



Second Edition

# English Poetry of the Sixteenth Century

Gary Waller



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Longman Literature in English Series

**General Editors: David Carroll and Michael Wheeler**  
**Lancaster University**

For a complete list of titles see pages viii–ix

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Second Edition

Gary Waller

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## Editors' Preface

The multi-volume Longman Literature in English Series provides students of literature with a critical introduction to the major genres in their historical and cultural context. Each volume gives a coherent account of a clearly defined area, and the series, when complete, will offer a practical and comprehensive guide to literature written in English from Anglo-Saxon times to the present. The aim of the series as a whole is to show that the most valuable and stimulating approach to the study of literature is that based upon an awareness of the relations between literary forms and their historical contexts. Thus the areas covered by most of the separate volumes are defined by period and genre. Each volume offers new and informed ways of reading literary works, and provides guidance for further reading in an extensive reference section.

In recent years, the nature of English studies has been questioned in a number of increasingly radical ways. The very terms employed to define a series of this kind – period, genre, history, context, canon – have become the focus of extensive critical debate, which has necessarily influenced in varying degrees the successive volumes published since 1985. But however fierce the debate, it rages around the traditional terms and concepts.

As well as studies on all periods of English and American literature, the series includes books on criticism and literary theory, and on the intellectual and cultural context. A comprehensive series of this kind must of course include other literatures written in English, and therefore a group of volumes deals with Irish and Scottish literature, and the literatures of India, Africa, the Caribbean, Australia and Canada. The forty-seven volumes of the series cover the following areas: Pre-Renaissance English Literature, English Poetry, English Drama, English Fiction, English Prose, Criticism and Literary Theory, Intellectual and Cultural Context, American Literature, Other Literatures in English.

David Carroll  
Michael Wheeler



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Longman Literature in English Series  
**General Editors: David Carroll and Michael Wheeler**  
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- \* *Already published*

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## Author's Preface to the Second Edition

Whether historians write history or critics criticism (even though never entirely in the ways they choose), or whether they are in some sense written by their subjects, will never be proved by a single volume, but the process by which this volume of the Longman Literature in English series, both in its first edition and in this substantial rewriting, has been written certainly supports what it tries to exemplify – that the disruptive and contradictory structures that erupt within writing are the product of the interactions of many discourses, not merely the product of the will of its 'author'. But as the scriptor of this study, I recognize many intellectual debts and personal obligations. When in 1979 Michael Wheeler, one of the General Editors of the series, originally asked me to undertake the volume, I had in process a study of the power of the Court over the poetry of the period. Much of that had grown from earlier work on the Sidney Circle, and especially from two studies of the Countess of Pembroke which convinced me (as usual, after they were published) that we needed to rethink our way of reading the period and its poetry. In order to let some of the answers to the questions that were arising find me, I had at times to stop reading sixteenth-century poetry, my ostensible subject, until I could find fit words by which it could speak through me. The preparation of the second edition has involved a not dissimilar process, not least because the questions we ask now are, inevitably, changing.

My specific debts (authors may not exist in quite the ways we once thought, but readers and friends certainly do) are many, and only the most important can be acknowledged here. I recall that as I read over the final stages of the first edition, I found myself drawn back to C. S. Lewis's *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* and discovered myself agreeing, though from startlingly different perspectives, with many of his judgements: I commenced my teaching career in the rooms in which he had once taught at Magdalene College, Cambridge, and so my acknowledgement is a doubly appropriate one. His successors in the Chair of Medieval and Renaissance Literature, the late J. A. W. Bennett and John Stevens, both helped me greatly in those early days,

and later, as did other teachers and mentors, including Peter Dane, Mike Doyle, L. C. Knights, and the late J. C. Reid. In writing the original edition, I learnt much from scholars such as Catherine Belsey, the late Diane Bornstein, Elizabeth Bieman, Jonathan Dollimore, Antony Easthope, Ian Donaldson, A. C. Hamilton, S. K. Heninger Jr, Bob Hodge, Ann Rosalind Jones, Roger Kuin, Richard Lanham, Ken Larsen, Jacqueline Miller, Louis A. Montrose, J. C. A. Rathmell, Jerry Rubio, William Sessions, Bernard Sharratt, Alan Sinfield, Peter Stallybrass and Frank Whigham. The second edition has benefited from the continued help of many of these, and especially from Curt Bright, Richard Dutton, Peggy Knapp, Mary Ellen Lamb, Naomi Miller, Janel Mueller, Josephine Roberts, Mary Beth Rose, Ann Shaver, Suzanne Woods, and many members of the congenial Spenser and Sidney groups at Kalamazoo, who'll know whom I mean and why. Among the students to whom in part this book is dedicated and with whom it was to a large extent written (in some cases giving me reason to break the Eighth Commandment) are: Andrew Brown, Andrea Clough, Craig Dionne, Margaret McLaren, Stacia Nagel, Michele Osherow and Susan Rudy Dorscht (who, for the first edition, served as my research assistant). Kathleen McCormick, my colleague and collaborator on other projects as well as an acute reader and 'onlie begetter' of some parts of this, is due especial thanks, not least for Philip. My colleagues at the University of Hartford bear some responsibility for the speed with which this second edition was finished. Humphrey Tonkin, himself no mean friend of sixteenth-century poetry, and Jonathan Lawson, a gambler in the rural delights of the eighteenth century, deserve special thanks. I also thank Alan Hadad, Joel Kagan and Lynne Kelly. Michael Wheeler encouraged me by mixing indulgence and firmness.

Research for the first edition of this book was carried out over nearly ten years, with the help of research grants from the Canada Council, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, and short-term grants from Dalhousie and Wilfrid Laurier Universities. Parts of the second edition took shape in Cambridge in 1988, with the help of a fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, and in the congenial surroundings of the Newberry Library, Chicago, where I held a short-term fellowship in 1990-91. I wish to thank the Humanities Research Centre at the Australian National University for a fellowship in 1979 that helped me think through some of the beginnings of the first edition of the book.

