

Writing Under Tyranny English Literature and the Henrician Reformation

Review Number:

556

Publish date:

Friday, 1 December, 2006

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ISBN:

9780199283330

Date of Publication:

2005

Price:

£68.00

Pages:

568pp.

Publisher:

Oxford University Press

Place of Publication:

Oxford

Reviewer:

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A new book by Greg Walker, Professor of Early Modern Literature and Culture at the University of Leicester, is a major event. He has already published four book-length studies of Henrician literature and politics, all with distinguished academic presses: *John Skelton and the Politics of the 1520s* (Cambridge, 1988); *Plays of Persuasion: Drama and Politics at the Court of Henry VIII* (Cambridge, 1991); *Persuasive Fictions: Faction, Faith and Political Culture in the Reign of Henry VIII* (Scolar Press, 1996); and *The Politics of Performance in Early Renaissance Drama* (Cambridge, 1998). This new book, *Writing Under Tyranny: English Literature and the Henrician Reformation*, builds on these earlier achievements in carefully relating rhetoric and politics in early Tudor literature, and continues the development of these themes into the later decades of Henry VIII's reign. Taken together, these five books provide historians and literary scholars with detailed expositions of a wide range of dramatic and non-dramatic writing in English to 1547, with some important new readings of political drama beyond that date. As with each of the earlier books, this one contains frequent and generous acknowledgements to the author's former research supervisor, Professor G. W. Bernard.

The present book has three main subjects of discussion, but one overarching thesis, which, like a strand of gold, is stretched ever finer and thinner. The premise, inferred in the title, is that after 'the explosion of the divorce crisis of 1527–32' Henry Tudor became a 'tyrant'. By the time he died there was 'a widespread perception that England had fallen under a despotic regime, and that Henry himself was a monster whose death was a blessing to his subjects' (p. 1). The author's purpose is thus to examine how those 'at the heart of the political nation', during the 1530s and 1540s, reacted 'to the growing realization that they were living

through something previously unthinkable: the slide into an English tyranny' (p. 2). All the literary texts described and discussed in this book are read as 'responses to government policy' which especially stimulated protests about 'the most sensitive issues of public policy and private emotion' (p. 2) by men working in and around the court.

For as long as they felt able they deployed all of the conventional forms: handbooks of moral, spiritual, or political counsel, hypothetical discussions, didactic and speculative writing of many kinds, to register their protests and offer alternative views of what they believed was in the best interests of the commonweal (p. 3).

In section one, the publication of William Thynne's 1532 edition of the works of England's greatest poet to date, Geoffrey Chaucer (d. 1400), is roped into the delicate task of using poetry to offer counsel to the king. The chief means to this end is Sir Brian Tuke, the pseudonymous author of the volume's dedication to Henry. (There is also one chapter in which John Heywood's 'Play of the Weather', formerly discussed in *Plays of Persuasion* (1991) and *Politics of Performance* (1998) is revisited.)

The claims made for the specific political purpose of the 1532 Chaucer seem to me to be the least persuasive ones in the present book, but they are the most innovative. Tuke's claim to have written the dedicatory 'Preface' is well known from his holograph inscription, made before 1536, in the copy now at Clare College, Cambridge, which was reproduced in the Scholar Press facsimile edition of 1969. From Tuke's impersonation of Thynne, named as the editor in the printed 'Preface', Professor Walker assumes not only that Thynne and Tuke were joint editors of the 1532 Chaucer, but also that they were of a single mind: 'One imagines that Thynne and Tuke would have approved' (p. 98), for example. Constant repetition of 'Thynne and Tuke', as if they were proven co-editors who thought alike, looks like a rhetorical ploy to convince us of what must remain, on present knowledge, speculation. However, the larger involvement of Tuke, here regarded as a full partner in the selection and preparation of Chaucer's (and other, named and unattributed Middle English poets') works, is vital to the present political reading of the 1532 edition taken as a whole. As the author points out, only someone in Tuke's position at court could provide the link between the inclusion of John Gower's 'Balade to kyng Henry the fourth', for example, and the claim that in choosing this 'ballad in praise of peace ... the editors were reflecting a significant theme in governmental thinking, a theme evident in the pronouncements of both the king and his ministers throughout 1531–2' (p. 95). I am not persuaded by this inductive method; here, it seems to me, we find an idea in search of evidence. Tuke becomes a co-editor because Thynne, a chief clerk of the kitchen, is considered unlikely to have had the kinds of contact with 'governmental thinking' required to see the 1532 edition of Chaucer's Works as an attempt to counsel Henry VIII. But is it credible that the editor(s) of the 1532 Chaucer should expect Henry to find, and then take to heart, the message of a relatively short poem, printed on five pages, towards the end of a folio volume containing 383 leaves, or 766 pages, in all? If Tuke, impersonating Thynne, is the real author of the Preface addressed to Henry, as he claimed at the time, and which seems entirely plausible, then his exposition of the avowed purpose of Thynne's edition, printed for a wider English readership, must also be given its due. This express purpose was revolutionary, assertive, and political enough in its literal sense without straining after dubious historical contexts. The Preface states its editor's intention to restore (under royal protection) knowledge of Chaucer's greatness of learning, eloquence, metrical felicity, freshness of subject matter, compendious style, and his exemplary status (in explicit comparison with such political literary personalities as Demosthenes and Cicero). This was to be achieved by restoring Chaucer's texts, thereby,

