

Afterword *Bending the rules*

Λευκῆ στάθμη, An unmarked rule. ... Aulus Gellius in the *Attic Nights*: ‘For all those people, and among them especially the Greeks, read eagerly and widely and swept together everything they came across without discrimination, using a “blank ruler” as they say’.

—Erasmus, ‘An unmarked rule’, *Amussis alba* (*Adagia*, I.v.88)

Gellius, book 1, chapter 4: ‘He inspected all these ancient writings with such care, weighing their merits and investigating their short-comings, that you would say his judgment was made exactly by rule.’ ... It may be thought to come from Homer’s *Odyssey*, book 5, where he speaks of Ulysses building his ship: ‘Trimmed with great skill and trued them to the line’.

—Erasmus, ‘By rule’, *Ad amussim* (*Adagia*, I.v.90)

This is said when things are done the wrong way round, when theory is accommodated to fact and not fact to theory. ... Aristotle mentions this adage in his *Ethics*, book 5: ‘For the rule of what is indefinite is also indefinite, like the leaden rule used in Lesbian architecture; the rule changes to fit the shape of the stone and does not remain a rule’.

—Erasmus, ‘By the Lesbian rule’, *Lesbia regula* (*Adagia*, I.v.93)¹

Erasmus’ reflections on his, and others’, reading of texts from classical antiquity shade into reflections on the rules that might be summoned up to measure and judge those texts, rules that may (he suggests) lie latent in that literature itself. The chapters gathered in this special issue examine how this project of reading for and reading with rules is a contested one in the period 1500–1650: writers grapple in idiosyncratic ways with the legacy of ancient literature, seeking to forge an *ars poetica*, or rather multiple *artes poeticae*, from their reading of antiquity. As this collection proposes, the *artes poeticae* of the early modern period are a product of formations that turn into transformations – written about and thought through in the image of classical models, they are simultaneously impatient to register points of departure from those forebears and, in the *longue durée*, undergo revision in turn. The essays presented here, for all their local differences of focus, chronology, and geography – a measure of the reach and complexity of poetics as both theory and practice in the period – share sufficient conceptual and methodological commonalities to suggest that the *artes poeticae* of early modernity constitute a continuous if multifaceted enterprise, and one deserving closer scrutiny.

That sixteenth- and seventeenth-century poetics merits the concerted attention of the sort offered here is immediately evident from the kinds of questions that individual chapters consistently raise and collectively begin to answer. First, *what, and where, are the rules that inform early modern poetics?* Each chapter, addressing some aspect of the relationship between theory and practice, considers how writers from the period 1500–1650 conceived of the processes whereby abstract rules were fulfilled, modified, bent, or even broken by literary craft itself. In many cases, explicit theory cedes ground to the implicit theory manifested through literary practice: Hetherington shows Daniel in *Musophilus* thinking through the rules of a rule-less poetic constitution; Tregear presents anthologies and commonplace-books as sites of comparative literary criticism; Brazeau finds Marinella simultaneously theorising and enacting theory; and Feile Tomes, registering how ‘conceptual heavy lifting occurs in poetry itself’ [xxx], sees Balbuena harnessing formal poetics (*Compendio*) to literary creation (*Grandeza mexicana*). Several chapters ask what comes first: do rules precede or follow poetic practice? Rules – whether the *normae* that, for Scaliger, ancient texts actively embodied [Hetherington,

¹ Erasmus 1982: 461, 462–3, 465.

xxx] or the ‘preceptes de Poësie’ that Peletier ‘found scattered’ in his own works and those of other ‘good Writers’ [Rayfield, xxx, xxx] – are often derived from individual works only to be recast, retroactively, as timeless principles preceding literary creation. For Giordano Bruno, in his *Degli eroici fuori*, that peculiar hybrid of poetry and critical manifesto [Hetherington, xxx], rules are born from poems, not poems from rules.² So a further crux addressed by some chapters is not just *what* and *where* but also *when* are the rules in relation to literary creativity.