Parts of this volume have appeared, in different form, as follows: portions of Chapter 1 in the *Dalhousie Review* (1981) and *Assays* (1982), different parts of the material on Philip and Robert Sidney, Raleigh and Shakespeare in *Short Fiction: Critical Views*, and *Poetry: Critical Views*, both published by Salem Press (1981 and 1982, respectively); much of

the account of *Astrophil and Stella* in the special Sidney issue of *Studies In the Literary Imagination* (1982), edited by William A. Sessions. Some of the material on the Sidney Circle appeared first in *The Triumph of Death and Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke*, published by the University of Salzburg (1977, 1979); that on Petrarchism in Chapter 3 in *Sir Philip Sidney and the Interpretation of Renaissance Culture*, edited by Gary F. Waller and Michael D. Moore (Croom Helm, 1984), and parts of the new chapter on women's poetry in *Silent But for the Word*, edited by Margaret P. Hannay (Kent State University Press, 1985), in *Studies in Philology* (1991), *Reading Mary Wroth*, co-edited with Naomi J. Miller (University of Tennessee Press, 1991), and *The Sidney Family Romance: William Herbert, Mary Wroth and Gender Construction in Early Modern England* (Wayne State University Press, 1993). Throughout, ideas and occasional paragraphs have surfaced in comments and reviews in the *Sidney Newsletter*. In all cases, prior publication is acknowledged.

Nobody other than the author is responsible for the final product. But then, as some of my colleagues and friends say, nor am I, since, they say, it is discourse that creates us; we do not speak, we are spoken. Nonetheless, the world of scholarship is such that I will want to accept any praise for whatever stimulation this volume may produce in its readers, so I must accept all the blame for its shortcomings.

GFW  
Carnegie Mellon University  
December 1984

University of Hartford  
December 1992

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## List of Abbreviations

The following common abbreviations of scholarly journals and series etc., have been used in this study:

<i>ADE Bulletin</i>	Association of Departments of English Bulletin
<i>AUMLA</i>	Australasian Universities Modern Languages Association
<i>CQ</i>	Critical Quarterly
<i>EETS</i>	Early English Texts Society
<i>ELH</i>	English Literary History
<i>ELN</i>	English Language Notes
<i>ELR</i>	English Literary Renaissance
<i>ES</i>	English Studies
<i>HLQ</i>	Huntingdon Library Quarterly
<i>HMC</i>	Historical Manuscripts Commission
<i>JEGP</i>	Journal of English and Germanic Philosophy
<i>JMRS</i>	Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies
<i>JWCI</i>	Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes
<i>KR</i>	Kenyon Review
<i>MLN</i>	Modern Language Notes
<i>MLQ</i>	Modern Languages Quarterly
<i>MLR</i>	Modern Language Review
<i>NLH</i>	New Literary History
<i>OLR</i>	Oxford Literary Review
<i>PMLA</i>	Publications of the Modern Languages Association
<i>PQ</i>	Philological Quarterly
<i>RenQ</i>	Renaissance Quarterly
<i>Ren and Ref</i>	Renaissance and Reformation
<i>RES</i>	Review of English Studies
<i>SEL</i>	Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900
<i>SLitI</i>	Studies in the Literary Imagination
<i>SN</i>	Shakespeare Newsletter
<i>SNew</i>	Sidney Newsletter
<i>SP</i>	Studies in Philosophy

<i>SpN</i>	Spenser Newsletter
<i>SRen</i>	Studies in the Renaissance
<i>TSLL</i>	Texas Studies in Language and Literature
<i>UTQ</i>	University of Toronto Quarterly
<i>YES</i>	Yearbook of English Studies

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This book is dedicated with gratitude to my students at Magdalene, Auckland, Dalhousie, Wilfrid Laurier, Carnegie Mellon and Hartford. The first edition was especially for Michael and Andrew; the second edition is, in addition, especially for Katie and Philip.



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## Chapter 1

# Reading the Poetry of the Sixteenth Century

## Introduction

When a modern student, even a general reader, looks at a volume of sixteenth-century poetry, what is likely to be his or her impression? When I first started teaching the poetry of Wyatt and Sidney, even Shakespeare and Donne, there was a sense of their remoteness from most concerns we have in the twentieth century. Except as a kind of nostalgia, what do delicate love sonnets, songs with refrains like 'hey nonny nonny no', and seemingly artificial, conventional poems dealing with refined upper-class manners and the erotic anguish of long-dead high-born gentlemen (I mark the gender deliberately) have to say to us? Even if one were interested in the history of the time – with its stirring mixture of battles, beheadings, rebellions, and religious controversies – much of the poetry may seem pale and lifeless, or else crudely versified propaganda, monuments to dead ideas, especially to an unswerving sexism. Shakespeare and Donne are, perhaps, exceptions: as F. R. Leavis put it for us, only when we reach Donne after a century of dull poetry, can we 'read on as we read the living'.<sup>1</sup>

Today, all this has changed. The study of sixteenth-century poetry has become one of the most interesting fields in English literature. In part, it is because we have realized just how similar, in significant ways, our age is to the sixteenth century or what we now tend to call, significantly, the 'early modern' period. Despite real differences in the social, cultural, and ideological practices of the two ages in such issues as class, gender, and race or ethnicity, we seem to face either similar dilemmas and obsessions or else be able to trace the history of our dilemmas and obsessions to that period. In part this is because of a greater liveliness in the field of literary and cultural criticism in general. In the past two decades, we have asked different questions of our literature and even begun to question the nature and status of 'literature' altogether. This introduction to sixteenth-century poetry is written in the belief that the great advances in our understanding

of the sixteenth century and its poetry – the work on canon, sources, traditions, conventions, rhetoric and poetics of the past century, all of which has given us access to the poems of the sixteenth century – will be wasted unless they are caught up into this new excitement about the ways we read literary and related texts. In order to make sixteenth-century poetry ours, to allow us to read it, to return to Leavis's words, not 'as students or as connoisseurs of anthology-pieces', but 'as we read the living', we must let it speak within the world we, its readers, inhabit.<sup>2</sup> By beginning with what appear to be urgent questions for us, we let the poems speak to us not only of our history but also of our present and of our possible futures.

