

Forum

Forum Policy: Members of the Association are invited to submit letters commenting on articles published in *PMLA* or on matters of scholarly and critical interest generally. Decision to publish will be made at the Editor's discretion, and authors of articles commented on will be invited to reply. Letters should be fewer than 1,000 words of text; footnotes are discouraged.

Surrey's Five Elegies

To the Editor:

I should like to propose a slight modification of one of the readings in C. W. Jentoft's excellent article, "Surrey's Five Elegies: Rhetoric, Structure, and the Poetry of Praise" (*PMLA*, 91, 1976, 23–32). Since I want to underline rather than question his interpretation in its general lines, I hope he will consider this a cooperative rather than a critical comment.

Jentoft argues convincingly that Surrey's second sonnet on the death of Wyatt, "In the rude age," has three main aims: to praise Wyatt, to attack his enemies, and to defend the practice of epideictic or commemorative poetry. As Jentoft explains, the first quatrain is a dependent clause. It might be paraphrased thus: "If, in the rude age, when knowledge was not widespread, Jove was commemorated in Crete, and others elsewhere, after their deaths, by [men] going to temples to honor them for teaching [various] arts that improve our lives."

The second quatrain, another dependent clause, is grammatically parallel:

If vertue yet in no vnthankfull tyme
fayled of some to blast her endles fame
a goodlie meane bothe to deter from cryme
and to her stepes our sequell to enflame.

This does not mean, as Jentoft suggests, that "men have in all Christless times often failed to broadcast enduring praise of the great" (p. 29). Rather, it might be paraphrased: "If, in no ungrateful time, [has] virtue yet failed to broadcast the endless fame of [at least] some, a goodly means both to deter us from crime and to enflame us to follow in their footsteps." This reading, of course, reverses the meaning.

In the sestet, a question resolves the two if-clauses and a final couplet caps the poem. To paraphrase: "Then, in days of truth, where Christ is taught, if Wyatt's friends mourn—the only debt that the dead may claim from the living—him—who used his rare intelligence for our benefit¹—do they deserve the blame of a carping critic? How his lively face fretted your breast, whose cinders still consume you with envy!" That is, even the remains of the living Wyatt, preserved in poetry—or the fact that he has been so memorialized—arouse this critic's envy and eat at his heart.

When the second quatrain is reinterpreted as above, it parallels the first in meaning as well as in grammar and leads naturally and logically into the sestet. Therefore, there is no need to concede an "illogical relationship between the if-clauses and the question" (p. 29). Both syntax and meaning, though admittedly puzzling (Jentoft offers the first plausible reading of the poem), prove to be logical once they are unraveled. Anyone who tries to paraphrase the poem will realize how much Surrey has packed into it. Extreme compression, with the bravura accomplishment of aiming in three directions at once and hitting all his targets, accounts for the difficulty. Indeed, to Jentoft's three aims we may add a fourth complication that Surrey has woven into his poem. In addition to praising Wyatt, attacking his enemies, and defending poetry, he also manages to construct his poem on the framework of a familiar Renaissance topos, which is found in More's *Utopia* and Donne's "Satire III": namely, if pagans can be virtuous (and ungrateful ages grateful) without the light of Christ, what excuse can we Christians offer for our misbehavior?

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Note

¹ The compressed syntax allows another, essentially similar, reading: "if Wyatt's friends mourn . . . that rare wit [who] died employed for our welfare."

Mr. Jentoft replies:

Mr. Low's reading of the second quatrain is accurate, I think. I had initially interpreted the passage similarly, but had gradually changed my mind as I became more wary of subverting accurate explication with the intentional fallacy—in short, with ascribing to lines 5 and 6 more sense than they actually contained in an overzealous effort to rescue the whole sonnet from the "tangle" to which Surrey's editors had consigned it. Low argues persuasively that my original decision was the correct one.

I am less convinced by his final suggestion because, unlike the first, it is not really justified by the lines themselves: the rhetorical question in the third quatrain simply asks if those who "waile" the loss of Wy-