



PERIODS, SCHOOLS, & MOVEMENTS

The English Renaissance

Essay by Lewis Walker, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

This article provides an introduction to the poetry written in England during the Renaissance, a period that extends from roughly 1485 through 1660. Coming late to England, the Renaissance flowered within an extraordinarily diverse and high-quality body of poetry. This was the age in which Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare wrote their great poetic dramas; in which appeared an astonishing variety of lyrics by such innovators as Sir Philip Sidney and John Donne; and in which England's two greatest epic poets, Edmund Spenser and John Milton, composed their masterpieces. Also during this period, female authors began to make their presence felt. All this took place amid unprecedented religious and political changes in England—including the Reformation and the Civil War. During this era, events, movements, and ideas in the wider culture had a close and immediate relationship with poets and their productions.

KEYWORDS

- Blank Verse
- Caroline Period
- Carpe Diem
- Cavalier Poets
- Early Tudor Period
- Elizabethan Period
- Epigram
- Interregnum
- Jacobean Period
- Love
- Metaphysical Poets
- Sonnet

POEMS DISCUSSED IN THIS ESSAY

- Amoretti* by Edmund Spenser
Astrophil and Stella by Philip Sidney
“A Ballad upon a Wedding” by John Suckling
“Celia’s Song (2)” by Ben Jonson
Delia by Samuel Daniel
“The Description of Cooke-ham” by Aemilia Lanyer
“An Elegy upon the Death of the Dean of Paul’s, Dr. John Donne” by Thomas Carew
Epithalamion by Edmund Spenser
The Fairie Queene by Edmund Spenser
“Holy Sonnet 10” by John Donne
“An Horatian Ode upon Cromwell’s Return from Ireland” by Andrew Marvell
“Il Penseroso” by John Milton
“Inviting a Friend to Supper” by Ben Jonson
“L’Allegro” by John Milton
“The long love that in my thought doth harbor” by Thomas Wyatt
“Love, that doth reign and live within my thought” by Henry Howard
“Lullay, lullay, like a Child” by John Skelton
“Lycidas” by John Milton
“Mannerly Marjorie Milk and Ale” by John Skelton
“My sweetest Lesbia” by Thomas Campion
“On Gut” by Ben Jonson
Paradise Lost by John Milton
“*Paradise Lost*: The Verse” by John Milton
“Satire 3” by John Donne
“The Shepheardes Calender” by Edmund Spenser
“Sonnet 61” of *Idea* by Michael Drayton
“Sonnet 116” by William Shakespeare
“The Soote Season” by Henry Howard

"The Spring" by Abraham Cowley
The Tempest by William Shakespeare
"To His Coy Mistress" by Andrew Marvell
"To Lucasta Going to the Wars" by Richard Lovelace
"To Penshurst" by Ben Jonson
"To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" by Robert Herrick
"A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" by John Donne
"The World" by Henry Vaughan

The accession to the throne of Henry Tudor, who became Henry VII in 1485, marks the beginning of a remarkable period in English culture. His reign saw the beginnings of a new spirit generated by European humanism, an intellectual and educational movement that originated in Italy. Humanism emphasized the study of the literatures of ancient Greece and Rome, as well as of the Bible—all in their original languages. The purpose of this kind of training was to prepare young men for public service. Henry VIII, who reigned from 1509 to 1547, received a thoroughly humanistic education. His desire for a divorce from his first wife, Katherine of Aragon (so, as he hoped, to marry Ann Boleyn and with her to have a male heir), and for supreme power within his kingdom, led him in the 1530s to sever ties with Rome and to effectively establish himself as the head of the church in England.

