

Richard Willes: Sixteenth-Century Religious Renegade and Concrete Poet

One of the quirkiest figures in the literary history not only of the college but of the Elizabethan period as a whole is the poet, geographer, and religious renegade Richard Willes (1546-1579?). Willes was a Wykehamist who, like so many others of his generation, fled the country at the Reformation, and set about re-establishing himself as a continental writer and academic. But the remarkable fact about Willes is that, having gone as far as entering the Jesuit novitiate, he apostasized, fled back to England, conformed to the Elizabethan regime, published a book of poems, and settled down to the private study of geography under the patronage of a firmly protestant family, that of the Earl of Bedford. His is an extraordinary trajectory—and his poems are no less unusual, including the first extensive examples in England (although written mainly in Latin) of what would today be called concrete poetry.

Richard Willes (often ‘Wills’) was born in 1546, ‘one of several sons of a yeoman, possibly Catholic, family of Pulham, Dorset’.¹ He attended Winchester College from 1558, where he was taught by the Neo-Latin poet and schoolmaster Christopher Johnson (c. 1536-1597). Johnson must have been the formative influence on Willes: appointed headmaster in 1560, he encouraged literary criticism, and among his pupils were numbered Henry Dethick (1547/8-c. 1613), the poet and literary theorist;² Richard White (1539-1611), the antiquary and author of the *Historiarum Britanniae libri XI* (1597-1607), a lengthy study of the Brutus legends;³ and Willes himself. As D. K. Money comments, Johnson, in a dedicatory epistle set before White’s *Orationes duae* (1566), recalls how in his own youth he delighted in the Latin works of Thomas More, including his *Utopia*.⁴ In 1564 Johnson published as a single sheet a Latin verse life of William of Wykeham, of which only a few copies survive,⁵ but Willes was to reprint the text in his own *Poematum liber*, as we shall see, surely a salutation to his old schoolmaster and mentor.⁶ Johnson eventually moved to London to practice as a physician, and in 1580 he published there a rendering into Latin verse of the pseudo-Homeric *Batrachomyomachia* or ‘Battle of the Frogs and Mice’, now very scarce.⁷ In this issue of *New College Notes* we are proud to present an English verse translation of Johnson on Wykeham, co-written by a group of today’s classicists!

Willes, like Richard White, was deprived of his New College place for absence in 1564; by that point Willes was at Louvain, and White himself had passed through Louvain and on to Padua. Willes entered the Jesuit novitiate in 1565 at Mainz, and in late 1569 he began to train for the priesthood. He went on to lecture in Perugia, but after a startling volte-face he was back in England by late 1572, having abandoned both his new-found faith and his order, which had been making moves to expel him anyway. The next year he published his *Poematum liber*, a book

¹ For Willes’s life see Anthony Payne in *ODNB* and for fuller detail A. D. S. Fowler’s introduction to his edition and translation of Willes’s [as ‘Wills’], *De re poetica* (Oxford, Luttrell Reprints no. 17, 1958).

² ‘Dethick’s *Oratio in laudem poëseos*, dedicated to Lord Burghley and printed c.1574, is one of the earliest formal defences of poetry in Elizabethan England’; ‘Dethick’s main work was the *Feriae sacrae libri octo* (1577), a lengthy collection of biblical paraphrases and verses on biblical incident, a popular Elizabethan genre’ (J. W. Binns in *ODNB*). The *Oratio* is very rare, ESTC recording only two copies, in Westminster Abbey and Hatfield House. The *Feriae sacrae* is recorded in only six copies. There is a text and translation of the *Oratio* in J. W. Binns, ed., *Latin Treatises on Poetry from Renaissance England* (Signal Mountain, Tenn., 1999). Dethick also published a popular English book on gardening.

³ White, unlike Dethick, became a fellow of New College, but fled for his religion. For him see J. W. Binns in *ODNB* and further his study ‘Richard White of Basingstoke and the Defence of Tudor myth’, *Cahiers Élisabéthains* 11 (1977), pp. 17-29. A fine portrait medal of him, illustrated in *ODNB*, was struck by Lodovico Leoni in 1568.

⁴ D. K. Money in *ODNB*.

⁵ ESTC records only copies in the Bodleian, Wood 276b (99) (= STC 14656.5), and in Cambridge University Library (= STC 14656.7).

⁶ As Wood notes in his annotation to the Bodleian copy, the verses were reprinted too in Sir John Harington, *A Briefe View of the State of the Church of England ... to the Yeere 1608* (London, 1653), pp. 37-41.

⁷ ESTC records only three copies. It was published by Thomas Purfoote.

containing his own (chiefly Latin, but with some macaronic, vernacular, and even hieroglyphic) pattern-poems and other types of verbal ingenuity; his *De re poetica*, addressed to the Warden, Fellows, and schoolboys of Winchester College; extensive critical ‘scholia’ on his intentionally difficult pattern-poems; and finally his schoolmaster Johnson’s verses on Wykeham, as well on the various wardens and schoolmasters of New College. The whole assemblage, published ‘Ex Bibliotheca Totelliana’ (i.e. from the atelier of the major literary publisher Richard Tottell) was dedicated to William Cecil, Lord Burghley, as was Dethick’s *Oratio in laudem poëseos* of the following year. Willes was obviously trying to make his peace with the Elizabethan regime, and hoped that such a gesture would prove an adequate statement of rediscovered loyalty. It must have been successful, for Willes was reaccepted into the English church, incorporated at both universities, and in later life became a significant geographical writer, the role for which he is most commonly remembered. His publications in this field were *The History of Travayle* (1577), and material from this collection, itself an expanded version of Richard Eden’s *Decades of the Newe Worlde* (1555), fed into the greatest of all Elizabethan travel compendia, Richard Hakluyt’s *Principal Navigations* (1589; 1598-1600). It is not known for sure when Willes died, but he may have been a man of this name who married in 1575 and/or another of the same name who was buried in 1579. He was mentioned with respect by several of the foremost literary writers of the age, both for his poetry and for his work as a geographer.