Let me give one example – a poem to which I shall return in Chapter 4. Some years ago, some of my students were asked to read Sir Thomas Wyatt's best-known poem:

They flee from me that sometime did me seek  
With naked foot stalking in my chamber.  
I have seen them gentle, tame, and meek  
That now are wild and do not remember  
That sometime they put themselves in danger  
To take bread at my hand; and now they range  
Busily seeking with a continual change.

Thanked be fortune it hath been otherwise  
Twenty times better, but once in special  
In thin array after a pleasant guise,  
When her loose gown from her shoulders did fall  
And she me caught in her arms long and small,  
Therewithal sweetly did me kiss,  
And softly said, 'Dear heart, how like you this?'

It was no dream; I lay broad waking.  
But all is turned through my gentleness  
Into a strange fashion of forsaking.  
And I have leave to go of her goodness,  
And she also to use newfangledness.  
But since that I so kindly am served  
I would fain know what she hath deserved.

The students were asked to write one- or two-page 'response statements' to the poem in which they described in as much detail as possible the initial effect of the text upon them – whether it was confusion, suspense, interest, indignation or whatever. Then they were asked to try to account for why reading the poem had that effect. First, what was there

in the repertoire of the text (its subject-matter, language, conventions, organization, themes, the gaps or indeterminacies which the reader has to fill in, and what is perhaps unstated but assumed by the writer of the poem and perhaps many of his original audiences)? Second, what was there in the repertoire of the reader that had contributed to that reading? What assumptions about subject matter, subjectivity, poetry, gender roles, class behaviour, was the reader bringing to his or her encounter with the text? How, in the act of reading, had reader and text co-operated? The results were fascinating. Most of the men in the class felt immediate identification with the wounded male ego that is seemingly articulated in the poem: he has been rejected by a woman with whom he has unexpectedly fallen in love only to be told by her that it was all enjoyable but superficial flirtation. Most of the women in the class were amusedly derisive of this attitude: what, they said, about the woman's viewpoint? In such a society, and within such a philosophy of love, both so male-centred, why should a woman not get what she could out of the game of sex? Girls just want to have fun. It should be added, perhaps, on a pedagogical note, that this course on sixteenth-century poetry traditionally culminates in a banquet using Elizabethan recipes prepared by the students themselves and accompanied by music and poetry readings. If we want the sixteenth-century poets to come alive, what better way than to combine poetry, music, and food!

More seriously, the students in the course were being introduced to a method of reading that this study will employ. The intention was to create strong readers of the poetry who would, as self-analytically as possible, bring their own most intense, often apparently very personal, questions to bear on their reading of Wyatt, or Sidney, or Shakespeare, or Donne. But, of course, they were asked to do more. As a means of intensifying their readings of Wyatt's poem, they were asked to read Roland Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse*, a remarkable anatomy of desire by a modern philosopher that seemed to many of the students, at this initial stage at least, to reflect uncannily on both the poetry they were reading and their own experiences. Barthes describes the lover, like the one in Wyatt's poem, remembering a love scene over and over 'in order to be unhappy/happy – not in order to understand'; and writes of how 'the ego discourses only when it is hurt'.<sup>3</sup> Barthes gave these student readers a powerful, contemporary vocabulary with which to articulate their questions about the text. He allowed them, too, to start to discover that his (and their) responses were not purely 'subjective', or 'personal', but rather constructed within a repertoire of common late-twentieth-century assumptions about love, desire, gender and sexuality. Readings, they were starting to learn, are never entirely 'personal' or 'subjective'.

The aim of this study is to introduce the poetry of the sixteenth

century so that such confrontations, or dialogues – what I like to call ‘polylogues’ since many, often contradictory, voices are involved – can occur between today’s readers and the texts that come to us from the sixteenth century. We need to realize that both texts and readers have vital parts to play in producing lively, informative, effective (and affective) readings. In a sense, the practice of ‘polylogue’ is not new: although without acknowledging (or perhaps even knowing) it, every age reads the poetry and other texts that come down to it from the past through its own concerns. If we look back a little further than our own time and study the history of the reception of sixteenth-century poetry, we can see how our understanding of it, and especially of the poems written in the two decades before 1600, has undergone quite distinct changes, especially over the past century. In 1861, Francis Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury* established what became the basis for the modern canon of Elizabethan poetry. It provided a set of criteria for evaluating the poetry that was largely accepted for more than a century. It assumed that the best poetry had an immediacy that made it easily accessible to the educated reader. While the long, public poems of the period – *A Mirror for Magistrates*, Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, Harington’s translation of Ariosto – clearly required some kind of historical understanding, Palgrave’s selection suggested that the Elizabethan lyric poems could be immediately perceived as ‘treasures which might lead us in higher and healthier ways than those of the world’.<sup>4</sup> They provided us with glimpses of an ideal order of love or harmony that the poets, all supposedly infatuated with the glories and buoyancy of the Elizabethan Age, celebrated in song just as they did in the pleasures, dances, and pageants of their lives at the Court. Even in modern times (in this case in the middle of the nineteenth century) we could have direct access to this magical world. Such poems were immediate in their appeal, and dealt directly with supposedly universal human experiences.

Such a reading has been increasingly questioned in our century, even though it underlies the most comprehensive anthology of the period’s poetry, E. K. Chambers’s *Oxford Book of Sixteenth-Century Verse* (1932). Eliot’s championing of the highly intellectual ‘Metaphysical’ as opposed to the Elizabethan poets; Winters’s construction of a native plain-style tradition that existed alongside the dominant ‘golden’ or ‘aureate’ court lyric in the sixteenth century; Lewis’s division of the century’s poetry into drab and golden (terms which he ingenuously asserted were not qualitative but descriptive); the articulation of the subtlety and richness of the Elizabethan poets’ rhetorical training by such scholars as Lanham and Tuve – all these developments have made the *Golden Treasury* model of Elizabethan poetry less acceptable. Refinements upon Winters’s approach have been especially influential, such as Peterson’s influence of medieval rhetoric on both the plain and eloquent style

and of the religious tradition of plain statement, Hunter's discussion of the division in the 1570s between moralistic, patriotic poems and courtly aestheticism, Inglis's or John Williams's reassertions of Winters's stress on the 'plain', moral-reflective, style and the claim that courtly Petrarchism is a deviation from the main English tradition. Valuable work, too, has been done on the canon of such poets as Wyatt, Googe, and Mary and Robert Sidney; Spenser has been rescued from disfavour (and even encyclopedized!) and most recently, the canon has been expanded by a significant amount of poetry written by women. As matters stand now, the reader of sixteenth-century poetry can find diverse approaches, all of which show that it offers very different kinds of interest. Nearly a century and a half after Palgrave, the dominant 'canon' of sixteenth-century poetry does not consist only of the golden lyrics and delicate songs of which he approved.<sup>5</sup>