reducynge vnto lyght this so precious and necessary ... ornament of the [English] tonge ... So that vnder ... royall protectyon and defence it may go forthe in publyke/ & preuayle ouer those that wolde blemysse/ deface/ and ... abolyssh the laude/ renoume/ and glorie hertofore compared/ and meritoriously adquired by dyuers princes/ and other of this said most noble yle/ whervnto nat onely straungers ... but also some of your owne subiectes ... do with great study

contende. (Sig. A3r, my reading from the Scolar facsimile edition)

While Professor Walker quotes and describes this passage, his argument nevertheless passes over its message that Tuke thought it was Thynne's purpose to spearhead a revival of English literary culture and language, a purpose the present book might have argued—but does not—came to fruition in the poetry of Henry Howard, earl of Surrey. The printing of Chaucer's works not only provided Italianate models, methods of composition, and standards of eloquence for court poets, it also familiarized readers of English poetry with the highest standards and greatest range of English humanist verse then available. The earlier production of copies of Chaucer's poetry in manuscript and print testifies to a long and vigorous tradition of interest in, and value added to, his work: literary, moral and political, or public. The intellectual revolution manifested in the 1532 Chaucer (and one of its best selling points) was the editorial claims made in the preface that Thynne had compared and collated source texts in search of 'very trewe copies of those workes of Geffray Chaucer/ whiche before had ben put in printe/ but also to dyuers other neuer tyll nowe imprinted' (A2v). These were the methods of textual production applied to classical and biblical texts rather than to English vernacular poetry. While it would have been easier, quicker, and less expensive, Henry VIII is told, not to have made such 'dilygent sertch' and 'collacion', the author of the Preface, writing in the persona of Thynne, says he

thought it in maner appertenant vnto my dewtie/ and that of very honesty and loue to my countrey I ought no lesse to do/ than to put my helpyng hande to the restauracion and bringynge agayne to lyght of the said workes/ after the trewe copies and exemplaries aforesaid (A3r).

Thynne's range of manuscript sources—many of which have not survived—mean that this edition still has relevance for Chaucer's editors.

A good poet always had the reputation of a moral authority, but according to Professor Walker, 'Thynne and Tuke constructed their Chaucer as a political as well as a moral authority, and stressed his function as a guide to princes in troubled times'.

Theirs was a Chaucer who not only offered sound advice on questions of personal conduct and morality, but counselled his readers consistently on the responsibilities of kings, on the regulation of religion, and even ... on the conduct of what one might call an ethical foreign policy. Hence the placement of those texts, both Chaucerian and non-Chaucerian, that are explicitly addressed to princes and governors in prominent positions at the beginning and end of the edition, and hence the fact that the majority of the self-evidently non-Chaucerian material is drawn from the *speculum principis* tradition ... [T]he advice they offer is implicitly to suppress anticlerical dissention [sic] and reconsider current policies (pp. 81-2).

