

James VI and Renaissance Poetic Theory

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DURING the Renaissance many critical treatises appeared in Europe. Scholars turned to a more minute study of classical authors and discovered that many of the metrical and theoretical principles underlying classical verse could not be applied to works in the vernacular. As a result it became clear that the critical manuals of Cicero and Quintilian were inadequate for evaluating art written in the vulgar tongue. In Italy, Trissino had suggested that Italian verse worked on a different idea of rhythm than Latin or Greek. For Trissino the Italian innovation was intimately connected with dancing:

Rithmo e anchora quello, che risulta dal danzare con ragione, e dal sonare, e cantare; il che volgarmente si kiama misura e tempo.¹

The Pléiade too were concerned with comparisons between classical and vernacular verse. Most of all they were conscious that French could not rival the older tongues in wealth of vocabulary. Thus when Du Bellay argued for the use of the vernacular in composition, it was only after adding the reservation, that 'nostre Langue n'est si copieuse que la Greque ou Latine'.² In England Puttenham spoke out for the superiority of modern poetry in having introduced rhyme, while Ascham adduced rules to bring English into close alignment with Latin.³

As this idea of vernacular composition lay behind the treatises, it is not surprising that they betray a spirit of nationalism, ranging from the open chauvinism of Vida's *Ars Poetica* to the more muted patriotism of Puttenham's *Arte of English Poesie*. Nearly all the critics are agreed that art has degenerated since antiquity and that the Renaissance will herald the first reversal of this process. But the location of the

revival depends on the poet's birthplace. Vida believes the leaders of the vernacular revolution to be the Tuscan poets under Medici patronage:

Iampridem tamen Ausonios invisere rursus
Coeperunt Medycum revocatae munere
Musae
Thuscorum Medycum, quos tandem protulit
aetas
Europae in tantis solamen dulce ruinis.⁴

Ronsard puts his faith in the Pléiade, and Puttenham advances a less vitriolic case for English supremacy.

Renaissance criticism thus had a strongly vernacular and patriotic bias. It is perhaps fitting that the quieter Scottish movement should produce but one contribution to this wealth of critical material, and that a work of less than twenty quarto pages, composed by a teenage king. Yet James VI's *Ane Schort Treatise Contein- ing some Reulis and Cautelis to be obseruit and eschewit in Scottis Poesie*,⁵ shows its author to have been aware of the larger European tradition. Apart from differences in terminology, James approaches poetry in the same way as Vida, Du Bellay, and Puttenham. He too opens by justifying his work in terms of the new problems besetting a writer:

'As for them that wrait of auld, lyke as the tyme is changeit sensyne, sa is the ordour of Poesie changeit. For then they observit not Flowing, nor eschewit not ryming in termes, besydes sindrie uther thingis, quhilk now we observe, and eschew, and dois weil in sa doing.'⁶

It was this sense of particular and present need which motivated the major European treatises. Like Vida and Du Bellay, James sees the

¹ Giovan Trissino, *La Poetica* (Vicenza, 1529), p. xii r.

² J. du Bellay, *La Deffence et Illustration de la Langue Francoise*, ed. Henri Chamard (Paris, 1948), p. 22.

³ George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, ed. Arber, English Reprints, vii (London, 1869), p. 22. Roger Ascham, *The Scholemaster*, ed. W. A. Wright (Cambridge, 1904), p. 260.

⁴ *Ars Poetica Marci Hieronymi Vidae Cremonensis* (Lugduni apud Gryphium, 1536), p. 10.

⁵ James VI, 'Essayes of a Prentise in the Divine Arte of Poesie', in *The Poems of King James VI of Scotland*, ed. J. Craigie, Scottish Text Society, 2 vols. (Edinburgh and London, 1948), i. 66-83.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

Renaissance poet as being in a unique and fortuitous position. He can take advantage of all the errors or advances made by earlier poets, and so speak of poetry 'as being come to mannis age and perfectioun'. It was in a similar light that Vida had seen the Tuscan movement, Ronsard and Du Bellay the Pléiade.

The nationalistic bias is reflected in the title of James's essay and expanded upon in the prologue. One of the king's justifications for writing is that among the many critical writers of the period, 'there hes neuer ane of them written in our language'. Nor is Scots to be confounded with English, for 'we differ from thame in sindrie reulis of Poesie'. He is intent on pleading for a Scottish poetic and linguistic autonomy. No language, however similar in structure to another, can be equated with it. This type of argument was already familiar to readers from the first chapter of Du Bellay's *Deffence*, where he advanced his famous account of language evolution. All tongues originate like the plant from a single root, and their diverse developments depend on national character and idiosyncrasy.

The *Reulis* is primarily a technical account of poetry. Like most European critics James is mainly concerned with devising rules for rhyme, rhythm, and stanza formation. This prevalent attitude to poetry resulted from its still being considered a secondary branch of rhetoric. The idea of the close relationship of the seven liberal arts had survived the Medieval period, while rhetoric had gained primary importance for literary men since Il Trapenzunzio's *Rhetoricum Libri* of 1435.¹ As a result four of the six books in Trissino's *Poetica* deal with technical problems and only the second of Gascoigne's sixteen rules touches on general poetic theory.² In the same way, seven of the eight chapters in the *Reulis* teach the poet his craft by means of arbitrary laws.