Willes’s *Poematum liber* is not especially common. New College alas does not own a copy.⁸ Wood’s copy in the Bodleian shows how the book might be ‘placed’ by a contemporary reader: Wood gathered into a volume of four imprints Willes’s book, followed by William Cheek’s *Anagramma et Chronometra* (London, 1613), and the two parts of John White’s *Miscellanea Variiegata* (London, 1663, 1664).⁹ The other Bodleian copy, among the Arts books (8° C 122(8) Art), once belonged to ‘Anatomy of Melancholy’ Robert Burton of Christ Church, as did several other items in that volume; it follows another New College book, the *Epigrammata* of John Reinolds—for which see the note on Reinolds in this issue.

The *Poematum liber* at least in its second part is a thoroughly ‘Wykehamical’ book. Whereas the book of poetry proper does not mention Willes’s sometime associations with Winchester and New College, the second part is dedicated to the Warden, Fellows, and schoolchildren of Winchester, the verso of the fresh title-page bears the colleges’ badge, and the ‘scholia’ conclude with Johnson’s verse life of Wykeham, and his distichs on his wardens and schoolmasters. This means too that not only Willes’s ‘scholia’ on how to read the poems but also his treatise *De re poetica* were aimed at a Wykehamical and specifically a Winchester audience. This is of some interest given that the strongly Platonist *De re poetica* is the first formal defence of poetry to be published in England, albeit one largely generated out of excerpts from J. C. Scaliger’s *Poetices libri septem* (1561) and Juan Luis Vives’s *De causis corruptarum artium* (1531).¹⁰

Willes was not quite the first English pattern poet, as there is one earlier example, by Stephen Hawes, in English, and dating from 1509—‘The Convercyon of Swerers’.¹¹ But Willes was the first man to publish extensive examples of *technopaegnia* or pattern poems on an obviously classical footing. As Church comments:

It may have been at Mainz, or at Perugia, that he first came in contact with the Greek *technopaegnia*. Willis’ facility in Greek is proved by his experience in 1569 at Trier, where he taught the language. And his interest in the *technopaegnia* is shown by the inclusion of eight shaped verses in his *Poematum liber*. Five of these eight closely imitate

⁸ There are two in the Bodleian Library, one in the British Library, four in Cambridge libraries, one apiece in Peterborough Cathedral and York Minster, two in Scotland, one in Ireland, and seven in North American libraries.

⁹ N. K. Kiessling, *The Library of Anthony Wood* (Oxford, 2002), no. 6607.

¹⁰ See Fowler’s edition, pp. 25-31 for a full analysis of his sources.

¹¹ Margaret Church, ‘The First English Pattern Poems’, *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 61 (1946), pp. 636-50, at pp. 637-39.

forms which have survived in the *Greek Anthology*, and four of these five have Greek subtitles. If we turn to Willis' scholia which conclude his volume, we may learn both that Willis was a scholar who valued method and diligence, and that his knowledge of the shaped verses came, for the most part, from editions of Greek authors by Joseph Scaliger and Jean Crispin.¹²

He produced both 'altar' and 'wings' poems, and may be considered a potential prompt for the two most famous pattern poems in English, George Herbert's 'Altar' and 'Easter Wings', if Herbert and Willes did not simply encounter them directly in the same source, be it in Scaliger or in the Greek Anthology itself.

Willes even tried his hand at what he called poetry 'in Egyptian letters, called 'hieroglyphic' by others'. This poem, no. 58, consists of two strings of five animals apiece. As his scholium explains, the Egyptians once declared their thoughts by means of pictures, signifying virtues and vices by means of various animals. His two strings therefore represent: 'Mansuetudo, fides, pietas, prudentia, vires', and then 'Garrulitas, luxus, stultitia, ira, gula.' And, as he notes, if you read aloud these Latin lists of virtues and then vices, the first forms a metrical hexameter and the second a metrical pentameter. Therefore, his symbols, read aloud in Latin, form an elegiac couplet! This renaissance interpretation of how hieroglyphs signify—an entirely symbolic or pictographic theory—was directly or indirectly based on Piero Valeriano Bolzani's *Hieroglyphica* (Basel, 1556), the source for many of these commonplace notions: dog for faithfulness, crow for garrulity, bear (if that is what Willes's illustration is ...) for anger, and so forth. It is surely the strangest 'poem' I have encountered in a sixteenth-century book:



Non nocere tibi, sed nocere tibi



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¹² Church, 'First English Pattern Poems', p. 639. She then discusses Willes at length, pp. 639-46.