At some point in the later-sixteenth century it became a liability to be reputed a prince-pleaser. As we are told, the 'literary community, under the pressure of political events, was beginning to reconfigure itself as an alternative forum for the discussion of moral and political values, a court in the legal rather than the regal sense' (p. 418). Strangely, however, the author attributes these changes to negative political pressure and even repression, rather than to the positive example of Chaucerian verse. Chaucer, it may be argued, wrote under more traumatic political conditions of despotism and tyranny than Henry VIII could create, especially during the reign of Richard II (which saw the Peasants' Revolt), and received renewed favours from the son of his early patron, John of Gaunt, after the deposition of a famously badly-advised king.

The five chapters in section two describe and discuss the works of Sir Thomas Elyot within the context of the King's 'Great Matter', and the repeated frustrations of Elyot's desire for public office. Elyot's literary career apparently tracked his political one as he moved from the early optimism of his prescriptive work, *The Book Named the Governor*

(1530–31), to the later reworking of classical Roman history in *The Image of Governance* (1540–41), which is read here, alongside Uwe Baumann's arguments from 1998–9 (for example), as a satire on contemporary life. Elyot's preface to this later book only paid lip-service to 'a measured defence of the Henrician via media' (p. 160), as Professor Walker, following George Bernard, describes Henry's 'chosen' religious policy of these years.

Elyot's fruitless search for a job at the centre of government, in particular a place on the privy council, and his real or imagined sense of grievance against Thomas Cranmer who succeeded where Elyot failed, is a familiar story. Its poignancy and its impact on his writing have also been discussed by Elyot's several biographers and by Professor Walker, briefly, in another book, but the detail and the clarity of its exposition here are to be welcomed. This section has a good narrative structure, and gives Elyot's story a satisfying emotional, as well as intellectual, coherence.

In the third and final section, *Writing Under Tyranny* turns to the introspective, lyrical, and humanist poetry of the elder Sir Thomas Wyatt and of Henry Howard, earl of Surrey. Too often these writers are lumped together and their very distinct literary voices, their different social status, and, hence, their political significance and opportunities are elided. The transmission of their poetry in print, from 1557 onwards, in Richard Tottel's miscellany of *Songes and Sonettes* began a tradition of biographical readings. However, while the titles added to their poems in Tottel's anthology invite readers to understand their verse in the context of the poets' mostly unhappy love affairs, Professor Walker's book invites readers to substitute the context of the Act of Supremacy and tyranny. Each poet wrote occasional verses reflecting on his imprisonment at various times, and, as we are reminded, only Wyatt survived to die of natural causes in the king's service. However, the author strains his material too far when he argues that the literary tactics revealed in these poets' treatments of their biblical and classical sources initiated 'a revolution in English poetry' which can be directly attributed to their contemporary political situations. He assumes that Henry's tyranny during the last decade of his life was so repressive that court poets could only express and comfort themselves using the indirect voices of different poetic personae who are nevertheless to be read, then and since, as synonymous with the actual, historic personalities of these courtiers.

Literary scholars will recognize and welcome the citations of the work on these poets by, for example, Elizabeth Heale, Colin Burrow, and Surrey's biographer, William Sessions, but they may feel some disquiet that the largest number of references to a single critical source is to H.A. Mason's *Thomas Wyatt: A Literary Portrait* (Bristol, 1986), which has also been relied upon for quotation and translation from other primary sources—for example, from Petrarch's poetry. This section of *Writing Under Tyranny* deals with material which will be better known to most denizens of English departments than that in the other sections of this book, and I think that they will be disappointed, as I was, not to find a more original treatment of this lyric poetry and its relationships to conventional topics of religious devotion and anti-court satire. That Henry's divorce caused much aggravation for many people, and that there was a practical, humanist tradition of learned men offering their counsel to the prince in various literary genres (as the first two sections of this book argue), are unexceptional truisms. But that the poetic arts of 'inwardness', the subtleties of poetic imitation of humanist models, and the lively representation of conscience, ambition, frustration, or self criticism are the explicit consequences of Henrician repression—writing under tyranny—is stretching a simple idea too far in my opinion. There is a danger that this conclusion will seem reductive or simply romantic. For all the talk of politics, this book reflects a very old-fashioned approach to the relationship between life and literature which is clearly enjoying a revival. For example, in a subsection headed 'Surrey's Life in his Verse', Professor Walker not only assumes that Surrey's verse presents direct evidence for his life, but also then questions why at Surrey's trial, in 1546, no one alluded to his poetry as 'evidence'.