From this brief comparison of the *Reulis* with other examples of Renaissance critical theory, it becomes clear that it belongs to the same tradition. It originates from an interest in the vernacular. It shares with many other European manuals the patriotic tone and the view of the sixteenth century as a golden age. It sees

poetry as the metrical branch of rhetoric and devotes a large section to metrical problems. With this general similarity established, a more detailed study of the work is necessary. This is especially so as James set up a poetic school at court and encouraged writers like Stewart of Baldynneis, William Fowler, and William Alexander to follow his critical views.

In the discussion on rhyming James puts forward three ideas, continuing the almost mathematically logical approach of the prologue. He forbids identical rhymes, like those used by Chaucer, yet goes even further by not permitting a 'proue'/'reproue' or 'houe'/'behoue' rhyme. At first sight this stricture seems to be only an echo of Du Bellay's rule in the *Deffence*:

'Ces equivoques donq' et ces simples rymez avecques leurs composez, comme un baisser et abaisser, s'ilz ne changent ou augmentent grandement la signification de leurs simples, me soient chassez bien loing.'³

But Du Bellay, unlike James, lays the stress on a meaning criterion. 'Baisser' and 'abaisser' were synonyms in sixteenth-century French. The Scottish critic is widening the scope of the rule to cover cases in which there is a wide divergence of sense. It would seem that James is no servile imitator.

The tendency of his changes is to a stricter poetics than any hitherto advanced. For example, he insists that, without exception, the rhyme should be carried by the last long syllable in the line, even if this involves rhyming on the antepenultimate. No other critic seems to agree with this viewpoint, and indeed only Puttenham considers the problem at any length. Similarly he argues that only the Iamb should be used in Scottish verse. This decision he justifies by ear, and it seems strange to ignore all the other possible types on the strength of so flimsy an argument, especially when Puttenham had advocated the use of all the ancient feet.

Despite strange rules like these, James is often enlightening. In no case is this more so than when he treats decorum, one of the main

¹ See E. R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, tr. W. R. Trask (London, 1953), pp. 36-79.

² George Gascoigne, 'Certayne Notes of Instruction',

in *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, ed. G. Gregory Smith, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (London, 1950), vol. 1.

³ Du Bellay, *La Deffence*, p. 146.

topics in Elizabethan criticism.¹ It had been fully sketched out by Puttenham in book 3, chapter 6, of the *Arte of English Poesie*. He defined the three styles as high, mean, and base, as well as introducing a series of topics to fit each level. The high style was to be used in hymning the gods or princes; the mean style for matters concerning lawyers, gentlemen, and merchants, and the base for the 'doings of the common artificer'. This social division James at first ignores. Instead he confines himself to those aspects omitted by Puttenham or falsely treated in his account. On the subject of tragedy he openly disagrees with the English critic, who had assigned it to the high style. James advocates the use of 'lamentable wordis with some heich', thus extending the principle to mood and introducing a more complex system of graded levels of diction. The effect of this is to allow a freer, less rigid application of the device, enabling it to enrich rather than restrict the free flowing of verse.

Secondly, he extends the principle from the level of style to that of argument. If the lover is to use passionate but unaffected words, his reasoning must also proceed from passion. If country people are to speak colloquially, their argument must fit this style. In short, decorum is not only a linguistic but a social phenomenon. James takes up Puttenham's social division from a different angle, expanding the implications of his ideas, to show that the merchant will not only use the mean style but also arguments fitted to his mental capacity and social position. The king breaks down the artificial and harmful rigidity of the three stylistic levels set out by Puttenham. He also extends their relevance from the linguistic to the rhetorical; from style to argument.

James has thus successfully dealt with the principle of decorum, yet not been content merely to accept the ideas laid down by his predecessors. His views on imitation are equally interesting. He ignores the first interpretation of this topic—art as an imitation of Nature, and instead concentrates on imitation of classical authors. In this context most early critics had based their theory on some modification of Petrarch's statement in the *Familiars*.

He had argued for imitation alongside ingenuity, by seizing on Seneca's image of the bee. The modern poet steals from classical models as the bee steals from flowers:

'Apes in inventionibus imitandas, quae flores, non quales acceperint, referunt, sed ceras ac mella, mirifica quadam permixtione, conficiunt.'²

Just as both bee and flower profited from their interrelationship, so imitation of the classics benefited the vernacular. Just as the bee did not retain the pollen in its original form but converted it into honey, so the good imitator transformed his model into something new.