There is one aspect of the *Golden Treasury's* praise, however, which remained curiously untouched in the dominant evaluations of sixteenth-century poetry well into the 1980s, and indeed is still with us. Palgrave praised the Elizabethan poets for their ability to unify a variety of experience, asserting that their special excellence lay rather in the whole than in the parts, in their creation of unity, harmony and coherence. Most modern criticism – including the 'New Criticism', as well as 'Historicist' approaches that relate texts to their historical background – took for granted that a literary text is a unified, organic creation which 'reflects' or 'expresses' its author's views or vision, or the dominant philosophical assumptions of its age. What Tillyard termed the 'Elizabethan World Picture' – a philosophical conglomerate, supposedly believed by all Elizabethans, that the universe was a divinely created organism, characterized by unity, harmony and hierarchy – was widely seen as reflected in the age's poetry. In the last two decades, however (and if one traces its philosophical sources, at least as far back as Marx, Nietzsche and Freud) a new paradigm has arisen in our understanding of many of the human sciences, one that has drastically affected the way we read literary and related texts. Louis Althusser once suggested that our age would be looked back to as one in which the most fundamental human activities – perceiving, reading, writing – were radically revalued.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps not since the late eighteenth century have the roles and status of interpretation, history, reading and writing been put so fiercely and fundamentally into question. It is now difficult to approach literary history or criticism, the teaching of language, literature, culture – even the most fundamental human traits of perception and description – without being aware of radically different questions and to consider, however tentatively, new and disturbing answers.

It was not, however, until the late 1970s that such tremors started to

affect sixteenth-century studies. They were first seen in print in such studies as Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980), Goldberg's *Endlesse Worke* (1981), and Sinfield's *Literature in Protestant England* (1983), which indicated that some of the major philosophical and cultural changes that had started to reconstruct literary criticism generally were having some impact upon sixteenth-century studies. As Patterson put it in 1980, 'the theorists' have at last 'got into the Renaissance'.<sup>7</sup> What did she mean? The assumption that underlay most criticism before the 1980s was that meanings – or what are still widely termed a text's *themes* – were not only inherently 'in' the text, but that they were accessible to close, empirical attention to the text itself. In Britain, the influence of Leavis, Richards and others enshrined 'practical criticism' as the dominant mode of reading, and similar in many respects was the American New Criticism. The fundamental reading strategy of both – the means by which a work's supposed 'themes' were elucidated – was 'close reading', by means of which texts were supposed somehow to yield up their hidden meanings. Rather than acknowledging the constructed nature of meaning, such an approach tended to be objectivist, assuming that meanings were independent of the historical or cultural context of the reader or critic. In an obvious sense close reading underlies all approaches to literature: it is important to pay careful attention to one's interactions with the text, and to the questions and issues one finds oneself asking to explain those interactions. The assumption that meanings are 'in' a text has, in recent years, been increasingly seen as naïve empiricism, ignoring what a reader brings to the text and what wider cultural pressures were on a text when it was written. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, a close reading technique of a particularly intense kind was fashionable in deconstruction, an approach to reading whereby a literary text is subjected to a rigorous – indeed, some would say perverse – close reading. The term 'deconstruction' has recently been applied loosely to any reading that refuses to take a text's surface or preferred meaning for granted, but in its heyday, a deconstructive reading focused primarily on the duplicity of rhetoric and, in particular, the power of figural language to create the illusion of a self-contained meaning seemingly contained 'in' the text. Deconstruction's influence on readings of sixteenth-century poetry was spasmodic, and never as powerful as upon readings of Romantic poems by leading deconstructive critics like Harold Bloom and Geoffrey Hartman.

In the 1980s, both in discussions of the Renaissance and in literary theory generally, both traditional formalism and deconstruction were attacked by a variety of critical approaches that focused more on the historical and cultural construction of texts and their readings. Today's readers of the poetry of this period will therefore encounter the

methodological (and wider political) issues raised by New Historicism, Cultural Materialism and feminism.

All three have shown that a consideration of literary and related texts is inseparable from the locations and forms by which power and desire flow through society's dominant institutions, including the family, religion, and politics. Although much of the best current scholarship on the early modern period, including its poetry, is sufficiently eclectic to combine elements of all three so that to distinguish them may seem artificial, their different emphases are perhaps worthy of comment.

New Historicism, which was taking shape as the first edition of this book was written, has focused on texts as parts of a network of cultural forces, what Greenblatt terms 'a shared code, a set of interlocking tropes and similitudes that function not only as the objects but as the conditions of representations'. In the New Historicist view, a society is bound together, almost like a conspiracy within which individual texts and individual subjects alike are both imprisoned and legitimated. Like the various versions of 'old' Historicism – which it wants to supplant or supplement, although asking a wider range of questions, including many originating in the concerns of the present – New Historicism characteristically sees the past as 'other', and resists, not always successfully (or in my view, always wisely) the appropriation of earlier texts by those present concerns. It wants to put texts from the past back into their history. By contrast, Cultural Materialism has focused more on growing points and contradictions within a culture's ideological history, and so upon historical change: it endeavours to see texts as re-produced in *our* history rather than simply produced in their time of origination. Feminism, also characteristically reading the past as part of a project to change the future, has drawn our attention to the neglected and vital force of gender, characteristically arguing that gender assignments and relations between the sexes are 'a primary aspect of social organization', and therefore of the reading and writing of poetry. The most recent major anthologies of the period's poems, the revision of Chambers's collection, *The New Oxford Book of Sixteenth-Century Verse* (1991) and *The Penguin Book of Renaissance Verse* (1992) register the change. Both collections attempt to represent alternative, marginalized poetic voices; they include regional and women's poetry; they show how varied in political and theological outlook the poets were. The editors of the Penguin anthology, in particular, are aware of the revolution in criticism which has inevitably changed our ways of reading the period. Rather than presenting poems as 'timeless', they note that poems are 'social acts rather than isolated objects' and, responding to current critical debates, acknowledge that 'to recover the poetry of a past era is never simply a passive process; to recover is to become actively engaged, and to some extent to recreate'.<sup>8</sup>



