

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



Chris Stamatakis, *Sir Thomas Wyatt and the Rhetoric of Rewriting: 'Turning the Word'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). 288pp. ISBN 978 0 1996 4440 7.

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Habitually credited as the first major English poet of the Renaissance, Sir Thomas Wyatt now seems to be enjoying something of a renaissance of his own. The last few years have seen the publication of not one but two substantial critical biographies, Nicola Shulman's *Graven with Diamonds* (2011) and Susan Brigden's *The Heart's Forest* (2012). A new, two-volume *Complete Works*, edited by Jason Powell, is also reportedly in the pipeline, while the last decade has seen the publication of important essays on Wyatt by Powell and Brigden, among others, as well as of Greg Walker's *Writing Under Tyranny* (2005), of which a third part – over 150 pages – is given over largely to Wyatt. Remarkably, however, Stamatakis's *Sir Thomas Wyatt and the Rhetoric of Rewriting* is the first significant monograph dedicated solely to Wyatt in over 35 years. In its rigorous insistence that the issues at stake in Wyatt's writing are 'more fundamentally [...] linguistic, verbal, textual, and semiotic' than 'biographical' (p. 3), it offers a forceful challenge to the aforementioned studies. Thanks to its close readings of the variant textualities of the Tudor manuscripts in which Wyatt's words are scattered, it also proffers many delights and surprises.

Where previous studies have focused on the determinants shaping Wyatt's literary production, Stamatakis emphasizes the impact of textual transmission on the reception and interpretation of Wyatt's writings (p. 38). Stamatakis both advocates and performs 'an Erasmian return "*ad fontes*" to an *unedited* Wyatt' (p. 33), attending to how Wyatt's various writings were originally circulated and read by their mid-Tudor audiences. Paradoxically, what this archival turn to the manuscript sources reveals, rather than uncorrupted texts purified of non-authorial tamperings, is a scribal culture which makes the very notion of an original text, of a return *ad fontes*, problematic. Synthesizing recent work on Tudor manuscript culture by scholars such as Joseph Pearsall and Cathy

Shrank, Stamatakis shows how for Wyatt and his contemporaries, writing is always the rewriting of an earlier text, whether this takes the form of the translation of continental verse, the paraphrasing of a psalm, or the ostensibly straightforward reinscribing of a fatherly letter of advice. The result of such rescription, moreover, is often oriented, in Bahktinian terms, ‘toward a “future answer-word”’ (p. 178), anticipating, even encouraging, its own rewriting in turn. Circulated manuscripts, Stamatakis argues, can therefore be usefully thought of ‘as “events” in an ongoing kinetic sequence’, as ‘spaces which host discursive play’, ‘potential sites for textual conversation [...] rather than simply monumental repositories of an author’s collected output’ (pp. 13, 14, 16). Furthermore, under the conditions of this participatory poetics the written word is rarely any more than ‘provisional’, taking on something of the ‘slippery’ dialogic ‘ebb and flow of oral discourse’ (p. 4) and achieving at best a ‘restles rest’: it can be crossed out and a new word interlined in its place at any moment, by any hand through which the manuscript passes; or it can be copied out anew alongside other works, and thus, ‘turned’, take on new, unexpected meanings.

If the singular ‘ideal text’ of Wyatt’s poems sought by his editors of the 1970s is thus shown never to have existed, the ‘designed elusiveness of reference’ of Wyatt’s verse, and, above all, ‘the manifold transformations and recontextualisations that it undergoes’ through manuscript rescription ‘mean that stable, biographic identifications between the Wyatt who writes and the “I” who speaks in his poems become all the more doubtful or fragile’ (p. 3). Indeed, early Tudor manuscript culture, for Stamatakis, ‘repeatedly denies the very “individualization” that Foucault claims is congruent with the notion of an “author”’ (p. 9). Stamatakis suggests instead that even partially holograph Wyatt manuscripts such as *Egerton* undermine author-centered approaches, encouraging instead a more socio-centric approach, and ought to be considered less in terms of authorship than of *handling*. ‘One way of accommodating this *artist formerly known as Wyatt*’, he concludes, ‘is to locate him as a scribal agent somewhere at the interface of “original producer” and (mere) “collaborator”’ (p. 12), or between the ‘paradigms of text as repetition (copy) and text as rescription (*copia*)’ (p. 33).