James is not of this opinion. Beginning with invention as one of the chief poetic virtues, he says that this quality is best exercised 'if ye inuent your awin subiect, yourself', and don't 'compose of sene subiectis'. Imitation, it is implied, hinders the free action of this prime poetic virtue. This is especially so in translation, where 'ye are bound as to a staik, to follow that buikis phrasis, quhilk ye translate'. In his discussion of both imitation and translation James's approach is valuable, for he is thinking of lesser writers. Other critics tended to deal with first-rank poets, in whose hands imitation might have the beneficial effects suggested by Petrarch's image. But minor writers, following in their footsteps, adopted a more literal approach, which produced poetry sounding like the first awkward steps in French or Latin translation.

A salient feature of the king's poetic theory has by now come to light. He simplifies previous accounts by concentrating on technical rather than metaphysical aspects. By refusing to discuss imitation in Neo-Platonic or Aristotelian terms he is forced into a further simplification, this time with regard to invention. This concept was very important for the sixteenth-century critic, who saw it as closely connected with the theory of art as imitative of nature. By assigning art's terms of reference to the realm of the 'probable' rather than the 'actual', it was an easy matter to reconcile imitation with invention. The poet was not restricted to a reproduction of the real world

¹ See Rosemund Tuve, *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery*, for a modern discussion of decorum.

² The comparison between the author and the bee is

a commonplace in classical literature. See Seneca, *Epist.* 84; Pindar, *Pyth.* X; Plato, *Ion*.

as sensuously perceived but could imitate the potential values by means of his invention. But James had ignored imitation in this sense. In the same way he views invention narrowly, equating it with originality, the antithesis of literary imitation:

'Bot sen Inuention, is ane of the cheif vertewis in a Poete, it is best that ye inuent your awin subiect, your self, and not to compose of sene subiectis.'¹

This closely resembles Gascoigne's approach. He also saw invention as 'the first and most necessarie poynt' in poetic craftsmanship and asserted that it was opposed to imitation.

In fact Gascoigne and James are fulfilling a different function from Puttenham and Du Bellay. In modern terms, they are producing a textbook on elementary versifying rather than a full poetic theory. That is why they put a heavier emphasis on technical elements than usual. That is why they ignore the far-reaching metaphysical speculations on art's function in order to confine themselves to more practical problems of the poet's craft. They are not writing for the master poets but for the apprentices. As a result no discussion of the imagination is necessary, for it is a quality which is inherited, not imparted by 'reulis'. Imitation and invention are accepted as tools and their value assessed, but wider questions of the relationship of finished artefact to the world at large are outside the scope of the discussion.

Only once does James move outside the limits of a purely technical treatise. This is when he discusses the Horatian theory of a 'divine fury' animating great artists. Vida, Du Bellay, Ronsard, and Puttenham all stressed the poet's divinity, but the clearest statement is in Thomas Lodge's *Defence of Poetry*, where he uses it as a means of distinguishing the poet from the orator:

'It is a pretye sentence, yet not so prety as pithy, Poeta nascitur, Orator fit: as who should say, Poetrye commeth from above, from a heavenly seate of a glorious God, unto an excellent creature man; an Orator is but made by exercise.'²

Such a theory is clearly out of place in a

technical treatise and Gascoigne ignores it. But James not only mentions it, he opposes the mainstream of critical thought resolutely. For him, the poet must avoid 'materis of commoun weill' as 'they are to graue materis for a Poet to mell in'. Uncharacteristically he is departing from purely literary criteria and considering the poet's function in general terms. Such a departure must be accounted for.

The solution probably lies in his unique social position and his belief in divine right. In the *Basilicon Doron* he stressed that only the king is inspired by God. Yet he was aware that Ronsard had mocked Henri II's claim to near-deity, while Vida in the *Poetica* had placed the poet above earthly kings:

Ultiores sperate Deos, sub numine quorum
Semper vita fuit vatam defensa piorum.
Illi omnes sibi fortunas posuere volentes
Sub pedibus, regumque et opes, et sceptras
superba
Ingenti vincunt animo, ac mortalia rident.³

James therefore ignores the technical nature of his treatise on this isolated occasion to warn Scottish poets that interference in court matters will be frowned upon.

A more detailed study of the *Reulis* thus reveals that its broad similarity to other critical treatises goes along with a number of hidden differences. The most important of these is its stature as a technical handbook of poetry on the model of Gascoigne's *Notes of Instruction*. As a consequence, the emphasis on rhetoric, versification, and metre is even more pronounced than in the *Deffence* or the *Arte of English Poesie*. Most of the major theoretical ideas are mentioned but their scope of reference is severely limited, as questions of poetic imitation of Nature or the relationship between invention and imagination would be irrelevant in the given context. On the other hand, the young king shows good sense in realizing that his youth and lack of poetic experience render him a poor rival to Du Bellay and Ascham on their own ground. If the *Reulis* are seen as a guide to versification written by a young man and not as a national poetic manifesto, they do constitute a valuable contribution to Renaissance learning.

Critical Essays, ed. G. Gregory Smith (Oxford, 1950), i. 71.

³ Vida, *Ars Poetica*, p. 21.

¹ James VI, *Essays*, p. 79.

² Thomas Lodge, 'Defence of Poetry', in *Elizabethan*