I started this introduction talking about the fun of reading sixteenth-century poetry, of music, food and eager debate. And now, a few pages later, I am introducing readers to a somewhat abstract set of terms like 'deconstruction' and 'ideological', which might seem to take us very far from sitting back and simply enjoying Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* or Donne's 'The Canonization'. But in any field of knowledge, as we discover we need to express or explain new experiences, we need to discover, invent, or adapt new terminology. Literary criticism has been traditionally weak in developing adequate terminology, probably because of a genteel reluctance to move beyond 'appreciation' or to offend the 'general' reader. One result of that reluctance has been the marginalization of literary studies, in terms at least of intellectual rigour and sophistication, among the other human sciences like information sciences, political theory or philosophy. Recent developments in cultural studies, initially in Britain and increasingly in America, have often been more forthright in adapting terms from the new theory, and so provide us with precedents for reading poems in terms of questions raised by psychoanalysis, feminism or cultural materialism.

At this point, I want to discuss a key term which has become increasingly central to both literary and cultural studies, and which is important to our understanding of sixteenth-century poetry. It is 'ideology'. In this book, the term is being used not to mean a set of false or partial ideas which lie behind and determine the meanings of texts, but rather a complex of distinctive practices and social relations which are characteristic of any society and which are inscribed in its language and other material practices. Ideology applies to all the largely unconscious assumptions and acts by which men and women relate to their world; it is the system of images, attitudes, feelings, myths and gestures which are peculiar to a society, which the members who make up that society habitually take for granted. In any society, especially in one as obsessed with order and control as Elizabethan England, one of the functions of ideology is, as far as possible, to define and limit the linguistic and cultural practices by which members of that society function. If, as usually happens, a society likes to think of itself as harmonious, coherent, and consensual, then it is ideology that enables this to occur. It tries to suggest that the existing order of things is permanent, natural, universally acknowledged, embodying truths we would all agree with – and in so far as it persuades us that such 'truths' are *not* ideology (ideology, as one of my students indignantly put it, is something other societies have, not ours), then it is successful. It gives us seemingly coherent representations and explanations of our lives, in particular by giving us the seemingly natural language by which we describe and thus try to understand them. Thus ideology acts as a kind of social glue, binding us all together.

It is important to be clear about the domain of ideology as a term for analysis. The immediate connotations of the term are political in the sense that it points to the machinery, overt and implicit, by which states police and even create the allegiances and assumptions of their subjects, as in the propaganda exalting the image of Elizabeth as the 'Virgin Queen'. However, ideology has a much broader relevance: it is concerned with issues as diverse as aesthetics and sexual feelings, family patterns and, indeed, with any area of experience in which a society needs to order and explain its beliefs, institutions and practices to itself. The various 'new' historicisms and feminism have done much to show just how far the seemingly most ordinary practices carry ideological value and interrelate: the establishment of sexual and gender identities are, for instance, intimately bound up with broader issues of order, the 'natural', authority and hierarchy. The value of the term 'ideology' as an analytical tool lies in making us think about the significance of contemporary assumptions about the world, about the constructed nature of those assumptions, their interrelationships, potential contradictions and tensions.

How does ideology affect the writing and reading of poetry? The impact of ideology upon the writings of a particular society – or, for that matter on the conventions and strategies by which those writings are read – is no different from the way it operates upon any other cultural practice. In no case, in Macherey's words, does a writer manufacture the materials with which he or she works. On the contrary, the power of ideology is inscribed within a text as, and indeed before, it is written. We might imagine ideology as a powerful force hovering over us as we read a text; even as we read, it reminds us of what is apparently correct, commonsensical, or 'natural'. When a text is written, ideology works to make some things more natural to write; when a text is read, it works to direct language into conveying only those meanings reinforced by the dominant forces of our society.<sup>9</sup>

With much sixteenth-century poetry, the above argument will have obvious force. Clearly, some works, like *A Mirror for Magistrates* or *The Faerie Queene*, defined themselves very explicitly in relation to dominant Elizabethan beliefs. With such texts, it becomes our role to call the bluff of ideology, so to speak, and to point out how it structured, or rather constructed, the text. To do so, we should therefore not be concerned just with the explicit 'ideas' that are 'reflected' by a poem, but rather on how and by what means and with what distortions the text has been subjected to the power of ideology. A 'public' poem like *The Faerie Queene* is clearly vulnerable to the most obvious kinds of ideological pressure because it deals explicitly with sensitive political issues. But, as we shall see, the seemingly innocent court lyrics so admired by Palgrave are also sites of ceaseless ideological interrogations and pressure. In the

hands of a Champion, the lyric may seem lightweight entertainment; with Shakespeare it seems to become a moving articulation of a complex personality. Either way, the lyric no less than the epic is caught within the age's ideological struggles.

