

1 Introduction: “aut prodesse . . . aut delectare”

Why was poetry so frequently defended in the English Renaissance on the grounds of its “profitable pleasure,” its ability, as Philip Sidney perhaps most famously puts it, to “delight and teach; and delight, to move men to take that goodness in hand, which without delight they would fly as from a stranger”?¹ The intent of Renaissance poetry to “profit and delight” restates classical doctrine, Horace’s “aut prodesse . . . aut delectare” or Lucretius’ metaphor for his instructional verse: wormwood daubed with honey. An intellectual historical account of the prevalence of this doctrine in the Renaissance would not explain, however, why the inheritors of this classical tradition suddenly recognized themselves as such and claimed their inheritance. The problem requires instead a social historical account if it is to avoid effacing the social and cultural contradictions that this Horatian poetics itself worked to efface in Renaissance England. Forwarding such an account, I argue that this Horatian poetics marks a struggle between dominant and subordinate members of the sixteenth-century elite. The construction of the very category of “literature” in Horatian terms, I will argue, was responsive to this struggle, which created a conflict over the value of labor or leisure, and an uncertainty about which activities constituted either. The intent of poetry to “profit *and* delight” would mask this conflict – strategically – within that “and.”²

It should be observed that an intellectual historical account of Horatian influence would beg the question of the “and” even in its return to the classics, since, as Madeleine Doran has noted, the “aut . . . aut” of Horace’s definition presents a choice of “either/or.” Renaissance interpreters frequently shift from a decision between alternatives to the decision for both.³ Though this shift may be warranted by other passages in Horace and Lucretius that do not demand a choice between profit or pleasure, the conflict between a choice of “either/or” or “both/and” in the classical sources suggests what will be demonstrated at length throughout this work, that the relations between profitable and pleasurable activity are subject to potentially contradictory, potentially strategic interpretation.

For Horace, these relations are tied to the place of poetry within Roman

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culture. Horace's lines of advice on pleasure and profit come out of a specifically identified social context. On the one hand, Horace considers that while the Greeks were greedy for glory, the Romans are greedy businessmen who teach their children to count coins and add fractions. Such an audience, concerned with getting and spending, is not likely to immortalize the Roman poet. For this reason, poets wish their poetry "aut prodesse . . . aut delectare . . . / aut simul et iucunda et idonea dicere vitae" [either to benefit, or to amuse, or to utter words at once both pleasing and helpful to life].⁴ It may be that Horace links the benefit of poetry to the Romans concerned only with material benefits. But that Horace also has moral profit in mind is suggested by his second reference to mixing profit and pleasure, some ten lines later, in which profit becomes clearly moral rather than pecuniary, and is associated with Roman elders. Pleasure, on the other hand, comes to be associated specifically with the young (and putatively business-minded) members of the Roman aristocracy, who scorn poems devoid of pleasure. Faced with the contradictory demands of his audience, and perhaps with contradictory values within elite Roman culture, the poet must seek to satisfy two constituencies at once: "Omne tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci" [he has won every vote who has blended profit and pleasure].⁵ Horace's imperative in these lines depends primarily on the social and cultural context of poetry, rather than on an abstract sense of the demands of morality or on a psychology of learning. The metaphor that Horace uses, "omne tulit punctum," comes from the public action of voting, and the "vote" is finally over the success of the poet: will his words be purchased, disseminated, and celebrated? Or as Thomas Drant's 1567 translation rendered it, if the poet mixes sweet with good, "His bookes the stationers will bye, / beyonte Sea it will goe, / And will conserue the authors name, / a thowsand yeare, and mo."⁶

Of course, notions of literary profit and pleasure in the Renaissance did not come only through Horace, but were mediated in particular through Italian humanism. Nor were these notions of profit and pleasure wholly removed from questions of morality and psychology, either in Horace and Lucretius or in Renaissance defenses of poetry. Without suggesting that the social concerns of Horace's poetic theory determine similar concerns in the Renaissance, rather than providing one language for their articulation; and without suggesting even that the brief reading of Horace offered here was necessarily a Renaissance reading of Horace – though Spenser comes pretty close to it in a Latin poem to Gabriel Harvey – I want nonetheless to locate our understanding of Horatian constructions of Renaissance poetry within the kind of specific concerns about the social situation of poem and audience that these passages in Horace raise.⁷

This book has two goals. First, I want to argue that the works I consider,

Thomas Elyot's *Boke Named the Governour*, Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poetry*, and Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, reflect in their Horatian doctrine conflicts in standards of aristocratic conduct during the social and cultural transitions of the sixteenth century. These works do not just give us a window onto this transitional culture, however; rather, they are part of it. Changes in notions of aristocratic conduct help to determine the definition of and regard for poetry within sixteenth-century aristocratic culture. And this regard was inevitably ambivalent, given that what properly constituted such conduct was itself under debate. Thus I argue that we need a greater sense of sixteenth-century poetry as a culturally contested practice – one that can be situated within a changing cultural landscape that rewarded forms of both profit and pleasure.

