

Sonia Hernández-Santano, ed. 2016
William Webbe, A Discourse of English Poetry
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Before the appearance in print of the most renowned works on poetics of sixteenth-century England, George Puttenham's *The Art of English Poesy* (1589) and Sir Philip Sidney's *The Defence of Poesy* (1595), William Webbe had published *A Discourse of English Poetry* (1586), now acknowledged as one of the first attempts in England to write a systematic and comprehensive poetics and to establish a national poetic canon. Webbe, who composed *A Discourse* over the summer of 1586, was very likely unaware of Sidney's *Defence*, although it had been circulating in manuscript form since the beginning of the decade. As he confesses somewhat apologetically in the prefatory texts to his work, he was removed from the literary circles of London, which he says prevented him from reading some of the works he mentions and which he only knows by reputation. Webbe ponders the nature of poetry, essentially following Horace's *Ars Poetica*, and enthusiastically advocates a reformation in the direction of classical metres. In doing so he particularly encourages the two authors whom he hails as the paradigms of English poetry, i.e. Gabriel Harvey and Edmund Spenser, to take the lead.

Over a century ago George Gregory Smith included in his *Elizabethan Critical Essays* (1904) an edition of Webbe's treatise, which stood as the most recent attempt to edit Webbe's work until in 2016 Sonia Hernández-Santano published her conscientious modern-spelling version, accompanied by a thorough critical apparatus. The text of Hernández-Santano's edition is the result of collating that of the only original edition of Webbe's *A Discourse* (printed jointly by John Charlewood and Robert Walley in 1586) with the old-spelling editions by Smith (1904), Edward Arber (1870) and Joseph Haslewood (1815). Hernández-Santano's edition furthermore includes the only other extant works by Webbe, to wit, his "translation of Virgil's Eclogues I and II in hexameters together with his rendering into Sapphic verse [of] Spenser's 'Song to Elisa' (from *Calendar*, 'April')," plus, the "Ap-

pendent translation of Georg Fabricius' 'Canons' on poetry as derived from Horace's *Ars Poetica*" (10).

Four are the contemporary works that shape Webbe's *A Discourse*: Thomas Elyot's *The Boke Named the Governour* (1531), Roger Ascham's *The Schoolmaster* (1570), Thomas Phaer's translation of the *Aeneid* (1573), and Spenser's *The Shepherds' Calendar* (1579). Each of them is employed by Webbe for different purposes. Thus, Elyot's work "constitutes a primary source of arguments and textual examples for Webbe's defence of poetic didacticism," and moreover it lends "authority to his choice of ancient poets who best serve instructive purposes" (8). *The Schoolmaster*, for its part, "provides Webbe with the appropriate discursive tools to hail literature as the principal idiom for the articulation of a mature cultural identity that would raise the English nation to the same status as the ancient empires" (7). Phaer's translation "provides Webbe with enlightening poetic *exempla* when it comes to demonstrating that the English tongue is capable of the rhetorical eloquence of classical texts" (8), while from *The Shepherds' Calendar*, "rendered in *A Discourse* as the most outstanding evidence of poetic proficiency" in English, Webbe extracts "all sort of *exempla* so as to illustrate every aspect of his humanist definition of poetry" (8). "Spenser, whose authorship Webbe does not openly assume," is, as Hernández-Santano asserts, "extolled both as an innovator [...] and as a consolidator of the canon of English national poetics, equated in this regard to Virgil for his success in transforming his vernacular language into a dignified instrument of poetic expression" (33).

In the instructive Introduction to her edition, Hernández-Santano devotes the two independent sections following the "Preliminary Considerations" precisely to discuss the extent of Ascham, Elyot and Spenser's influence upon Webbe: "2. The Humanist Context of *A Discourse*: Roger Ascham's *The Schoolmaster* and Thomas Elyot's *The Governour*" and "3. William Webbe and Cambridge Ideals: Canonizing Spenser's *The Shepherds' Calendar*." These are followed by "4. A Defence of the Quantitative Reformation of English Verse," where Webbe's ideas on versification, and his exhortation to experiment with quantitative meters, in decline among many poets save for exceptions such as Abraham Fraunce, are explained in detail.

A Discourse was ultimately "conceived as a prescriptive manual on versification that provides practical instructions and examples so

as to, on the one hand, contribute to the refinement of rhyme and, on the other, allow a coherent adaptation of Latin rules of prosody to English verse" (8–9). Webbe's zeal in his advocacy of classical hexameters, decades before promoted by the Cambridge circle (initially structured around Ascham, John Cheke and Thomas Watson), suggests that he was unaware that such specific reformation of verse was, by the time of the publication of his treatise, in decay if not dated—again with exceptions such as the younger generation of St John's College. Still, as Hernández-Santano rightly notes, there may be more to Webbe's work than the staunch defense of a particular form of versification: "Webbe's commentaries do not seem to be a neutrally descriptive catalogue of contemporary literary authorities; instead, from most of them the reader may infer Webbe's desire to be noticed by those to whom he alludes, both by publicly recognizing their merits, and by displaying his remaining links with the Cambridge world. Whether he intended to obtain patronage and to be accepted at an Inn of Court, or simply aspired to be accepted by the literary elite at whose apex he situated Harvey and Spenser is difficult to ascertain" (29–30). Hernández-Santano's edition closes with a "Textual Notes" section, which complements the abundant and exhaustive footnotes to the text, a "Glossary" containing obsolete or archaic terms, and a helpful updated bibliography of scholarship on Elizabethan literary theory.

References

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