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“Well-Staged Syllables”: From Classical to Early Modern English Metres in Drama

Edited by Silvia Bigliazzi

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Robert Stagg*

Afterword

The title of this collection is derived from Philip Sidney. Towards the end of his *Defence of Poesy* (published in 1595 though written about fifteen years earlier), Sidney weighs two kinds of versification alongside, and sometimes against, one another. First there is "the ancient", a so-called 'quantitative' prosody of the sort found in Latin, which Sidney deems "more fit for music" and "to express diverse passions, by the low or lofty sounds of the well-weighed syllable"; the second kind, the modern, "striketh a certain kind of music" too, and "doth delight, though by another way" (Sidney 2002, 248).[1] In the end the distinction (like much else in Sidney's *Defence*) curiously fizzles out, "there being in either sweetness, and wanting in neither majesty", and Sidney concludes that the English language is "fit for both sorts" of verse (ibid). While Sidney's distinction can ultimately seem a little anticlimactic, the phrase "well-weighed syllable" reverberates through Derek Attridge's *Well-Weighed Syllables: Elizabethan Verse in Classical Metres* (1974) which sought, rather as this volume does, to understand what Sidney and others heard in "the ancient" versification of the Greeks and Latins and why they thought it worth renaissancing in their vernacular prosodies.However, the title of this special issue describes "well-staged", not "well-weighed" syllables. It is a provocative rewording, since Sidney had little ear for the theatre. He thought it populated by "gross absurdities" with "neither decency nor discretion", "mingling kings and clowns" in mongrel tragicomedies, which "causeth her mother Poesy's honesty to be called in question" (Sidney 2002, 243). Only Thomas Sackville and Thomas

[1] It is unclear whether the similar debate about quantitative verse between Dicus and Lalus in two manuscripts of the *Old Arcadia* (Jesus College, Oxford MS 150 and The Queen's College, Oxford MS 301) pre- or post-dates Sidney's discussion of the subject in the *Defence*.

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Norton's *Gorboduc* (1561), the first English play to be written (mostly) in blank verse, comes out of the *Defence* with any credit – and even then its "stately speeches" and "well sounding phrases" are undermined by its being "faulty both in place and time" (ibid). Moreover, the sort of quantitative verse Sidney is discussing in the *Defence* – and the sort he had written elsewhere, for example in some of his sonnets, and in parts of the *Arcadia* – was not intended for the stage (indeed many of its propagandists, Harvey noisiest among them, would have been aghast to think they were writing anything so popular). In the spirit of Stephen Orgel's article, then, which asks us to consider who *did not* write such quantitative versification as well as who did, this special issue of *Skenè. Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies* offers us an account of a dog that is not normally thought to have barked – or, more aptly, a syllable that is not normally thought to have been spoken: a neoclassical prosody that found its way onto the English stage, or at least onto some English stages, or at least had the possibility of some sort of staging in England.

One of those possible stages was the schoolroom. There was a theatrical quality to many sixteenth- and seventeenth-century grammar school practices, whether or not they took place in verse, from the "dialogue method" of "academic rhetorical training in the writing of *controversiae*" (Jones 1977, 13), whereby pupils wrote personified speeches or detached arguments in favour of such and such a logical position, to the "opposing" exercises in which schoolboys gave voice to a series of back-and-forth interrogations, to the writing of *prosopopeia* and *ekphrasis* in which "liveliness" and the "art of impersonation and description" (Enterline 2012, 21) were especially cherished, characteristics which found their more three-dimensional expression onstage. In this collection of essays Francesco Dall'Olio and Angelica Vedelago go further still, showing us how some dramas sought to recreate the style of a classical metre or metres for pedagogical purposes, educating students both in the rhythms of Greek and Latin and how those languages might be rendered into the vernacular – as was the case with George Buchanan's 1556 translation of Euripides' *Alcestis* (which was performed at the college of La Guyenne, "an equivalent of the English grammar school" where Buchanan himself taught, Vedelago, 111 and Dall'Olio, 126) and Thomas Watson's 1581 translation of Sophocles' *Antigone* (which was "most probably" performed "by students . . . at Oxford", Vedelago, 109).