The short reign (1547-1553) of Henry VIII's son, Edward VI, took England further down the road of Protestantism. Significant in his reign was the publication of the first edition of the Book of Common Prayer (1549), which became the standard guide for worship in the reign of Elizabeth. Its simple but elegant language inspired many poets during the period, including William Shakespeare, whose "Sonnet 116" applies language from the marriage service to friendship: "Let me not to the marriage of true minds / Admit impediments" (1-2). Mary, Edward's half sister, attempted to return the nation to Catholicism, but her death after a very brief reign (1553-1558) allowed for the reinstatement of Protestantism as the official religion of England under Elizabeth I.

The long reign (1558-1603) of Elizabeth tested the queen's resolve to follow what she saw as her father Henry VIII's middle path between Catholicism and

extreme Protestantism. As if to anatomize the situation, John Donne, writing in the 1590s, provided a serious yet witty examination of competing religious creeds in his "Satire 3," which compares the belief systems of Catholicism, Calvinism, and the Church of England through a conceit (an extended metaphor) that personifies each religion as a different mistress. The last years of Elizabeth's reign witnessed other important developments, including the execution of Mary Queen of Scots in 1587 for her role in the Catholic conspiracy, known as the Babington Plot, to replace Elizabeth on the throne. During the 1580s, England was beginning to realize its destiny as a world naval power; as a result, poets frequently used themes and metaphors related to voyages and exploration in their poems. In her role as the unmarried "virgin queen," Elizabeth received extravagant praise from poets, including Edmund Spenser, who titled his epic *The Fairie Queene* in honor of her.

During Elizabeth's reign, a new model of the cosmos was introduced, in which planets were theorized to revolve around the sun, although the older Ptolemaic system, which placed the earth at the center of the universe, was still the dominant belief in the popular mind. By the end of the century, astrology—with its concern to explain human destiny by the power of the stars—was losing clout. We also see evidence of some interest in the serious study of magic and the occult. This pursuit was fostered by Renaissance Neoplatonism, which claimed that the mystical properties of the natural world could be manipulated by a practitioner with an educated imagination. We can see a treatment of this idea in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (c. 1611).

Having no heir, Elizabeth was succeeded by James VI of Scotland, who became James I of England in 1603, the first of the Stuart monarchs. He alienated Catholics by the inconsistency of his policy towards them, and was thus held partly responsible for provoking the Gunpowder Plot, a scheme to blow up the Houses of Parliament (and the King with them) in 1605. The conspiracy came to nothing, but it intensified public hatred of Catholics and made the great majority of English people deeply suspicious of any future partiality (or apparent partiality) shown to Catholics by government or religious authorities.

The son of James I, Charles I (1625-1649), had a contentious relationship with the Puritan-dominated parliament. In the 1640s, civil war broke out between the royalist forces of the king (the Cavaliers) and the parliamentary army (nicknamed “Roundheads”). The Roundheads prevailed and in 1649 executed the king as a traitor to his own people, seven years after the theaters were closed in accord with the Puritan idea that they were sites of immorality.

After the execution of the king, the leaders of the victorious Republican forces—preeminent among whom was the general of the parliamentary army, Oliver Cromwell—formed the Commonwealth government. One of the first actions undertaken by Cromwell was an invasion of Ireland, which was a military success for England. His return from the conquest was the occasion for what is perhaps the greatest political poem in English, Andrew Marvell’s “An Horatian Ode upon Cromwell’s Return from Ireland.” Marvell expresses admiration for both Cromwell and for Charles I, whose execution is described briefly but memorably: “but bow’d his comely head/ Down, as upon a bed” (63-64). Cromwell became the Lord Protector (chief of state), but his death in 1658 opened the way for the restoration of King Charles II to the throne in 1660.

The date of 1660 is an appropriate end-point for the Renaissance period in England. The reformation of Henry VIII, informed to a great extent by humanism, made possible a wide range of political and religious settlements for the nation. The monarchy was restored, but with significant limitations that prohibited absolutism. At the same time, the literary culture fostered by the Renaissance had, in several important ways, run its course. The Puritan closing of the theaters, for example, had put the drama on hold for nearly 20 years. When plays came to be written again, they were quite different from the blank-verse tragedies and romantic comedies of the earlier age.