Throughout this study, however, I will be looking for ways in which the poems of the sixteenth century do not simply reflect the age's dominant ideology. I will suggest how oppositional voices are struggling to be heard and how we can help give them voice. *The Faerie Queene*, for instance, tries to be a celebration of the Elizabethan monarchy, ruling class, and court ideals, and yet it incorporates ideas and practices that call their dominance into question. Wyatt's lyrics contain scarcely veiled hints of rebellion and disgust with the dominant ideologies of power and desire. How conscious of these tensions were Spenser and Wyatt? To an extent, they probably knew what they were voicing. That kind of opposition clearly operates on the level of very explicit ideas. But there are other kinds of opposition more subtly and profoundly encoded in the poetry. One important function of the literary text – perhaps, it is often argued, what constitutes 'the greatness' of a work, and maybe the most important social function of art – is that of bringing out the contradictions and tensions that a dominant ideology tries to ignore or cover over. It does so not so much on the level of the explicit ideas to which a text points, but rather on the level of the text's 'unconscious', which we see both in the language and in the gaps and indeterminacies that accompany language. Poems are, after all, not ideas but words – words and spaces around words – and it is on the level of words that we can read the strains, oppositions, and struggles of an age. Language is a primary site of ideological struggle. It is our language where the struggles for meaning and power took place – and where they take place in our own reading and criticism.

Raymond Williams suggests that we should read literary texts as a means of probing an age's transitional nature, looking for signs of change not so much in their explicit ideas as within what can be termed a society's 'structures of feeling'. We do so, he argues, in order to stress the live, ever-changing, characteristics of a culture and, in particular, the generative and regenerative part that language plays within culture. Williams writes of a society consisting of archaic, residual, and emergent experiences, values, and practices.<sup>10</sup> The majority of any society's practices are inevitably residual, deriving from the past and closely identified with the historically dominant class of that society. A few are archaic, the residuum of, say, philosophical or religious ideas from a previous age: a key example in Elizabethan poetry would be chivalry, largely abandoned as a material practice by the end of the sixteenth century, but still very powerful in its cultural implications and as a source of ritual and initiation for the court poets. But within

the inevitable flux and contradictions of any society, new experiences and practices are always emerging, always potential, and in periods of particular stress, like the 1590s, they may start to emerge more strongly. They are usually felt before they can be put into language, because there are no fully formed structures of discourse by which they can be expressed. It is at such points of strain that certain forms of writing and other cultural practices are most revealing. In the late sixteenth century we can look to the experimentation in the public theatre, the revival of verse satire, the unusual diversity of broken, mixed, unfinished works as indications of the sense that one often has in some of the age's poems that they are trying to articulate something which was already being felt but for which there were not yet adequate words. Williams terms 'pre-emergent' those cases where the structure of feeling that is tangible in particular writings points to an area of experience which still lies beyond us – the full significance of which may only become explicit years later as new language becomes available. All texts, in other words, are an articulation of more than they know and it is clear we must recognize that the texts we read are themselves unaware of their relation to ideology.<sup>11</sup>

What practical implications for the reader of sixteenth-century poetry do such considerations have? They suggest that we must concentrate on the 'dislocations' and 'disruptions' in poetic texts as well as on what they 'intend'. This advice may seem to conflict directly with notions of 'unity', 'order' and 'hierarchy' which have so long seemed inextricable from the discussions of the period's poetry and its 'world-vision'. I say 'seem' because it is, in fact, possible to interpret the sixteenth century itself as a period of surprising upsurges and dislocations. The whole age was, after all, one of extraordinary insecurity, quite deserving the title that Auden gave to the early twentieth century, the 'age of anxiety'. In other words, to insist that the textual practices of sixteenth-century poems operate in contradiction to their own intentions may, I hope, be seen less as a demolition of them than an appropriate way into understanding and enjoying them. We are dealing with a period where there was enormous pressure upon language to grapple with new experiences, new feelings, and new social patterns. It was a time in which (as many poets themselves noted) language itself seemed to be simultaneously inadequate and overflowing. Although the poems may attempt to efface the struggle that has produced them, that struggle none the less leaves its invisible but indelible marks. What is not in the text is just as important as what seems to be there.

The task of reading, therefore, becomes a very exciting one. It is that of bringing to life what has been blotted out, teasing out the conflicting discourses that fight within the text, that remain, in the metaphor that Derrida has made famous, 'active and stirring, inscribed in white ink,

an invisible drawing covered over in the palimpsest'. We will watch, for instance, how in *The Faerie Queene* the surface text maintains an uneasy and shifting relationship with its apparent philosophical content. We will trace the movements by which a text falls short of or exceeds what it wants to say, the ways by which it is sidetracked, turned back on, or repeats itself. We will see how the period's best poems are full of eloquent silences and half silences. We will pose the question (the writings of the women poets of the period are excellent examples here) of what seem to be significant absences, silent or suppressed, in the texts. As Macherey puts it, there are times when not only do texts not speak but when they cannot speak, and it is in uncertainties and disruptions where they may speak most eloquently.<sup>12</sup>

Does such talk of looking for 'gaps', 'disruptions', 'uncertainties' and 'absences' in texts sound strange? One of my students once likened it to what a psychotherapist or analyst does with a patient, probing into the darkness of his or her repressed memories, and patterns of obsessions and habits. That is a good analogy. We are looking for the 'unconscious' of the texts we read, not just the hidden meanings but the suppressed or repressed meanings. To mention psychoanalysis is to be modern with a vengeance, but it is interesting how some Renaissance thinkers, notably Sidney, seem to have wrestled with such issues. As I will show in Chapter 2, in sixteenth-century poetic theory and practice, there are two contradictory views of language. One sees texts as communicating 'messages' or 'information', and is built upon a desire to extract conceptual statements from words. The other sees it as a means to escape into the endless play and self-indulgence of language. An interesting contrast exists between Sidney and Greville, one we will see in Chapters 4 and 5. On the one hand, there is a puritanical desire to see tropes, metre and rhyme as disciplined ornament, means for the presentation of ideas and, in Greville's case, to be used with great reluctance. On the other hand, we can see the overflowing productivity of language, its playing off of one mode of linguistic organization against another, as a means in itself of achieving genuine knowledge.