In pursuing this argument I also carry on, as a second goal of this book, a critique of the revisionary literary history begun by New Historicist criticism. I argue that rather than situating poetry as a particular kind of discourse with a specific, and contested, status in sixteenth-century culture, this criticism has tended to assimilate poetry to other forms of discursive and institutional power. Horatian defenses of literature, because of their own assimilation of literary profit and pleasure, have thus had a formative influence on Renaissance New Historicism. New Historicist claims that Renaissance literary texts are not really about pleasure (for example, love) but are politically productive (by expressing ambition or devotion to the monarch) echo Renaissance accounts of the literary text's profitable pleasure.⁸ And this is in part because these contemporary analyses unconsciously repeat sixteenth-century anxieties about the place of literature, especially in relationship to the "political." I take up this argument at some length in the section that follows, where I discuss it in relationship to recent critiques of the New Historicism. I also first outline how I draw on Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of culture to provide what I argue is a more historically situated account of poetry's place in the sixteenth century, one that emphasizes the transformations of and contest among various forms of capital – cultural, social, and economic – during the period. My ultimate interest lies in the way the interaction of these forms produces by the century's end an idea of poetry as having a distinct and distinctive aesthetic status. But I hope that this work also provides an example of a historicist literary criticism that can become more materialist in its practice by not treating all historical space as the space of culture. I aim instead to locate cultural forms within a historical space that includes but is not exhausted by them. From this perspective I also suggest the need for a literary politics attentive to the specific and contingent place of the cultural within other spheres of social, political or economic power. I bring this perspective to bear on contemporary concerns in my final chapter, which

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turns to the uncertain situation of literary studies in the contemporary university.

The power of literature?

At stake in recent critiques of the New Historicism are problems raised particularly by Marxist criticism about the relationship between political, economic, and cultural formations, as well as questions about what counts as the “material” or “historical” world. Although at times conducting its work without explicit reference to these Marxist problematics, the New Historicism has, nonetheless, put great pressure on them because it has been driven both by poststructuralist emphases on the importance of signification and the unstable binary of text and world, and by a materialist drive to locate literary texts within determining political and economic structures.⁹ The sometimes contradictory forces of these two drives have been tremendously productive for literary criticism. More recently, however, both practitioners and critics of the New Historicism have raised questions about the consequences, for its historiography and its politics, of a tendency within the New Historicism to foreground the dynamics of textuality as the privileged subject of history. Critics of the New Historicism have argued that the materialist claims of New Historicist work may be vitiated by an emphasis on the play of signification, so that historical determinants to identity and action – including forms of overt inequality, coercion and violence – may become effaced as signifiers slide from signifieds or displace them altogether.¹⁰

Of course, signification is itself historical, a point Louis Montrose emphasizes in a recent essay that attempts to respond to some of New Historicism’s critics. “*Figuration*,” Montrose suggests, is “*materially* constitutive of society and history.”¹¹ Yet even were this the case (and we might at least doubt Montrose’s “constitutive”), it would not mean that all figuration is the same: metaphor, money, and monarchy all depend on figuration, but these figures do not necessarily circulate in the same locations, in the same way or to the same effect, and the relationships between these specific circulations would have to be described as well. Alan Liu identifies an important instance of the contraction of distinct historical relations into homogenized textual ones when he observes that New Historicist work has, in attributing “power” to literary texts, tended to merge “authorship” and “authority.”¹² This observation suggests in particular how emphases on figuration inform claims for the political effects of literature made within New Historicist criticism. For underlying the merger of literary authorship and authority is the assumption that if figures constitutively shape history, then so too do those writers who foreground their

production. (It is worth noting that a playful figure of speech – the pun on “author” – helps underwrite even this “historical” claim for the authority of literary authorship.) The New Historicism thus tends to privilege those literary writers who exemplify the rhetorical powers that are seen to drive history and that drive the New Historicism’s own “reading” of it.