THE LITERATURE OF THE RENAISSANCE IN CONTEXT

The educational program of the humanists, with its focus on linguistic and rhetorical facility, was intended to produce men qualified for public service. Such a

program also had the effect of fostering poetic skills. Thus, a high percentage of politically prominent men in this age were also poets. It therefore becomes especially helpful to divide the larger Renaissance period into several shorter periods, each with the title of a political regime: the Early Tudor Period (1485-1558); the Elizabethan Period (1558-1603); the Jacobean Period (1603-1625); the Caroline Period (1625-1649); and the Interregnum (1649-1660).

THE EARLY TUDOR PERIOD

The most distinguished poet of the first quarter of the sixteenth century was John Skelton, humanist and courtier. Skelton’s style was so unique and widely imitated that “Skeltonics” was introduced as a term to describe verse that followed his style of short lines, irregular meter, and unusual stress patterns. Thomas Wyatt the Elder (1503-1542), another courtier poet, served Henry VIII as a diplomat, but is best known for his adaptations of the poetry of Francesco Petrarca (known more commonly as Petrarch). Wyatt’s “The long love that in my thought doth harbor” is a sonnet based on a Petrarchan original, in which the speaker unashamedly speaks of his desire for an unnamed woman. Wyatt’s friend Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (1517-1547) was also a translator and adapter of Petrarch. He titled his version of the same sonnet “Love, that doth reign and live within my thought.” However, while Wyatt used the Italian form (rhyming *abbaabbacdcdee*), Surrey employed, for the first time in English, what came to be known as the English or Shakespearean sonnet (*abab cdcd efef gg*). The publication of many of Surrey’s and Wyatt’s adaptations in *Songs and Sonnets* (1557), otherwise known as *Tottel’s Miscellany*, made Italian love conventions and poetic models available to the next generation of English poets, who would work from these models to produce some of the most memorable poetry of the English Renaissance.

Another influential translation during this period (1550s) was that by Thomas Hoby (1530-1566) of *The Courtier*, originally written by Baldassare Castiglione. This work, in the form of a dialogue between Italian aristocrats, gives instruction on how to be a courtier, especially by exhibiting graceful behavior—an ideal cultivated in the English tradition of courtly poetry.

THE ELIZABETHAN PERIOD

Philip Sidney, who lived through the middle of the Elizabethan period, seems to have been Castiglione's ideal courtier come to life. A man of action as well as a poet and an intellectual, he died fighting for the Protestant cause in the Netherlands in 1586 and was universally mourned. His *Astrophil and Stella* [*Star-Lover and Star*] is one of the finest sonnet sequences of the age.

Several other sonnet sequences appeared in the 1590s, including Samuel Daniel's *Delia* (1592) and Michael Drayton's *Idea's Mirror* (1594), which was later revised as *Idea* (1619). Sonnet 61 of *Idea*, which begins "Since there's no help, come, let us kiss and part" (1), comprises a memorable account of a dying love affair. Many of William Shakespeare's own sonnets differ from sonnets being written by other poets at the time largely because, instead of focusing on one man dealing with his unrequited desire for a woman, they feature two men talking about love. After 1600 the sonnet sequence went almost completely out of fashion with the exception of Mary Sidney Wroth's *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* (*All-Loving to Lover of Two*), published in 1621. The niece of Philip Sidney, Wroth uses Petrarchan conventions to chart the emotions of a female speaker vexed by an unfaithful lover.