While the "rhythmic enunciation" (Enterline 2012, 152) of the English schoolroom was largely classical in tone, and did not venture far into English prosody, as the appendix to Marco Duranti's essay helpfully demonstrates, it did encourage pupils to conceptually and pragmatically shuttle between vernacular and classical prosodies. One of Roger Ascham's innovations as a

pedagogue was to codify the exercise in 'double translation', a loose version of which was current in grammar schools around the country.[2] Pupils would first take lines from a Latin text, then turn them into English before returning them into Latin. Ascham thought the exercise kept the mind "busily occupied in turning and tossing itself many ways" (Ascham 1570, 42); for a curious pupil, it would also have insinuated the possible overlaps between the two languages and their prosodic systems. In another well-attested prosody exercise, a schoolmaster would change some of the words in a poem to take it out of correct quantitative metre. The first schoolboy to "return" the verse to its "true" quantities would win the applause of the schoolroom (Hoole 1660, 160). We hear something of both exercises happening onstage in William Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*. In 3.1 a disguised Lucentio 'teaches' Bianca in a broken quantitative metre interspersed with hasty English prose. When Bianca replies to Lucentio she restores the quantitative metre so that "''tis now in tune" and "construe[d]" in accordance with John Lily's grammar school textbook (Shakespeare 2005, 3.1.44, 40). Bianca – more importantly, the boy playing Bianca – and Lucentio are involved in a cheeky play on the double translation exercise, as they (in another version of a grammar school exercise) return the Latin verse to a state of prosodic rectitude. While these exercises were supposed to entrench Latin quantitative prosody, they must also have nudged the more thoughtful students (Shakespeare among them) to creatively entertain a borderland between classical and vernacular versification. This "prosodic erudition", in Vedelago's phrase (pp.), meant that "sixteenth-century poets were adept at holding two different rhythms – a formal, quantitative, metrical one and a natural, accented, verbal one – in their heads simultaneously" (King 2000, 238).

The sixteenth-century treatises on English poetics were in keeping with this educational legacy, for they macaronically blur the differences between Latin and English prosody. Throughout his *Notes* (1576) George Gascoigne refers to stressed syllables as "long" and unstressed syllables as "short", without making a distinction between stress and quantity. George Puttenham often conflates (or confuses) quantitative and accentual-syllabic writing, concluding that both have a "numerosity" about them (Puttenham 2007, 157, 209). Although William Webbe recognises that English "words cannot well be forced to abide the touch of position and other rules of [Latin] *prosodia*", he still thinks they have a "natural force or quantity" that "will not abide any place" (Webbe 1586, G1*r*).

This prosodic latitude, almost a metrical code-switching, is emphasised

[2] For the theory and practice of 'double translation' in Ascham's *Schoolmaster* and in early modern schoolrooms, see Miller 1963.

in Hannah Crawforth's article for this issue, which hears *Samson Agonistes* as a "dramatic poem" that not only "describes a freedom of form within a system of constraint" but additionally encourages its readers "to make their freedom within constraint itself", to hear "the limits of all pre-existing modes [of versification], ancient and modern, Greek and English" and to plot their own way through a thicket of existing prosodic options (217). Those options – whether they together constituted more of a predicament or an opportunity – proliferate yet further if we consider the metrical principles that animated the Elizabethan revival of classical prosody, since no-one in that age entirely agreed upon what it was and how it worked (unlike, later, Alfred Lord Tennyson who claimed to know the metrical 'quantity' of every word in English except "scissors", Tennyson 1897, 2.231). Sixteenth-century prosodists puzzled and fretted and argued. What did 'short' and 'long' syllables mean in practice? Should they be read as if they were English prose but have their length measured, separately, nonetheless? Or should readers slow down on a long syllable (with a "slow staidness", as William Scott put it in 1599 and speed up (with a "more voluble speed and currentness") on a short syllable? (2013, 59). Was 'quantity' a replacement for stress or a supplement to it? With a touch of bemusement, George Puttenham concluded that syllables in Greek and Latin must have been "timed . . . not by reason of any evident or apparent cause in writing or sound remaining upon one more than another", running counter to an influential grammarians' argument that syllabic length had once been acoustically palpable but had since become a solely intellectual quality (Puttenham 2007, 204). In *Well-Weighed Syllables*, Attridge concurs that "sound" is "the wrong place to look for 'quantity'"; for him, "it is to be found in the minds of the Elizabethans" (Attridge 1974, 160). He offers an intriguing comparison with the planting of the Farnese Gardens atop Rome's Palatine Hill in the mid-sixteenth century, where the papal architect Giacomo da Vignola had aligned steps, hedges and grottoes with the Basilica of Constantine, even though the basilica lay buried beneath several feet of earth (it would not be excavated until the nineteenth century). Vignola's design appealed to the "mind's eye" (*Hamlet* 1.2.184), rather as quantitative prosody appealed to the mind's ear. Was 'quantity', then, something to be "intellectually conceived (as opposed to audibly perceived)", somehow avoiding the ear and engaging only the mind (Hamlin 2004, 102)? And if so, how on earth could it be staged?