Ostensibly focussing on Wyatt’s prose translation and his apologias, Chapter One embeds Wyatt’s writing practice in the context of the ‘will-to-collate’ (p. 53) of a new textual culture shaped by Erasmian humanism and Lutheran theology, and an accompanying early sixteenth-century shift in semiotics from a broadly referential, anti-rhetorical theory of language to a more relational, rhetorical theory. Arguing that Wyatt’s *Defence* offers a ‘conflicted semiotics’ that falls somewhere between the two, Stamatakis nevertheless portrays Wyatt’s fascination with verbal difference as leaning

more towards the latter, even as ‘approaching a proto-Derridean notion of simultaneous difference and deferral’ (p. 46-7). Chapter Two traces the ‘lexical redemption’ of the fallen word in Wyatt’s paraphrases of the penitential psalms. It is particularly persuasive when showing how through paraphrastic ‘strategies of rescriptive unfolding’ (p. 71), words first used in ‘earthly, sinful contexts’ come to be redeployed with a ‘transcendental, spiritual purview’ (p. 85). ‘Word’ itself, and ‘love’, are unsurprising examples skillfully drawn out; but Stamatakis is at his most delightfully insightful when showing how the signified of an ostensibly insignificant word such as ‘trauncyd’ shifts over the course of the paraphrase from David’s lustful sense perceptions to his vision of the Incarnation (pp. 86-7).

Chapter Three explores Tudor epistolary practice, with fathers urging sons to improve themselves by copying out their letters of advice. Biological relations are recast here as ‘typographic, copy-textual ones’ (p. 116). The final chapter and epilogue examine how Wyatt’s balets seek to engender a knowing company of readers through a communal language game in which ‘the abject lyric “I” proclaims an elite and knowing courtly “we”’ (p. 164). The volume concludes with two useful appendices, the first a ‘Conspectus of Manuscripts’ detailing the principal sources of Wyatt’s poetry and prose, the second a table showing variants of the poems across manuscripts. These would perhaps be of most use in the forthcoming *Works*, but until that appears, we should be grateful to have them here.

Very occasionally, Stamatakis’s commitment to material textual issues perhaps blinds him to wider matters of cultural politics. Of ‘Myne owne Jhon poyntz’’s closing lines he writes, ‘all we end up with, finally, is an invitation for the apostrophized Poyntz to judge the epistle’s metrical play’ (p. 138). Yet precisely this invitation to engender a company of knowing reader-writers beyond the king’s tyrannical reach unites the enticement to future rewritings with the tendency Stamatakis identifies in Tudor diplomatic epistles more widely, and Wyatt’s verse epistles more especially, to ‘resist the endless trace of Derridean deferral’ by prompting tangible, material action (p. 132). Often Stamatakis’s philological insights seem to tessellate well with Walker’s more politically-inflected *Writing under Tyranny*, yet there are also deep-seated disagreements, informed in part by underlying theoretical divergences. What Walker sees in Wyatt’s ‘here I am in kent and cristendome’ as the ‘rootedness’ of the narratorial ‘I’ in ‘the quotidian detail of the poet’s own life and experience’,¹ for example, is for Stamatakis ‘only a mirage of phantoms and doubles’ (p. 4).

¹ Greg Walker, *Writing Under Tyranny: English Literature and the Henrician Reformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 299.

If there are fleeting moments in which Stamatakis's individual readings falter, and in which his new philological approach threatens to tether Wyatt's texts within a hermetically sealed sixteenth century, far more often his meticulous scholarship brings not only Wyatt's writing but that of his whole milieu vividly alive, and prompts exciting thoughts as to how artists and critics might continue to respond to its 'rescriptive trajectories' and 'reusable texts' in the twenty-first century. Thanks to this rigorously researched, thoughtful, and elegantly written book, the word on Wyatt promises to keep on turning.

Works Cited

- Brigden, Susan, *Thomas Wyatt: The Heart's Forest* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012)
- Shulman, Nicola, *Graven With Diamonds: The Many Lives of Thomas Wyatt, Courtier, Poet, Assassin, Spy* (London: Short Books, 2011)
- Walker, Greg, *Writing Under Tyranny: English Literature and the Henrician Reformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005)