceased or even stood still. The phase of regularization associated with Tottel was itself temporary, a living and properly unstable phase in a natural process. In the 1590s, when Donne composed his five 'Satyres' (not published until 1633), a much less regulated view of the iambic pentameter is in evidence. He is writing, in Satyre II, about poetry and poets:

> One, (like a wretch, which at Barre judg'd as dead,
> Yet prompts him which stands next, and cannot reade,
> And saves his life) gives ideot actors meanes
> (Starving himselfe) to live by'his labor'd sceanes;
> As in some Organ, Puppits dance above
> And bellows pant below, which them do move.
> One would move Love by rimes, but witchcrafts charms
> Bring not now their old feares, nor their old harmes:
> Rammes, and slings now are seely battery,
> Pistolets are the best Artillerie.
> And they who write to Lords, rewards to get,
> Are they not like singers at doores for meat?   (Satyre II, 11–22)[39]

9

The metre of the lines is so dislocated, the rhymes so deliberately 'inexact' (in a manner less like the comic rhyming of Swift or Byron than the pain-ful dissonances of Wilfred Owen and other modern poets), the syntax so gnarled and tortuous, that it comes as a jolt to modern readers to realize that the formal metre, even of this poem, is the iambic pentameter, and indeed the rhyming couplet. Donne's satiric manner was developed partly under the influence of a widespread notion (still subscribed to by Puttenham) that satire derived from the part-bestial woodland deities known as satyrs, who made up the chorus of Greek satyr plays (like Euripides's *Cyclops*). But it was also largely modelled on the 'difficult' Roman poet Persius, known for a thrusting, dislocated, and cryptic style, as well as on the harshness of Juvenal.[40]

Donne's decision to frame such stylistic purposes in a metrical form whose boundaries it restlessly defies or transgresses was itself overtaken throughout the ensuing century by a progressive tightening and purification of the rhyming couplet, culminating in Pope. Here is how Pope 'translated' Donne's lines:

> Here a lean Bard, whose wit could never give
> Himself a dinner, makes an Actor live:
> The Thief condemn'd, in law already dead,
> So prompts, and saves a Rogue who cannot read.
> Thus as the pipes of some carv'd Organ move,
> The gilded Puppets dance and mount above,
> Heav'd by the breath th'inspiring Bellows blow;
> Th'inspiring Bellows lie and pant below.
> One sings the Fair; but Songs no longer move,
> No Rat is rhym'd to death, nor Maid to love:
> In Love's, in Nature's spite, the siege they hold,
> And soon the Flesh, the Dev'l, and all but Gold.
> These write to Lords, some mean reward to get,
> As needy Beggars sing at doors for meat.
> (Pope, *Donne's Second Satyre*, 13–26)

This version was written around 1713, and published with revisions a cen-tury after Donne's, in 1735–40, as *The Second Satire of Dr. John Donne, … Versifyed*. Pope had given the same treatment to the Fourth Satire (published 1733) and also published his friend Thomas Parnell's version of the Third Satire in 1738, with the subtitle 'Versifyed by Dr. PARNELLE. In Imitation of Mr. POPE' added in 1739.[41] 'Versifyed' in all these subtitles expresses the full arrogance of a cultural superiority towards a poetic disorderliness which, though powerfully in control of its recording of turbulent doings and states of mind, appears to fall short of a newer conception of order