

William Webbe. *A Discourse of English Poetry* (1586). Ed. Sonia Hernández-Santano. *Critical Texts*, 47. Cambridge: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2016. Pp. xii, 164. €13.99. ISBN: 9781781881255.

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William Webbe's *A Discourse of English Poetry* (1586) bears the distinction of being the first poetical treatise of some length to be printed in England, which makes it a historical curiosity but hardly a seminal work. George Gascoigne's "Certain Notes of Instruction concerning the Making of Verse or Rhyme in English," which Webbe evidently knew, had been printed in 1575 to accompany his *The Poesies*, but was far less ambitious in scope and gave only sixteen succinct indications for would-be poets. *A Discourse's* more illustrious companions, George Puttenham's *The Art of English Poesy* and Sir Philip Sidney's *A Defence of Poesy* were both written in the early 1580s but not published until 1589 and 1595, respectively. As editor Sonia Hernández-Santano points out (2016: 68n30), there is no evidence in *A Discourse* that Webbe was familiar with Puttenham's or with Sidney's works, despite the latter author's connection through his patronage of Abraham Fraunce with the circles into which, according to Hernández-Santano, Webbe sought to gain inclusion. *A Discourse* naturally has points in common, and also of divergence, with Puttenham's and Sidney's treatises, most of which are indicated in the generous footnotes; but Webbe's direct influences were, above all, Roger Ascham's *The Scholemaster* (1570) and Sir Thomas Elyot's *The Boke Named the Governour* (1531), works whose markedly pedagogical nature no doubt appealed to Webbe, the otherwise undistinguished tutor to the two sons of the equally undistinguished squire, Edward Sulyard, of Runwell, Essex. Although Hernández-Santano gives little information about Webbe's employer, he was in fact a member of parliament and until 1580 landlord of Lincoln's Inn (J.H. 1981), where he retained rooms. More significantly, Sulyard's friendship with Michael Hicke, a staunch Puritan and admirer of belligerent Presbyterian Thomas Cartwright, hints at a radically protestant milieu in which Webbe's anti-papist contempt for rhyme would have met with approval. Apart from his employment by Sulyard and his authorship of *A*



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*Discourse*, little else is known of Webbe. One William Webbe obtained his B.A. from Cambridge in 1572–73, another in 1581–82; the former would have been a contemporary of Edmund Spenser and Gabriel Harvey, the latter of Fraunce. Hernández-Santano opts for the earlier Webbe, reasonably enough given the familiarity of tone with which he addresses both Spenser and Harvey throughout his work.

If it is, then, by his work that we must know Webbe, he was a Tudor humanist with little originality and an “occasional want of academic rigour and precision” (7). In addition to Ascham, Elyot and Gascoigne, he also draws on Georg Fabricius’ *De re poetica libri septem* (1565) for its synopsis of Horace’s *Ars Poetica*, and Audomarus Taleus’ *Rhetorica* (1552) for its treatment of metrical feet. His poetical examples derive chiefly from Virgil’s *Aeneid* in Thomas Phaer’s translation (1573), and from Spenser’s *The Shepheardes Calendar* (1579); he also includes his own hexameter versions of Virgil’s first two eclogues and his Sapphic rendering of Hobbinol’s hymn in praise of Elisa from Spenser’s “April” eclogue. He mentions Arthur Golding’s *Metamorphoses* (1567) and is obviously familiar with the 1584 anthology, *A Handefull of Pleasant Delites*, but Tottel’s *Miscellany* (1557) is surprisingly ignored or unknown, and Sir Thomas Wyatt, therefore, missing from his list of English poets. Webbe’s narrow reading together with his hazy ideas about the chronology of classical authors or poetic genre betoken a mind and a taste formed at some distance from the intellectual and poetic elites of the day. Hernández-Santano suggests that *A Discourse* was partly motivated by Webbe’s wish to curry favour with the Harvey-Spenser circle as well, perhaps, as to advertise his own versifying skill; however, his learning will barely have impressed, while his own poetic production is, as he himself acknowledges, meagre for reasons he chooses not to specify (132). The value, then, of *A Discourse*, is not so much its originality as, perhaps, its representativeness of a mid-brow nationalistic and protestant poetics which is most striking for its advocacy of the adoption of Latin, quantitative metre in English verse; it is, so to speak, the *Daily Mail* of poetic treatises in contrast to the quality journalism of Sidney’s *Defence* and Puttenham’s *Art*, although Webbe is not so benightedly conservative as to deny the utility of even the most morally dubious poetry: with Sidney, he considers that what is “blameable” is not the writing itself but the “foolish construction” of its readers (104).