What differences do such considerations make to a study of poetry in the sixteenth century? They enable us to read Raleigh, Spenser or Shakespeare in most exciting ways. There are always wider struggles going on than a writer consciously knows – contradictions rooted in the history of which he or she is a part, covered over by the comforts of ideology and only visible, perhaps, to later readers. We read not only for the obvious surface meanings but for symptomatic absences in texts and so for the signs of those ideological pressures which the text has seemingly erased or covered over. Ideology's power forces texts to remain silent about or to marginalize questions on matters that go beyond or challenge the age's orthodoxy. In the terms much

favoured by older modes of criticism, the 'intentions' of a text are the ways the ideology of the text tries to mobilize certain responses. But the text, we can learn to see, always has other 'intentions'. A careful reader of sixteenth-century poetry, therefore, must focus not merely on what a text seems to say, or what its author seems to want to be heard to say, nor even on what it does not say, but on what it cannot say, either at all or only with difficulty. The text's detours, silences, omissions, absences, faults and symptomatic dislocations are all part of what we focus on in addition to, and even at times in preference to, its surface. We look for the different languages, literary and social that hover in the vicinity of the text, trying to master and muffle it; in particular we focus on places where the seemingly unified surface of a work is contradicted or undermined, where the text 'momentarily misses a beat, thins out or loses intensity, or makes a false move – where the scars show, in the face of stress'. We ask in short not only what is there, but also what is not there and why, and who or what these seeming presences and omissions serve and what we, as their readers, might fill them with.<sup>13</sup>

## The Court

This is a study of sixteenth-century poetry, and yet as I tell my own students, we have to read sixteenth-century poetry by means of something – ideas, desires, feelings and strategies for reading that embody these – and so I want them to read with as powerful a set of strategies as possible. Although they have over the past twenty years become relatively familiar in literary criticism, the issues raised in the last few pages may constitute an unfamiliar approach for many students. I hope they repay re-reading, and the discussion (here necessarily theoretical) will make much more particular sense, I hope, in ensuing chapters. In investigating the poetry of court poets like Dunbar, Wyatt, Raleigh or Greville, in Chapter 4, for instance, we shall have to look not merely to the ideas that can be abstracted from the age's commonplaces, or even those ideas of which the writer may have been aware, but to the events that have made the writer's history, and especially to ideas and feelings that play about (in the vicinity of) their writings. In many cases, the writer will have been unaware of them, as he or she struggled within the complex interplay of discursive structures, symbolic formations and ideological systems of representation that defined his or her cultural practices. We must try to relate the poetry we read – whether explicit public propaganda like *A Mirror for Magistrates* or lyrics like Wyatt's 'Blame Not My Lute' – to the hidden interplays of power that structured

the society. A collection of 'private' lyrics like *Astrophil and Stella* no less than a massive 'public' poem like Daniel's *Civil Wars* or *The Faerie Queene* is culturally produced, coerced and compelled by political and wider cultural forces outside it, by networks of discourse in which it is caught or – to use Macherey's powerful metaphor – which haunt it, playing, encroaching, or teasing it from the edge of the text.<sup>14</sup>

I can make the foregoing discussion of 'ideology' more concrete by an explicit example of how it functioned in the sixteenth century. In his influential essay on 'Ideological State Apparatuses', Althusser discusses the very concrete practices by which any society structures, even in part creates, the allegiances by which its members feel they 'belong' to it – the system of education, characteristic lifestyle, patterns of religion, family organization and so forth. It is by means of such institutions and structures, what he called 'apparatuses', that ideology functions. Except that – and here we enter into a discussion of the dominant 'apparatuses' of this period – the poetry of the sixteenth century was not produced by 'ordinary people'. Or to put it differently, the received canon of sixteenth-century poetry is almost entirely the product of (written for, and almost always by) a small fraction of the population – the aristocracy, the gentry and those aspiring members of the 'middle' classes who had some pretensions to upward mobility, what Evans terms 'a new social phenomenon', the second generation of the new bourgeoisie going to university and abandoning their fathers' professions for a life of letters. He instances Donne, Peele, Harvey, Greene and Spenser, and points out that in fact, of the major poets of the century, only Surrey belongs to the old aristocracy.<sup>15</sup> Some exceptions to his generalization will be discussed in later chapters, notably in Chapters 8 and 9, when I comment on the poetry written by women and 'popular' poetry, but by and large it is an accurate statement.

The major institution or apparatus that dominates sixteenth-century poetry is the Court. In his famous history of the English Civil War, as he looked back at his youth and attempted to make sense of those years which we now recognize as one of the cataclysmic eras of English history, Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon, focused on the institution in which he had spent his youth. The Court, he wrote, was where 'as in a mirror, we may best see the face of that time, and the affections and temper of the people in general', for, he continued, 'the court measured the temper and affection of the country'.<sup>16</sup> Throughout the sixteenth century, 'Court' was a powerful word as well as a powerful institution; it accumulated round itself ideas and feelings that were often contradictory or confusing, but always compelling. Men and women 'swarmed' to the Court (the metaphor is a favourite one) for power, gain, gossip, titles, favours, rewards and entertainment. The Court was more than merely the seat of government, or wherever

the monarch happened to be. All across Europe the idea of the Court, as well as its concrete existence, excited an intensity that indicates a rare concentration of power and cultural dominance. It is Gabriel Harvey's 'only mart of preferment and honour'; it is Spenser's 'seat of courtesy and civil conversation'; it is Donne's 'bladder of Vanitie'. What powers, real or reputed, did the Court have over the destinies, tastes and allegiances of men and women? What recurring anxieties or affirmations are associated with the Court? By whom are they voiced? With what special or covert interests? And with what degree of truth? What can they mediate to us of the Court's influence on the ongoing and deep-rooted cultural changes of the period – the complex struggles for political and social ascendancy, the fundamental changes of ideology and material practice?

How did the Court's power operate upon the particular details of life? How did the dominant 'apparatus' control the specifics of living, including the way poetry was thought of, written and received? I stress the word 'details' because, as Said explains, 'for power to work it must be able to manage, control, even create detail: the more detail, the more real power'. Power is felt more intimately in detail – in the particulars of our everyday lives, and in the particularities of poetry. The Court was one of the key places where, in Foucault's words, 'power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives'.<sup>17</sup> The Court produced, in all who came into contact with it, a set of expectations, anxieties, assumptions and habits, sometimes very explicitly, sometimes by unstated but very concrete pressures. And as we read the period's writings, we can see how writers and artists provide a kind of early-warning system for later historical developments.

