Prosody and Purpose in the English Renaissance

Hardison, Jr., O. B.

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This study began as an investigation of the prosody underlying Surrey's translation of the *Aeneid* into blank verse around 1540. The study expanded far beyond its original limits, in large measure because I could not find a treatment of English prosody in the sixteenth century that answered the questions I was asking. I hope what I have done will prove useful to others who ask similar questions, not only about renaissance verse but about English verse of any period.

The first section of this book is subtitled "Contexts" and places English renaissance prosody in the context of those prosodic systems that influenced it in the sixteenth century. These chapters establish a foundation in historical prosody for approaching the subject. They are detailed and may occasionally seem formidable. I do not apologize for this fact. The subject itself is complex. I have tried to be no more complex than the subject demands, and I have concentrated in the text on explication, while relegating controversies and fine points to the notes.

The second major section of this book is subtitled "Performances." It examines only two types of poem—heroic and dramatic—but it attempts an examination of the prosody of these types during the period between Surrey's translation of the *Aeneid* (ca. 1540) and Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667). The focus on two genres was necessary because of space limitations. However, it is appropriate because heroic and dramatic poetry are especially well defined during the period in question, both in critical theory and through practical experimentation. In
addition, the two forms are so closely related in Italian, French, and English prosodies that to treat one requires consideration of the other.

My title is *Prosody and Purpose in the English Renaissance*. Purpose is involved throughout. In the first section ("Contexts"), it is involved, for example, in the relations posited in ancient theory between meter and genre, in the concept of prosodic decorum, in attempts to introduce the ancient strategies of construction into uninflected modern languages, in efforts to make vernacular forms like the hendecasyllabic, the Alexandrine, and the English decasyllabic capable of effects comparable to those of ancient forms, in the relation between romance prosodic conventions and the celebration of cultural roots, and in efforts in the seventeenth century to devise prosodic forms that meet the need of reason to protect itself against imagination.

Music is an aspect of prosody that relates to purpose in special ways, and a concern for the musical aspects of prosody runs through the present book, culminating in the chapter on Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The musical aspect of prosody is often associated with the ability of poetry to be constitutive—that is, to make objective otherwise unimaginable realities rather than simply to imitate what is. In the high Middle Ages, the requirement that language be subordinate to music contributed directly to the development of the syllabic prosody of romance languages and to the elements of romance theory that are corollaries of the idea that poetry is, to use the phrase of Eustache Deschamps, "natural music."

In the second part of the book ("Performances"), purpose is also understood in terms of cultural, political, and professional objectives that shaped individual poems. Among these are the desire to elevate culture by elevating the language and linguistic forms that make thought possible, the need to adapt verse to performance by actors who move and gesture and interact as well as declaim, and the quest for a verse form able to present undistorted communications from an invisible source of truth.

In the course of this study several important generalizations about prosody have emerged. The first is the importance of what ancient grammar called "construction" to an adequate theory of prosody. Construction is the control of syntax and syntactical rhythms and hence of the grammatical forms that shape vocal performance. It can be considered a part of grammar, a part of rhetoric, or a part of prosody. It is especially relevant to heroic poetry and drama—heroic poetry because epic seeks forms of expression elevated above common speech, and drama because dialogue aims at forms that are like speech
and capable of shaping intonation when a passage is vocally performed. Construction cannot be excluded from the study of prosody in the period under consideration. Indeed, as modern studies of intonation show, it is relevant to the prosody of any period, including the present. It is considered in the following pages both in relation to ancient prosodic theory and in relation to aspects of vocal performance, illocution, and actorly speech that are discussed in their proper places in the “Performances” section.

A second important general point is the dominance of syllabic concepts of prosody in the period covered. Some years ago Edward Weismiller remarked in a review of theories about Milton’s versification that “the devices [Chaucer] used—or such of them as were not ruled out specifically by changes in language—seem to recur in the syllable counting verse of the 16th and 17th centuries. . . . This may be coincidental. It may, on the other hand, suggest the possibility that the technique of Chaucer’s French-Italian line . . . was better understood in the 17th century . . . than we supposed.” The present study is in full agreement with Professor Weismiller’s position. Syllabic concepts are dominant in English discussions of prosody in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As the “Performances” section shows, English verse of the same period is best understood in terms of this tradition, with important special features arising from Latin and Italian as well as French influence, and from renaissance as well as medieval models. Here again, purpose is involved. The syllabic tradition is itself complex. Different poets emphasize different elements of the tradition depending on what they want their poetry to do, and the same poet may use different prosodic strategies for different kinds of poems.

It should be added immediately that the present study makes no claim to having finally “solved” the outstanding problems of English prosody. As I observe in chapter 1, certain problems are forever beyond a simple solution because of the many diverse influences, linguistic as well as poetic, that have shaped the English language. English prosody will always involve apparent contradictions and ambivalence, quite aside from the fact that individual authors vary from one to another because of talent, personality, background, and the like.

The foundations of modern historical prosody were established for English verse between 1880 and 1910 by Jakob Schipper, George Saintsbury, and Robert Bridges. Very substantial progress has been made since their work, and studies now abound for specific authors and literary periods. Progress has not, however, brought consensus,
and there continue to be deep divisions regarding the historical as well as the applied aspects of prosody.