Montrose responds to such criticisms of New Historicist work when he observes in the same essay that some “see a new-historicist delight in anecdote, narrative, and ‘thick description’ as an imperialistic will to appropriate *all* of culture as the domain of literary criticism – to construe the world as an aesthetic macrotext cleverly interpreted by means of a formalist cultural poetics.” Against such formalism, Montrose issues the following call to attend more carefully to the particular domains and kinds of signification:

Inhabiting the discursive spaces currently traversed by the term *new historicism* are some of the most complex, persistent, and unsettling problems that professors of literature attempt to confront or to evade – among them, the conflict between essentialist and historically specific perspectives on the category of literature and its relations with other discourses; the possible relations between cultural practices and social, political, and economic institutions and processes; the consequences of post-structuralist theories of textuality for historical or materialist criticism.¹³

In this work I take up Montrose’s emendatory call for more historicized accounts of the development, situation, and effects of the category of literature, and for an attendant concern with the relationships between figuration and other political, social or economic structures. To do so I draw on the sociological work of Pierre Bourdieu, and in particular his classification of various forms of capital – material, social, and cultural.

Through attention to these forms, Bourdieu describes how social position may depend not only on economic determinants, but also, for example, on “good” connections or educational achievement. In addition, Bourdieu crucially argues that social subjects may try to exchange one form of capital for another (e.g. investing money in education in hopes of making connections or getting a better job) or they may denigrate the value of alternate forms of capital while praising their own (e.g. look down on money spent without educated taste). An advantage of this account for a social analysis of literary history lies in its recognition, in the concept of cultural capital, of a distinct form of social authority neither reducible to economic or political power nor purely aesthetic and outside of social struggle altogether. This recognition makes Bourdieu’s work sensitive to historical difference, and useful for historicist literary criticism, despite what might seem at first appearance its ahistorical, structuralist schematism. The interpretive power of Bourdieu’s sociology for a historicist analysis of literature can be understood in two different respects.

On the one hand, Bourdieu's emphasis on distinct forms of capital registers the crucial difference between pre-modern and modern societies, the former characterized by overlapping social spheres and the latter by their separation.¹⁴ The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries may be considered in these terms as a period of increasing separation of social roles and institutions out of the pre-modern merger of economic, social and judicial power in the feudal lord. In particular, during this period economic capital begins more fully to emerge as wealth partially separated out from traditional social hierarchy and personal relationships. The emergence of a more autonomous identity for the artist may likewise be traced to an incipient shift in the artist's support from personal patronage to the more anonymous market, as well as to a developing separation of art from the church and the sacred.¹⁵ Yet it is finally with a third separation that poetry as cultural capital most develops in the sixteenth century, and with which this work will be most fully concerned: the emergence of the state within absolutist Europe as a locus of authority to some degree distinct from and opposed to that of the feudal lord. As Norbert Elias has described, this separation created the opportunity for the social assertion of secular-bourgeois intellectuals who gained power within the expanding bureaucratic state and whose identity lay in their humanist language skills and disciplined conduct rather than warrior function or traditional landed status.¹⁶ But this is not to suggest that such literary cultural capital remained bound to a single economic or social class. As forms of social authority became increasingly distinct they were also more likely to compete with, emulate or be traded for one another. Capable of alienation, development, and exchange, they became "capital" on the model of economic capital.¹⁷ Hence, as with economic capital, the acquisition of cultural capital was not confined to an emergent bourgeoisie, but was part of a crucial transition of the aristocracy itself from a warrior into a civil elite.

On the other hand, this capital did not circulate absolutely, nor were the kinds of capital evenly exchangeable. This recognition depends on the second sense in which Bourdieu's model demands attention to a particular historical or contemporary social dynamic, as in Bourdieu's account in *Distinction* of contemporary France. Because Bourdieu's categories – the kinds of capital – take on meaning only in their historical relations to one another, the social purchase of "cultural capital," as with each other kind, is historically contingent. Moreover, while both the acquisition and the relative values of all the forms of capital are in Bourdieu's account subject to social struggle and hence change, the nature and course of that change itself depends on the histories of their acquisition and values.¹⁸ Bourdieu's account, that is, attends to two opposing consequences of what we mean when we say that something "has a history": the insistence that things

change, but also that such change is constrained by the pressures of the past.¹⁹ Thus Bourdieu's account argues that while the forms of capital are exchangeable, they are so only within historically objective limits. Different starting positions within the social contest (for example, status, degree and kind of wealth, training or education), the different means and rates by which diverse forms of capital can be acquired, and the history of the relative valuation of these forms of capital, all help to determine which kinds of capital social subjects will try to amass and what the value of that capital will be relative to other kinds.²⁰