What can the poetry of the age tell us about how it was to be exposed to, fostered by, or exploited by the Court? As Strong and others have shown, throughout the Renaissance, all European Courts attempted to use the arts to control and in a very real sense create the tastes, habits, beliefs and allegiances of their subjects. In some cases this attempt was carried out through overt state apparatuses – through control and censorship of the theatre, imprisonment of playwrights and the patronage and protection of particular literary forms and opinions, for example. 'Before the invention of the mechanical mass media of today', Strong writes, 'the creation of monarchs as an "image" to draw people's allegiance was the task of humanists, poets, writers and artists'.<sup>18</sup> Around the monarch was the Court, and all over Europe, it was to the Court that intellectuals, educators, artists, architects and poets were drawn. No less than the building of palaces or great houses, official state portraits, medallions or court fetes, poetry was part of what Strong terms 'the politics of spectacle'. It was part of the increasing



attempt – culminating in England in the reigns of James I and Charles I – to propagate a belief in the sacredness of the monarchy and the role of the Court and mobility within a ritual of power. Just as ‘the world of the court fete is an ideal one in which nature, ordered and controlled, has all dangerous potential removed’, and in which the Court could celebrate its wisdom and control over the world, time, and change, so poetry too became, as John Donne’s friend, Sir Henry Wotton, put it, ‘an instrument of state’.<sup>19</sup>

In *Music and Poetry in the Early Tudor Court* (1961) Stevens showed how the sixteenth-century lyric loses much of its point when simply read as words on a page. Court poetry, he argued, is built of ‘shades and nuances of meaning’ which are social rather than literary. ‘What distinguishes the individual from the type . . . arose from situation, not from words.’<sup>20</sup> Throughout the period, poetry is thought primarily of as action in and for the Court, as performance, even as production, not merely as written text. The poems are the visible edge of a whole complex social text, the centre of which, as Puttenham’s potted history of the century’s poetry (probably completed by the 1580s) put it, was a firm policy of binding poetry inextricably to the Court. When he focuses on the ‘new company of courtly makers’ who ‘sprong up’ at the end of Henry VIII’s reign, and ‘greatly polished our rude and homely maner of vulgar Poesie’, Puttenham is articulating the Court’s imprimatur upon not only a chosen number of poets but also upon a certain function for poetry in the Court. Briefly surveying the mid-Tudor poets, including Sternhold, Heywood and Golding, he then culminates his history by describing the courtly poets under Elizabeth I:

And in her Majesties time that now is are sprong up an other crew of Courtly makers Noble men and Gentlemen of her Majesties owne servauntes, who have written excellently well as it would appeare if their doings could be found out and made publicke with the rest, of which number is first that noble Gentleman *Edward Earle of Oxford*. *Thomas Lord of Bukhurst*, when he was young, *Henry Lord Paget*, *Sir Philip Sydney*, *Sir Walter Rawleigh*, *Master Edward Dyar*, *Maister Fulke Grevell*, *Gascon*, *Britton*, *Turberville* and a great many other learned Gentlemen, whose names I do not omit for envie, but to avoyde tediousnesse, and who have deserved no little Commendation.<sup>21</sup>

Throughout his treatise, Puttenham links poetry to the favour of Courts and princes, repeatedly stressing the duty of the ‘Civill Poet’ to celebrate the values and acts of the Court in the way ‘the embroderer’ sets ‘stone and perle or passements of gold upon the stuff of a Princely garment’.<sup>22</sup> While *The Arte of English Poesie* presents itself as a treatise on poetry,

it is also setting out the ideal lifestyle of the courtier. Indirectness, even dissimulation (what Puttenham terms *Beau semblant*), ornament, calculated ostentation, are all characteristics that are simultaneously those of the poet and the courtier. The 'grace' displayed by the poet is inseparable from a training in the essential courtly characteristics of dissimulation and indirection. When he discusses the use of allegory, he describes it as the figure of 'false semblant' and 'the Courtier'; and at the conclusion of his treatise, he echoes Castiglione's advice that the courtier should strive above all else 'to give entertainment to Princes, Ladies of honour, Gentlewomen and Gentlemen', and to do so must 'dissemble' not only his 'countenances' and 'conceits' but also all 'his ordinary actions of behaviour . . . whereby the better' to 'winne his purposes and good advantages'.<sup>23</sup> The terms are exactly those he uses to describe the making of poetry.

The Court, then, as one of the dominant 'apparatuses' of the age, appropriated poetry as one of the practices by which it tried to exercise its political dominance. Within the Court, poetry was seen as entertainment by and for amateur gentleman poets of the Court; it was what Stevens calls 'idealised talk' performed and enjoyed along with what Lewis terms 'a little music after supper'. It was rarely designed to be published: as Puttenham notes, 'many notable Gentlemen in the Court . . . have written commendably, and suppressed it agayne, or else suffered it to be published without their own names to it'. Poetry was one of the means by which a Surrey, a Raleigh or an Essex displayed his desirability (along with dancing, music, and general self-display) and so advanced his political fortunes. It was part of a deliberate attempt to advance a new social order and not simply a 'literary' fashion. Sessions has traced the emergence in England to the self-conscious advancing of a 'cultural hegemony' in the poetry of Surrey in 1542, built on an unambiguous class bias: 'true' nobility and honour fashioning a new poetics and to some extent a new language, with the poet as a privileged voice of that nobility and honour. In aristocratic poets like Surrey, and then some time later, Sidney, Sessions argues there can be found an ideology of poetic virtue that is bound up with noble virtue.<sup>24</sup>

In a more democratic age, such assumptions about 'natural' nobility may seem unsupportable nonsense, and there was much else going on in the poetry of the time that undermined such class-bound theory of poetry. But there is no doubt that it was the theory of most of the dominant poets in the period before the end of the century. Raleigh's poetry, as we shall see in Chapter 4, was intended as a key to Elizabeth's political favour; Robert Sidney, as Chapter 5 will show, wrote most of his poetry while in exile in the Low Countries as an expression of his desire to be back in the centre of public affairs, while one of