Moving to Edmund Spenser (1552-1599), we reach the major Elizabethan poetic achievement outside of drama. Spenser experimented with a remarkable range of genres and verse forms. His works include *The Shepheardes Calender*, a pastoral; *Epithalamion*, a celebration of a wedding; and a sonnet sequence, *Amoretti*, which employs his own variation on the sonnet form, rhyming *ababbcbccddcc*. For *The Fairie Queene*, he invented the stanza that was later named after him: nine lines rhyming *ababbcbcc*, with the last line having six iambic feet instead of five. This allegory, in which each book celebrates a moral virtue, has an Arthurian setting, looking back to the Middle Ages, and uses consciously antique language in imitation of Chaucer; but it joins these deliberate archaisms with Spenser's "modern" concerns with Neoplatonism and militant Protestantism.

There are two other major verse forms that were prominent during the Elizabethan era, one large and one small. This was the moment when blank verse came

of age, especially in the hands of Christopher Marlowe. It was to prove an infinitely powerful and flexible instrument for plays of all sorts: romantic comedies, comical satires, histories, tragedies, tragicomedies. On a less exalted level, we need to notice lyrics that were written to be set to music, like the airs of Thomas Campion, composer and poet. His song "My sweetest Lesbia" (1601) is an invitation to love before "we sleep one ever-during night" (1). It is a specimen of the *carpe diem* (Latin for "seize the day") poem, a frequent Renaissance type.

THE JACOBAN PERIOD

Songs for individual voices continued to be important in the reign of King James (called "Jacobean" from the Latin for "James"), as can be seen in the first lines of Ben Jonson's "Celia's Song (2)": "Drink to me only with thine eyes, / And I will pledge with mine" (1-2). Lyrics suitable for singing by several voices, called madrigals, were popular in both the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods.

Ben Jonson's skill also elevated the epigram to a prominent status. He devoted a section of his 1616 collected *Works* to the form. Many of the poems in this section fit the narrow definition of the traditional epigram: a poem characterized by compressed form, witty language, and satiric commentary. An example is "On Gut." But Jonson has an elastic conception of epigram; he includes under the heading some epitaphs and a verse epistle, "Inviting a Friend to Supper."

In "To Penshurst," Jonson also produced a fine specimen of the country-house poem, which celebrates the virtues of a person or family by praising his/her/their estate. In this case, Penshurst, the estate of Robert Sidney, the brother of Sir Philip Sidney, is described as a center of hospitality where all are welcome. At about the same time, Aemilia Lanyer composed "The Description of Cooke-ham" (1611), another version of the type, in which the author recalls her friendship with the countess of Cumberland at the countess's estate of Cooke-ham and laments the countess's departure.

METAPHYSICAL POETRY

The term "metaphysical," as applied to John Donne and certain of his followers, was coined by Dr. Samuel Johnson long after their day. Writing of Abraham Cowley

(1618-1687), Johnson, in his *Lives of the Poets* (1779), commented:

The metaphysical poets were men of learning, and to show their learning was their whole endeavor; but, unluckily resolving to show it in rhyme, instead of writing poetry they only wrote verses, and very often such verses as stood the trial of the finger better than of the ear; for the modulation was so imperfect that they were only found to be verses by counting the syllables. (Johnson 18-19)

Although mainly negative in his comments, Johnson did grudgingly give the metaphysical school some credit: “if they frequently threw away their wit upon false conceits, they likewise sometimes struck out unexpected truth” (21). Johnson clearly did not like the unusual comparisons that he deemed to be the hallmark of this kind of poetry. In the twentieth century, metaphysical poetry came to be reevaluated and is now regarded much more highly. According to one modern commentator, the metaphysical poem is characterized by concentrated expression, very much like that of an epigram; the use of conceits, especially comparisons of things that are mostly unlike with only small points of likeness; the insistence that readers follow an explication or argument that is developed through the conceit(s); and often a strong sense of drama (Gardner 17-23). One example from John Donne is “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning,” in which the speaker’s parting from his beloved is compared to the movement of one leg away from the other on a drawing compass.