Details of his conversations, his actions, his use of heraldic devices and his commissioning of portraits were all cited against him and subjected to detailed scrutiny in order to provide evidence of his attitudes and intentions. But the most explicit and extended statements of his attitudes, his resentments, his hopes and aspirations were never exposed to examination (p. 386).

He goes on to affirm that had Surrey's poetry been considered the prosecution could have found ample 'evidence' of the charges against him. Perhaps the late-Henrician regime was less of a tyranny than this book assumes. Perhaps the law officers of the Henrician regime realized that poetry is fiction, which may be read and interpreted differently by different readers. Professor Walker has kindly acknowledged my own work on the subject of Wyatt's devotional poetry and noted its 'more sceptical' approach (p. 521, n.3) to the autobiographical readings to which he subscribes; but I remain sceptical in the absence of external evidence.

There is no attempt in this last section of the book to connect the new beginning for English humanist poetry, effected by Wyatt and Surrey in particular, with the impact of Chaucer's poetry and the aspirations expressed, for example, by Tuke's Preface of 1532 on behalf of William Thynne. The 'clear disjunction' described between Wyatt's and Surrey's work 'and that of previous generations of writers' (p.430) does not take account of a long enough historical view of English poetry. It could well be argued, as the structure of this book implies but does not articulate, that the continuity between Chaucer and Surrey is both stronger and clearer than the disjunction between Wyatt or Surrey and their immediate predecessors such as Skelton and Hawes.

With respect to the smaller, technical but substantive business of reviewers, it should be pointed out for historians especially that the primary documentary evidence is almost entirely quoted and cited from printed calendars of state papers, which are of various quality and consistency. For example, the role of the definition of praemunire by Chapuy, quoted in translation from the Spanish Calendar, is unclear (see p. 471, n.56.) It is also odd to find references to the PRO rather than the National Archives in a book with a 2005 imprint.

There is no bibliography or list of sources included. As few of the references within 105 dense pages of endnotes are indexed, it is often very inconvenient to find a full reference to a work. This is especially so when even the first reference in a chapter is not given in full, or, bizarrely, where the first full reference to a specific work appears after its first use in short form within the same chapter. There are several other signs of incomplete copy-editing, although only a few substantive errors can be mentioned here. Patricia Thomson, co-editor of the Liverpool University Press edition of Wyatt's poetry, editor of *Wyatt The Critical Heritage* (1974, 1985), and author of *Sir Thomas Wyatt and his Background* (1964) is repeatedly, but not consistently, referred to as Thompson in text and notes—something which obscures her identity as author and editor of all the books mentioned above. Other inconsistencies include the standard abbreviation STC varied to RSTC in some chapters; the use, without explanation, of Susan Brigden's first, 1989, edition of *London and the Reformation* in, for example, ch. 6, n. 5, but the second edition, of 1991, in, for example, ch. 3, n. 5. (The short form in ch. 10, n. 1, does not indicate which edition has been used.) Something has gone wrong with the reference to Brigden's first edition in ch. 9, n. 20; presumably, 'pp. 1–215' should read 'pp. 12–15'. Similarly, I suggest that 'Wyatt's best work' (p. 532, n. 32, third line up) should read 'Surrey's best work'. There are 150 biblical psalms, not 151 (as at p. 523, n. 29). I have not listed other literal errors in common words that do not materially affect the reader's comprehension. While no book of 556 pages can be free from such slips, Oxford University Press should have tried harder to capture and eliminate them.

Overall, this is a long book, and a well written one, but I find its historical premises about the Henrician regime tendentious; its single political argument about the increasing difficulty of offering counsel strained; and its literary cohesion forced. Its discrete sections read like a series of appendices to Professor Walker's earlier, and, to my mind, more valuable, books on Henrician literature and politics. Nevertheless, the summaries of critical opinions on individual works and the narratives of historic events and interactions of

personalities are very detailed. The literary evidence from texts of several kinds is quoted fully (prose texts are modernized, but verse texts are wisely given in original spelling to preserve metrical forms). The end notes are so exhaustive, they often resemble miniature essays. So, despite the reservations discussed above about some of its conclusions, this could prove a useful book.

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