I acknowledge here special obligations to Derek Attridge's *Well-Weighed Syllables* (1974), Susanne Woods's *Natural Emphasis: English Versification from Chaucer to Dryden* (1985), and the prosodic essays contributed by Edward Weismiller to the *Variorum Commentary on the Poems of John Milton* (1972, 1975). Among works that have treated Continental prosodic traditions, Georges Lote, *Histoire du vers français* (1949–56), and Mario Pazzaglia, *Il Verso e l'arte della canzone nel 'De vulgari eloquentia'* (1967), have been especially valuable. T. V. F. Brogan's *English Versification, 1570–1890* (1981) remains for me, as for all others who venture into this field, an indispensable guide and resource.

I have found contemporary work on applied prosody stimulating but less immediately relevant than the historical studies to the issues I have examined. Especially useful among applied prosodic studies have been the series of articles on English renaissance poets by George T. Wright. These articles combine historical understanding with sensitivity to the sound of verse in ways that are, if not unique, at least exemplary, and no one working in the field can fail to learn from them. Unfortunately, his book *Shakespeare's Metrical Art* had been announced but had not appeared at the time my own book was being prepared for press.

I also acknowledge my obligation to the concept of relative stress defined in 1900 by Otto Jespersen and incorporated by George L. Trager and Henry Lee Smith, Jr., into *An Outline of English Structure* (1951), and to the theory of generative prosody outlined by Morris Halle and Samuel J. Keyser, Jr., in *English Stress: Its Form, Its Growth, and Its Role in Verse* (1971). Although different systems of generative prosody have been offered since 1970, principally those of Karl Magnuson and Frank Ryder (1970, 1971) and Paul Kiparsky (1975, 1977), the work of Halle and Keyser remains the basic statement of the position. Finally, for reasons explained above, I have drawn on efforts to integrate syntax into the study of prosody as illustrated especially by the work of David Crystal (*Prosodic Systems and Intonation in English* [1969]) and D. W. Harding (*Words into Rhythm: English Speech Rhythm in Verse and Prose* [1976]).

At different points in the following pages I have used the conventions of quantitative, syllabic, and accentual scansion to reveal details of prosodic technique. For quantitative scansion, I have used "·" to indicate a short syllable and "—" to indicate a long syllable. For accen-
tual scansion, "x" indicates a light stress, "/" a heavy stress, and "\" a secondary stress. This three-stress system should not be taken as a rejection of the idea that proper treatment of many passages of English verse requires four degrees of relative stress, an idea with which I agree. An asterisk ("*") is regularly used to mark a caesura. A straight line ("|") is used to separate feet.

For lines scanned in terms of syllabic conventions, I have adopted the system outlined by Jean Suberville (Histoire et théorie de la versification française [rev. ed., 1946; rpt. 1968]) and refined by Clive Scott (French Verse-Art: A Study [1980]), except that I use an asterisk (*) for the caesura. Measures are indicated by number of syllables and separated by a plus sign (+). Thus the string [2 + 4*4 + 2] indicates a conventional Alexandrine with no extrametrical syllables, having two measures in each half-line and the caesura after the sixth syllable. An apostrophe following a number indicates that the measure ends with an extrametrical unstressed syllable. An Alexandrine with an epic caesura would be shown as [2 + 4'*4 + 2]. Primary accents in syllabic lines are indicated by a ("/") above the accented vowel.

Quotations of renaissance verse are from original editions or twentieth-century old-spelling editions. Except in a few passages in which it seems to me important for aesthetic reasons to retain the original usage, u, v, i, and j are normalized. For convenience, English renaissance critics are quoted as far as possible from G. Gregory Smith (Elizabethan Critical Essays [1904; rpt. 1950]) and J. E. Spingarn (Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century [1907; rpt. 1957]).

Foreign language quotations are translated in the text. When such quotations involve sensitive definitions or have aesthetic qualities important to the discussion, the originals are included in the notes. Otherwise, the originals are omitted in order to save space.

My interest in the ars metrica dates from the early 1960s, when I drew on some of its concepts to clarify the relation between poetry and grammar in late classical and medieval theory in The Enduring Monument (1962; rpt. 1973). Two of the chapters in this book (6 and 9) include materials published in different form in articles in Studies in Philology and the Shakespeare Quarterly.

Like many students of the history of English renaissance prosody, I owe a large debt to Professor Edward R. Weismiller. Since I became aware of his work, I have been happy to consider myself one of the "tribe of Ed." Professor Weismiller generously took time from a busy schedule to read a draft of this book in manuscript. His meticulous and expert suggestions were invaluable. I owe another considerable
debts to Professor T. V. F. Brogan, who also read the book in manuscript and also offered many helpful suggestions. Neither Professor Weismiller nor Professor Brogan is responsible for whatever deficiencies may appear in the following pages, but the present book is the better for their generous and expert attentions.

I wish to express my thanks also to Joy Sylvester of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for reading the sections of the book that deal with French prosody, and to the staffs of the Lauinger Library of Georgetown University and the Folger Shakespeare Library for generous assistance in many of the tasks of research. My thanks also to Mary V. Yates for her expert editorial contributions to preparing this manuscript for publication.

My greatest debt has been, as in the past, to my wife, Marifrancis.