The metaphysical poetry of Donne inspired several followers throughout the remainder of the Renaissance. The next poet of importance in this tradition was George Herbert (1593-1633), who avoided the educated, sometimes obscure conceits of Donne, but is considered a metaphysical poet by his startling homely comparisons that explore and dramatize his relationship with Christ. Thomas Carew (1595-1640) can be classified as a metaphysical poet, partly on the basis of his appreciation of Donne in “An Elegy upon the Death of the Dean of Paul’s, Dr. John Donne,” which contains

the famous couplet, “*Here lies a king, that ruled as he thought fit / The universal monarchy of wit*” (95-96).

Several other poets of the latter part of the Renaissance period display more or less metaphysical features. Richard Crashaw (c. 1613-1649), made use of the extravagant images and controlled wildness that critics associate with the baroque style. A professed follower of Herbert, Henry Vaughan (1621-1695) published a collection of religious poems that consciously echo many of Herbert’s themes and titles. Vaughan’s most celebrated poem, “The World” (1650), begins with a mystical image of eternity: “I saw eternity the other night, / Like a great ring of pure and endless light, / All calm as it was bright” (1-3). In this poem, Vaughan uses Neoplatonic images of rings and circles to demonstrate how souls return to their source through a process reminiscent of recycling. Vaughan, who practiced medicine in his later years, seems to have absorbed these images of circularity at least partly from William Harvey, a physician who announced his discovery of the circulation of the blood in 1628.

Andrew Marvell also contributed to the body of metaphysical poetry with works like “To His Coy Mistress” (1650-1652), in which the speaker issues what is in some ways a fairly conventional *carpe diem* invitation to a reluctant lady to engage in love before it is too late. However, the emphasis is not on the delights they could enjoy but on unsettling images of the death and decay that await them at the end of their lives. Abraham Cowley (1618-1687), whose works prompted Dr. Johnson’s criticisms of the metaphysical style, is a late exemplar. In “The Spring” (1647), Cowley, through his conceits, conveys the idea that the speaker’s mistress actually enables nature’s rebirth.

THE CAROLINE PERIOD

This period, beginning in 1625, is called after the Latin for Charles (Carolus), the king’s name.

Prose works of interest published at this time include *Religio Medici* (*The Religion of a Physician*, 1642) by Sir Thomas Browne. A doctor, Browne took pleasure, like the metaphysical poets, in entertaining contradictory attitudes regarding certain subjects (in this case, religion), in exercising a unique type of curious

knowledge, and in creating unusual conceits. A particularly important body of prose composed during this period and throughout the Restoration is the series of pamphlets written by John Milton on political and religious issues from a radical Puritan point of view. These tracts give us a remarkably full look at the development of ideas that became crucial in Milton's major poems, especially *Paradise Lost*.

In the midst of the turmoil caused by the English Civil War, Milton published his *Poems* (1645), a comprehensive collection of his early work. Here we find tremendous poetic diversity. In the companion poems "L'Allegro" [The Cheerful Person] and "Il Penseroso" [The Thoughtful Person], written in iambic tetrameter couplets with specific attention given to musical effects, two equally valid approaches to life are explored. The collection also contains sonnets in the Italian form on a variety of topics, as well as the lengthy poem "Lycidas," a pastoral elegy lamenting the death of a fellow poet but taking the opportunity to rail in good Puritan fashion against the corrupt clergy of the English church.

THE CAVALIER POETS

The term "Cavaliers" (derived from the Italian word for horseman or knight) was applied to the supporters of King Charles during the Civil War; and the Cavalier poets, in their lyrics, reflected the grace, wit, and gallantry associated with the court party. They were strongly influenced by Ben Jonson's concise and idiomatic language. Robert Herrick (1591-1634) is perhaps the most important Cavalier poet. Like Jonson, he celebrates the pleasant aspects of life, but focuses more than Jonson on rural sports and rituals—the kinds of "superstitious" traditions so strenuously opposed by the Puritans. Herrick's "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" is probably the most well-known *carpe diem* lyric; it begins:

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
Old time is still [always] a-flying;
And this same flower that blooms today,
Tomorrow will be dying. (1-4)

Although it does urge young people ("virgins" may possibly refer to either sex) to seek pleasure without

delay, this poem is not as darkly preoccupied with death and decay as Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress," another work in the same genre.