Silvia Bigliazzi's essay proposes another intriguing way that early modern writers 'made their freedom' from the classical metres they translated (154-9), thereby struggling loose from the quandaries discussed above. They could do so by emphasising 'emulation' over 'imitation'. Where other translations (such as those discussed in Dall'Olio and Vedelago's articles) tried to imitate, even to recreate, classical metres with or in an English

equivalent, Jasper Heywood "shows no actual equivalence to Seneca's metres" when translating the chorus of his *Troas* (1559) "and precisely by failing to do so" made his "emulative project autonomous" (160). After all, as several of the sixteenth-century quantitative prosodists noted, Latin metres could themselves be read as an imitation or emulation of Ancient Greek – this being an analysis that could sometimes clinch their arguments for a quantitative verse in English (since it promised a Latinate golden age for English poetry) yet could sometimes trouble them too (since it threatened a sort of linguistic infinite regress, with the vernacular yanked further and further from its classical origins). Contributors to this collection are somewhat divided as to the place of Ancient Greek in sixteenth-century England, with Dall'Olio arguing for a "more Greek than Latin prosody" in some of Buchanan's translations (126), while Marco Duranti contends that Greek was less important in general, pointing out that "[n]o treatise specifically devoted to Greek prosody was printed in England" (66). In this respect, the collection echoes – more by emulation than imitation – the debates about Greek in Elizabethan England, with scholars then and now trying to establish whether Greek is the language behind the arras of Latin prosody's sixteenth-century recrudescence.

If the essays included here stretch back to the classics, both in Latin and Greek, they also reach across Europe. Thus, Emanuel Stelzer reads enjambment as a 'marker' of classical gravitas first in the *versi sciolti* of early-to-mid sixteenth-century Italy and then in the blank verse of Elizabethan England. This is a matter of 'confluence' (Bruce Smith's word, cannily employed by Stelzer) more than of 'influence'; neoclassical trends in versification emerge across the European continent in tandem yet often without definite, documented connection (Smith 1988, 6).

In just this vein, Sidney's first acquaintance with a "well-weighed syllable" was probably in France. His years in Paris in the mid-1570s brought him into the orbit of the grammarian and quantitative prosodist Petrus Ramus. During 1573, Sidney lived with Ramus's printer André Wechel "at peppercorn rates" (Stewart 2001, 79) on the Rue Jean-de-Beauvais, a stone's (or peppercorn's) throw from the Sorbonne, where and when Wechel was printing the second edition of Ramus's immensely influential *Grammaire* (he had also printed the first edition of 1562). In the first edition of his grammar, Ramus had celebrated the "coze naturelle" ("natural cause") of a vernacular quantitative prosody "com'el'etoet aus ansien' Gres e Latins" ("like that of the Ancient Greeks and Latins", Ramus 1562, 35, translation mine). For the second edition, which he did not live to see in print, Ramus expanded his remarks on quantitative verse to further adumbrate and celebrate this "bonne & riche poesie" (Ramus 1573, 43). Ramus's pupil and sometime secretary Théophile de Banos would later dedicate his edition of

the *Petri Rami Commentariorum de Religione Christiana* (1576) to Sidney, and commemorated Sidney's friendship with and esteem for Ramus in a dedicatory epistle to the edition. The "loose research group or think tank" (Hetherington 2018, 647) that hung around Sidney even after his death was often explicitly Ramist, ranging from Abraham Fraunce's production of a Ramist logic (in 1585) and rhetoric (in 1588) to William Temple's dedication of Ramus's dialectic to Sidney in 1584. Furthermore, Sidney's stay in Paris coincided with the rise of the *Académie de Poésie et de Musique*, "the first French academy to be officially instituted by royal decree" (Yates 1947, 14). The academy was designed to promote the so-called *musique mesurée*, a music based on ancient quantities rather than vernacular phrasing and intonation. The French-language lyrics for songs and psalms set to this music were therefore in quantitative metre. As the letters patent put it, the academicians would volunteer "essays de Vers mesurez mis en musique, mesurée selon les loix à peu prés des Maîtres de la Musique du bon & ancien âge" ("attempts at measured verses put into music, measured according to the laws closest to the music masters of that good and ancient age"), the point of which was to purge "la barbarie" from "les esprits des Auditeurs" ("the minds of the auditors/audience"; Yates 1947, 319-320, translation mine). As far as literary historians can tell, these were 'confluences' around rather than 'influences' on Sidney, even though they took place in the span of only a few Parisian streets, but they attest to (what Stelzer modestly calls) "the non-insular character of Elizabethan verse-making" (196).