The significance of this argument may be seen by comparing it to what might seem at first glance a similar account in Stephen Greenblatt's work of the "negotiations" between art and society. Greenblatt describes how art participates as a kind of "currency" that facilitates the artist's "mutually profitable exchange" with the social world. While this argument may seem quite similar to Bourdieu's concern with the relationships between forms of capital, for Greenblatt art becomes a "currency" with that word's connotation of "flow." Easily exchanging one thing for another, art or representation can both freely participate in and come to figure a free market of "mutually profitable exchange."²¹ Bourdieu's work on the other hand returns to such exchanges an emphasis on their bases in individual and collective histories of inequality. As metaphor "capital" implies unequal distribution and control in a way that "currency" does not. These inequalities may not change with the "currency" – the speed or means – of representation.

Indeed, while much historicist literary criticism has similarly used Bourdieu's work to *identify* cultural with economic capital, as a means of reinserting the aesthetic back into "history," this identification in fact effaces the historical differences, and the consequences of those differences, among forms of capital. Thus in the anthology on the New Historicism in which Greenblatt's essay on the circulation of art was reprinted, the editor H. Aram Veerer explicitly associates Greenblatt's argument, and the New Historicism more generally, with Bourdieu's sociology. Veerer writes that "for Greenblatt the critic's role is to dismantle the dichotomy of the economic and the non-economic, to show that the most purportedly disinterested and self-sacrificing practices, including art, aim to maximize material or symbolic profit."²² I would argue that this is a misreading of Bourdieu frequent in New Historicist criticism – a misreading that significantly shapes the New Historicism's claims. For it is Bourdieu's attention to the effects of the difference between forms of "profit" that seems to me the most crucial, and interesting, aspect of his work. In Bourdieu's model cultural capital may function as a social investment like economic capital, but it is not immediately substitutable for it. Hence the dismantling of the difference

between economic and cultural capital, rather than demystifying the latter, may be seen rather as part of a contemporary struggle over art's value in which cultural and economic capital are equated. Besides remystifying the value of what it seeks to demystify, this perspective seems wrong to me because it slights economic and political determinations by substituting for them the coin of culture.²³

To question this "currency" of art is not to argue that social values or positions are fixed – Bourdieu's categories aim to draw attention to shifts in both. But it is to consider the constraints against which social subjects react and which determine the limits of the presently possible. As Timothy Reiss observes, "poetry, all art, always responds somehow to social constraints. The statement hardly bears repeating. But the real questions concern the matters of how it does so, of how it is perceived as doing so, of what are the constraints, and what the public's expectations."²⁴

In trying to situate sixteenth-century poetry within a range of constraints and expectations, I argue that Renaissance New Historicist emphases on poetry's local political effects are complicated by the way in which such claims of political efficacy were themselves part of a construction of poetry's place in the world. To analyze rather than repeat Renaissance claims about the pleasure or profitability of literary texts we need to understand the ambivalent value "pleasure" and "profit" had within sixteenth-century culture. Further, we need to study the ongoing construction of poetry as a particular form of discursive practice within and through these ambivalent values. Such a study requires a shift in emphasis from the relationship between literature and more local political struggles to a consideration of the place of literature within longer-term changes in elite Tudor society and culture. In applying this emphasis, this book stresses not the politics that is conducted *through* literature, but the politics *of* literature as a form. To separate the terms "authority" and "authorship" in this book will not be to return to a pre-political notion of literature, nor to suggest that sixteenth-century poetry was politically inconsequential. It will be, however, to try to evaluate more self-consciously the place of poetry and poets in relationship to the politics and culture of the sixteenth-century elite.

Louis Montrose's 1980 essay on George Peele, "Gifts and Reasons: The Contexts of Peele's *Araynement of Paris*," provides a striking example of the need to become more self-conscious about this place. Montrose argues that George Peele's courtly entertainment not only celebrated Elizabeth's virgin rule, but also inserted Peele, who offered this celebration as a gift to Elizabeth, into a network of courtly gift exchange that was also a network of power. Because the exchange of gifts creates social bonds, "the