The compression of wit found in Cavalier poetry is often taken as a sign of its link with Donne and the metaphysical poets. Three Cavalier poets who share in this tradition are Richard Carew, John Suckling, and Richard Lovelace. Suckling (1609-1641) wrote primarily about love, and his poetry exhibits a witty cynicism, seen in such works as "A Ballad upon a Wedding," which focuses on the sexuality of the bride and groom as well as of the speaker. Lovelace (1618-1657), who fought for the king and was imprisoned several times for his royalist sympathies, gives voice to courtly values in "To Lucasta, Going to the Wars": "I could not love thee, dear, so much, / Loved I not honor more" (1-2).

THE INTERREGNUM

The Interregnum (Latin for "between the reigns") is actually comprised of two shorter periods, the Commonwealth (1649-1653) and the Protectorate (1653-1660). During this time, many of the metaphysical poems—including those by Marvell, Crashaw, and Vaughan—were composed.

It is important to point out what was *not* written in this period that *might have been written*. John Milton, who had been contemplating his great epic for some time, was effectively prevented from writing poetry by his service as Latin secretary for the government (carrying on correspondence with other governments in Latin, the European language of diplomacy) throughout the Interregnum. At the restoration of Charles II, Milton, as one of the chief regicides, was imprisoned and fined, but finally released; it is thought that Marvell worked behind the scenes to secure his freedom.

Although three of Milton's major works were published after the Restoration in 1660, they all belong certainly to the Renaissance period. *Paradise Lost* (1667) represents the culmination of the epic tradition that had begun with the classical poets Homer and Virgil and reached its previous high point in Spenser's *Fairie Queene*. Milton, with intimate knowledge of this tradition, calls on it in *Paradise Lost* only to dismiss its concerns with honor, emulation, and military prowess as

unworthy. In fact, he makes these the primary concerns of Satan and the fallen angels. He draws on his personal experience with politics to inform the debate in Hell (Book 2) and with his three wives to construct scenes of domestic give-and-take between Adam and Eve, his humble protagonists. Never far from the center of the poem is an awareness of his blindness (as in the prologues of Books 1, 3, and 7). In other words, the work is preeminently a product of the imagination educated in humanism at the same time that it is radically personal and original. In "The Verse," a short defense of his prosody that prefaces the reissue of *Paradise Lost* in 1668, Milton describes the heroic couplets of much Restoration poetry as "*the Invention of a barbarous Age*." He links his own "English Heroic Verse without Rime" (blank verse) with "*our best English Tragedies*," probably those of Shakespeare. Having witnessed the failure of his cherished Republican cause and the reinstitution of kings and bishops, Milton imagines himself as engaging in a restoration of his own. He proudly asserts that his "*neglect then of Rime so little is to be taken for a defect, though it may seem so perhaps to vulgar Readers, that it rather is to be esteem'd an example set, the first in English, of ancient liberty recover'd to Heroic Poem from the troublesom and modern bondage of Rimeing*" (352). Although unable to effect the political liberation of the English people, Milton, through his verse, can restore the true English way of expressing heroism—no trifling achievement.

It is fitting to end this survey of Renaissance poetry with Milton, in whose career so many of the poetic traditions of the age are summed up. He experimented with and transformed a great number of genres. His technical mastery of verse was unsurpassed, as was his knowledge of the Bible and of classical and modern

literature. Perhaps most importantly, he entered into the public life of his world in true humanistic fashion and absorbed that world into his poetry.

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Lewis Walker is Professor of English at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, where he teaches graduate and undergraduate courses on Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton. His interests include the literary relationships among major English authors and classical influences on English literature.

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