None of these Sidneyan 'confluences' found their way onto an English stage, and readers of this collection will have been disappointed if they took its title too literally. In fact, few of the neoclassically versified texts discussed here were given a performance (so far as we know). Some of them, like Milton's *Samson*, can seem to actively resist performance and/or cultivate readership; others, like Buchanan's translations, may have envisaged their performance as instrumental or mediatory rather than as a valuable end in itself. Other 'emulative' attempts at a neoclassical dramatic metre, like the fourteener (as a version of the Senecan iambic trimeter), only flourished on stage for a relatively brief period and were displaced by less ostentatious verse forms, chief among them blank verse.

Both Stelzer and Orgel's essays might nudge us to think, too, of blank verse – eventually the dominant metre of the early modern English stage – as a neoclassical sort of versification. Several contributors to this collection mention that John Day first advertised English blank verse as a "strange meter"" (Howard 1554, frontispiece). The word "strange" assumes a now obsolete sense of "belonging to another country; foreign, alien" (*OED s.v.* "strange" adj. and n. 1a), which could encompass a strangeness in time as well as in place. Many scholars have heard "an echo of the classical high

style" (Blank 2006, 60) emanating from the unrhymed iambic pentameter, with its blank ten syllables somehow "simulating the exotic grace of Latin quantitative verse" (Tucker Brooke 1922, 187-8) and recuperating "the resonance of Virgil's dactylic hexameters" (Simpson 2016, 1.601), even though the iambic pentameter is syllabically shorter than and rhythmically quite different from Virgil's heroic line(s). The earliest works of blank verse are undoubtedly steeped in the classics, from the Earl of Surrey's *Aeneid* translation(s) to Sackville and Norton's "pure Senecan" *Gorboduc* (Schelling 1908, 2.401) to George Gascoigne and Francis Kinwelmarsh's *Jocasta*, 'the first pale figure of Greek tragedy on the English stage' (Prouty 1966, 157). These pioneer blank versers wanted some "legitimizing connection to the classical past" (McKeen 2020, 179), for sure, even as they wrote in the vernacular, which was putatively busy "decoloniz[ing] the modern occident from the domination of Latin" (Waswo 1999, 412) (Stephen Guy-Bray has wittily described Surrey's *Aeneid* as "a conservative innovation", 2004, 181). The apparent Janus-facedness of early blank verse might look in one direction after all, by facing up to the passing of "cultural and political authority . . . from a fallen empire to a rising one" (McKeen 2020, 174); we could think of *versos sueltos* as a prosodic accompaniment to sixteenth-century Spain's acquiring of territory in Germany, the Low Countries and the Americas, which was routinely afforded classical parallel, or the unrhymed *hendecassílabo* as an accompaniment to Portugal's maritime growth, expeditions and colonisations around Africa, India and China.[3] In other words these various kinds of metrical blankness from around Europe could be a form of the *translatio imperii*, emulating the verse of the Greeks and Latins in a contemporary vernacular form while boldly claiming an imperial prosodic kinship with those ancient empires.

In his essay about the complicated and sometimes botched textual transmission of Aristotle's *Poetics*, Guido Avezzù writes about "the success of a mistake", and of "fortunate" errors in the history of a text (and, by extension, of a verse form) (52-7). Something similar might be said of classical versification on the early modern English stage. Blank verse never satisfied the quantitative purists. Some of them, like Sidney, did not live to hear its theatrical heyday. Others like Ascham thought that it had not "hit perfect and true versifying", i.e. metrical classicism, even as it shunned the "barbarism", i.e. the anti-classicism, of rhyme (Ascham 1570, 61). Yet if blank verse constituted "the institution of a new 'classical'" (as Orgel puts it here, 31), which sought to emulate the classical metres without narrowly imitating or reproducing them, then we can think of classical metres as being central

[3] For comparisons between Roman and Spanish imperial conquests, see Lupher 2009.

not marginal to the early modern English stage – and if this is true, or even plausible as a thought experiment, it would be another, salutary reminder that the history of versification rarely proceeds in a straight line.

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