

Review of Stephen Guy-Bray. *Line Endings in Renaissance Poetry*. London and New York. Anthem Press. 2022. Pp. 108. Hb., ISBN 9781785279096. £80. Ebook, 9781785279102. £25.

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Admitting that his is not a well-tilled field of enquiry, Guy-Bray responds by devoting an introduction plus four subsequent chapters to the subject of line endings, arguing that “they are, or can be, the defining feature of the poem” (1): already a contentious claim. Though their role in structuring a poem on the written page is undeniable, my problem is that poetry does not only exist on the written page, but also in readers’ memories and in public recitals and audio recordings where the written page becomes, need I say, conspicuously less relevant. Chapter two (“Rhyme”) avoids this issue and elaborates some commendably detailed close readings, beginning with Marvell’s witty response to the of course unrhymed *Paradise Lost*, and proceeding through the Earl of Surrey’s translation of the *Aeneid*, innovative in its use of blank verse, Sidney’s *The Defence of Poesy*, where the author reacts against the current vogue of unrhymed poetry, Thomas Campion who wrote a treatise arguing the reverse, i.e., that rhyme schemes encourage doggerel, only to be countered in his turn by Samuel Daniel’s *A Defense of Ryme*, while Jonson’s *A Fit of Rhyme against Rhyming* (sic) further enriched the debate. The remainder of chapter two scrutinizes various poems by Shakespeare, Marvell and Milton, examining how feminine rhymes can underline a poem’s erotic implications, while, according to Guy-Bray, *Lycidas*’s persistent and idiosyncratic varying of poetic forms deliberately incites the reader to “develop a theory of rhyme” (28): another challenging claim. Chapter three considers enjambment and includes some detailed analyses of English poets’ attempts to translate Ovid and Virgil in whom the freer Latin syntax admits far more frequent enjambments, a point on which Milton capitalised when composing his own neo-Latin poems. In the same chapter Guy-Bray considers various Shakespearean sonnets as well as poems by Jonson, Marvell, Henry Vaughan and Herrick, plus the to me less well-known female writers Hester Pulter, Katherine Philips and Mary Wroth, welcome visitors to the discussion. His conclusion that enjambment, the extension of a line of verse beyond a line of text, can imply the triumph over death, i.e., a continuation of life, is another plausible if audacious assertion.

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Chapter four considers the sestina, a form where the end words of the first six lines are repeated in differing orders in the following stanzas: clearly a daunting prescription making it “arguably the most demanding poetic form until the experimental poetics of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries” (p. 70). The resultant poem may well tax the writer’s freedom excessively but it may also and at best present the opportunity for linking form and content to an exceptional degree, the poet’s “loss of autonomy” and “disintegration of thought” (p. 60) becoming significant themes within the resulting work. Examples come from Spenser, whose “Ye wastefull woodes” was the first English sestina, through William Drummond, for Guy-Bray an unjustly neglected poet, to Sidney in particular, whose double sestina “Ye goatherd gods,” inserted into *Arcadia*, offers material for eleven pages of analysis. Again, the conclusions are enterprising as they link the rigid form of the sestina to the stasis in which Guy-Bray locates its performers Strephon and Klaius, a male couple bonded by their futile love for the same woman, Urania, which pattern is symbolised by the ultimately meaningless repetitions of the rhyme words punctuating the extremely formalistic poem which gives them life. The implications of this pattern for queer theory are then sketched in the chapter’s final lines.

The fifth and last chapter (“Forwards”) jumps to the contemporary period, concentrating in particular on the same matters of enjambment and the sestina form already examined in English Renaissance literature. The choice of material—the black poet Lucille Clifton’s “study the masters,” Robert Creeley’s “Love Comes Quietly” and Martha Ronk’s “In a landscape of having to repeat”—allows Guy-Bray to raise issues of racial suppression and also deliberate incoherence while still retaining contact with his subject matter: Strephon and Klaius even reappear in the context of Ronk’s poem. While enjambment is now virtually the default mode for modern free verse, the sestina has gained a discernible prominence among modern poets who are perhaps reacting against the looseness that characterises that same trend: his two examples, Patricia Smith in her “Ethel’s Sestina” and Stuart Barnes in his “Sestina: Rape” even incorporate the term into their titles. While the resurrection of such a difficult mode is noteworthy, any reader of Wilfred Owen must surely acknowledge that there are other ways to “write about things that might seem too difficult and too powerful to be represented” (p. 85), while “to express the inexpressible” (ibid.) is literally impossible. That said, one can only concur that Guy-Bray’s intricate examination of both works shows how the restrictive form of the sestina can assist in the depiction of trauma, while in these instances helping simultaneously to transcend it.

I noted only a few typos, none of which are substantial enough to be worth quoting, and while the detailed analyses that form the bulk of this book make strong demands on the reader, they certainly sharpen one's appetite for a discovery or rediscovery of the material under examination.