significance of the offering is not in the material value of the gift but in the symbolic value of the act of giving.” The quoted sentence gives Montrose’s reading of some lines of the *Araygnement* in which Peele writes that gentlemen unlike commoners will graciously accept any gift. But it is difficult to separate the reading of Peele from Montrose’s own argument. On the one hand, Montrose describes Peele as a gentleman in name only who “sought the substance of status by writing in hope of Court preferment.” On the other hand, he observes that Peele’s career was disastrous: neither court patronage nor commercial publication was sufficiently lucrative, and Burghley in particular had no interest in paying for poetic celebrations of the queen or the Elizabethan elite. Nor apparently did he see such celebrations as important instruments of Tudor ideology, even though Peele’s “tale of Troy,” which Peele offered to Burghley, sounds like the kind of imperial poem we assume would have been of interest to the court – certainly it is the kind of imperial poem Spenser was offering. (Burghley, however, filed Peele’s offer with letters from cranks.) Montrose’s essay offers two points of view, without any systematic address of their relation: on the one hand the poet participates in the networks of court power, politics, and propaganda; on the other hand the poet is marginalized, even treated with scorn, by the court.²⁵

This ambivalence, I would argue, is characteristic of Renaissance New Historicist criticism as a whole. For example, one could compare Richard Helgerson’s work in the early 1980s on the construction of the role of the poet with that of Stephen Greenblatt on the implication of poetic and political self-fashioning. While Helgerson argues that even Spenser’s serious bid for the authority of poetry ended in frustration, Greenblatt implicitly aligns Spenser’s poetic project with the political project of Elizabethan power: the poet is returned to the political center.²⁶ Jeffrey Knapp has more recently attempted to address this contradiction by ingeniously claiming that the perceived triviality of poetry in England uniquely fitted the nation’s perception of its own relatively trivial place in Europe.²⁷ Ambivalent views of the poet’s power are also contained *within* Montrose’s influential work.²⁸ In addition to the consideration of the essay on Peele already offered, one could compare the 1979 essay on the *Shepherdess Calender* with the 1986 essay on the “Elizabethan Subject.” In the former Montrose suggests the ways in which the figure of Colin Clout (in the *Shepherdess Calender* and in book 6 of *The Faerie Queene*) incorporates a vision of the poet’s failed poetic and social ambitions; in the latter Montrose more optimistically equates the “prince among poets” with his queen and suggests that Spenser through his “education and verbal skill . . . gained the aristocratic patronage, state employment, and Irish property that gave substance to his social pretensions.”²⁹ Montrose notes that this

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bid was only “relatively successful” and that Spenser “nevertheless always remained on the social and economic as well as on the geographical margins” of the Elizabethan elite. But these qualifications do not fully impinge on Montrose’s overall argument, which stresses not hierarchy but mutuality. Moreover, even the relative success that Montrose refers to may require qualification. Certainly Spenser’s complaints about lack of reward from the court do not end in 1591, after he received a £50 annuity from Elizabeth, but continue through the 1596 “Prothalamion.”³⁰

Given such uncertainties about the value or authority of the poet within Elizabethan culture, the emphasis on what Montrose calls in his essay on the “Elizabethan Subject” the poet’s “distinctive *production* of ideology” needs to be shifted, so that we may ask what makes the poet’s work a “*distinctive* production of ideology.”³¹ Marshaling Helgerson’s description of Spenser as an emerging poet “Laureate” who “professionalizes poetry,” Montrose claims that sociohistorical criticism of the Renaissance is justified by the fact that “during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the separation of ‘Literature’ and ‘Art’ from explicitly didactic and political discourses . . . was as yet incipient.” By placing Spenser on the borderline between art and politics New Historicist criticism binds together what it argues formalist methods let fall apart: literature and history. If on the one hand Spenser’s poetry does ideological work, it does *distinctive* work because Spenser has distinguished himself as a “prince among poets” and as such indulges in the distinctive play, for example in the pastoral world, that separates him from writers of plainly didactic and political discourses. According to Montrose, the aesthetic distancing of the pastoral signs the work as Spenser’s active production, by representing poetic making within the poem. Its production made explicit, the poem opens up a gap between representation and represented, a kind of play that signals the poet’s function as a maker of ideology. The significance and relative autonomy of this role allows the poet a reciprocal relationship to the queen, in which both are ideologically formed and forming.³²

This reciprocal relationship between social subjects, entailed by Montrose’s intersubjective model of culture, provides a powerful and flexible starting point with which to understand the production of ideology within Elizabethan society. What should be questioned in this account, however, is the degree to which that reciprocity is evenly or unevenly distributed, a question made more pressing by Montrose’s observation that “few Elizabethan subjects publicly claimed for themselves a more exalted role in the shaping [of royal authority] than did Edmund Spenser.” Although “claim” might imply critical distance on the sort of self-promotion one might expect from the ambitious Spenser, Montrose seems to endorse it. Spenser’s incipient literary status renders him more than