After presenting author and text, Hernández-Santano sets out Webbe's reforming objectives, which together "aim at motivating English poetry to aspire towards consolidating a strong and competitive national literary idiom" (9). Addressed as it is to the "Noble Poets of England," *A Discourse* is a plea to Spenser and Harvey to renew their experimentation with classical metres and to eschew the vulgarity of "brutish" rhyme, the origins of which, *apud* Ascham, were with the barbarian Goths and Huns who introduced it to Italy, whence it spread up through France and into England (77–78). It is as difficult for modern readers to get excited over the quantifier *vs.* rhymers debate as it would have been for Webbe & Co. to lose sleep over the Betamax *vs.* VHS video war of the 1970s and 1980s. Historically, Webbe was fighting a losing battle in defence of what, on the evidence collected by Hernández-Santano (25–30), may have been little more than a Cambridge fad which for Spenser and Harvey, Webbe's putative champions, had already turned stale. The impression gained is of Webbe as a lap-dog, pestering at Spenser's and Harvey's heels as they march on regardless towards greater things. What is more, apart from his own, all Webbe's *exempla* are of English hexametering rhyme; with hindsight what is most surprising about the controversy, which was ultimately based on the *artificial/natural* dichotomy, is that it lasted at least until Thomas Campion's *Observations on the Art of English Poesy* (1602). One of the great virtues of Hernández-Santano's edition is the clarity with which it presents the issues related to versification and the quantitative movement in the Introduction (17–18, 37–48) and through the footnotes.

The Introduction also carefully situates *A Discourse* first within the broader English humanist context configured by Webbe's principle authorities, Ascham and Elyot, and in particular relation to matter and form, imitation, translation and, naturally, versification; then, within the narrower context of what Hernández-Santano terms the "Cambridge Ideals" which found fullest expression in Spenser's *A Shepheardes Calendar*, a work which Webbe duly 'canonizes' for illustrating to perfection the three principles of his poetic agenda as identified here: "imitation as a means of ennobling the English literary idiom; the instructive nature of poetry; and the civilizing effect of decorum as conveyed by the cohesion between matter and form" (35). In this regard, *A Discourse* is to Spenser's poetry what Fraunce's *The Shepherd's Logic* (1583?) had been to his dialectic. Oddly, perhaps, Hernández-Santano

does not consider the possibility that Webbe's work was intended as a companion-piece to Fraunce's —now available in the same series (Luis-Martínez 2016)— although both writers belonged to the same extended circle and subscribed to the same 'Cambridge Ideals.'

Hernández-Santano's edition of the text is based on collating the two extant copies of the original edition with the texts of its later editors, Edward Arber (1815), Joseph Haslewood (1815) and G. Gregory Smith (1904); the results of the collation are set out in the Textual Notes (141–144). Spelling, punctuation and capitalization are regularized and modernized. As already mentioned, the complete critical apparatus — there is also a Glossary and comprehensive Bibliography— is crowned by 250 valuable footnotes which clarify issues, identify allusions and quotations, and trace parallels in Puttenham and Sidney among others. Thanks to these notes, even in so derivative a text one or two touches of originality are brought to the reader's attention such as Webbe's distinction on the grounds of matter between *vates* and *poetae* (66n20) and his citation of Plato on poetry's "magical coerciveness" (66n22). The notes also sagely point out Webbe's errors, for example, his confusion between one of the Scipios and Alexander (69n32) or his problems with chronology as mentioned above. Nonetheless, some information would have been welcome about figures like Gonzalo Pérez ("Gonsalvo Periz" in the Index), whose Spanish translation of Homer's *Odyssey*, published in 1550, is only cited enigmatically (105n153); or Simias of Rhodes, the third-century BCE poet whose pattern poems appeared in the *Antologia graeca* and inspired George Herbert's "Easter Wings." These, however, are minor complaints.

What might have been usefully included in the Introduction is a discussion of the similarities and differences with Sidney and Puttenham which, though amply attested in the footnotes, perhaps deserved some more sustained analysis. Thus, the intellectual context would have been extended beyond Elyot, Ascham and the Cambridge set. Indeed, that context could have been stretched even further to include analogous texts from European authors which would have deepened the reader's perspective on Webbe. For the nationalistic enterprise shared by Ascham and Webbe was by no means peculiarly English: with roots in Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia* (1302?), there was a considerable tradition of championing the literary potential of the vernacular languages which passed through Pietro Bembo's *Prose della volgar lingua* (1525) to

Joachim du Bellay's *La défense et illustration de la langue française* (1549). Du Bellay's work also insisted, like Ascham and Webbe, on the importance of imitating not only classical but also contemporary writers, as did Jacques Peletier's *Art poétique* (1555), which subscribed, like Pierre de Ronsard's *Abregé de l'art poétique français* (1565) and Webbe (and Sidney) to the notion of the divine nature of poetic creation. At the same time, Julius Caesar Scaliger's immensely influential *Poetices libri septem* (1561) only turns up in a single footnote (89n90) despite being one of the prime proponents of the indivisibility of *res* and *verba*, the key to Ascham and Webbe's theory of decorum. In other words, if set in this broader European context, Webbe's *A Discourse* might emerge as a less provincial contribution, written from an Essex backwater, to early modern literary theory.

Nonetheless, Hernández-Santano is to be thanked for providing specialists with an accessible, affordable and extremely useful edition of Webbe's relatively neglected text. Since Gregory Smith's edition of 1904, our views of early modern poetry have changed considerably and there has been much research on Elizabethan humanism and pedagogy, as well as on the quantitative movement. Hernández-Santano takes sound stock of all of this work and her edition will become not only the standard text of *A Discourse* for the decades to come but also a highly recommendable first port of call for those with an interest in Elizabethan versification. She is, therefore, to be congratulated for her sterling efforts to rescue a relatively neglected work which, she will be the first to admit, is of less interest for itself than for the intellectual world it modestly bespeaks.

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