Secondly, this volume returns repeatedly to an urgent problem underpinning the period’s *artes poeticae*, namely *what happens when rules are broken?* Chapters dwell not only on what rules are applied, and what kind of rules (on Erasmus’ spectrum from ‘blank ruler’ to ‘exact’ and exacting measuring-line), and how their application was contestable, but also on moments of unruliness – breaks from implied or assumed norms, departures from procrustean strictures. Rules, this volume shows, become more interesting in the breach than the observance, when the period’s writers and commentators consider what lies beyond rules, what transcends systematization. Hetherington reconstructs Daniel’s scepticism towards the rule-conformity instituted by prior writers and aftercoming critics [xxx]; Tregear traces Montaigne’s critical exercises that move ‘beyond the bounds of criticism’, ‘beyond rules, and above reason’ [xxx]; Kachuck probes the tensile interplay of structure and freedom in Horace’s writings, juxtaposing the *Ars Poetica*’s aims to set ‘rules to art’ or ‘limits to artistic license’ and its ‘decidedly unruly’ bearings (or bear-ings?) as Horace breaks ‘his own rules’ [xxx]; and Brazeau presents defamiliarizing, ‘pilgrim words’ (‘parole peregrine’) as vehicles of *meraviglia* (wonder) for Tasso and Marinella [xxx]. Marinella’s pursuit of a new idiom befitting actions that ‘exceed’ (‘trapassano’) the ‘limits of human possibility’ speaks indirectly, and across a continent, to George Puttenham’s likening of figurative language to ‘trespasses in speech’ that pass ‘the ordinary limits of common vtterance’.³ The reception of classical poetics in these centuries is relentlessly attuned to possibilities of artful havoc.

This volume tackles a third central question: *how does early modern poetics exploit classical rules to justify rule-breaking?* Each chapter registers how the legacy of classical poetics (chiefly Aristotle and, often intercalated, Horace) contained the cues for its own reinvention. Surveying Roman comedy, Ben Jonson’s *Cordatus* concludes that ‘we should enjoy the same *Licentia* or free power, to illustrate and heighten our invention as they did; and not be tied to those strict and regular forms, which the nicenesse of a few ... would thrust vpon vs’.⁴ Writers repeatedly draw on the authority of classical poetics to license apparent deviations from classical poetics – a paradoxical non-conformity out of conformity, counterintuitively justifying unruliness by referencing a rule. Inherited rules, Hetherington argues, served as ‘provisional or heuristic’ devices [xxx] enabling writerly composition or readerly judgement that surpassed those rules; Kachuck, appraising ‘the rules of classical misrule’ [xxx], demonstrates how Horace’s ‘not-so-“classical” classicism’ [xxx] infused Elizabethan and Jacobean poetics; and Feile Tomes establishes how Ibero-American poetics needed ostentatiously to invoke a normative model – ‘the familiar contours of a tradition stretching back to Greco-Roman antiquity’ [xxx] – to sanction the very creations that inventively surpassed its strictures. Recognising how dazzling, irrational poetry defies Aristotelian or Horatian rules and critical systems depends, Tregear remarks, on the fruits of those very critical systems – critical instruments that reveal their ‘own shortcomings’ [xxx]. For the baroque poet Giovan Battista Marino, writing to Girolamo Preti in 1624, the real rule (‘vera regola’) is knowing how to break the rules at the right time and place (‘rompere le regole

² Bruno 1958: 959.

³ Puttenham 1589: S2v.

⁴ Jonson 1600: B4v–C1r.

a tempo e luogo’).⁵ The apparently illicit needs to be made licit: rule-breaking is inextricable from rule-making. Il n’y a pas de hors-règle.

The debates over rule-conformity and rule-scepticism reconstructed in these chapters typically exploited ambiguities and knots in classical poetics. Artfully breaking rules first required proof that those rules had been correctly interpreted. For Castelvetro, the opacity of Aristotle’s *Poetics* confirmed that it was an incomplete draft, exacerbating debates over sympathetic mimicry [Hall, xxx]; amidst the skirmishes over what constituted elevated style and whether prose qualified as poetry, Marinella casually remarked that Aristotle in ‘the third book of the *Rhetoric* makes a mistake’ [Brazeau, xxx]; and comments (were they neo-Aristotelian? non-Aristotelian?) by Horace’s Davus on poetic craft and madness provoked dispute [Kachuck, xxx]. Often gnomically compact, classical poetic theory necessitated considerable exegetical work from its early modern inheritors. At times its terminology proved difficult to decipher in itself and difficult to adapt to vernacular lexicons: Rayfield illustrates this deep-seated resistance when contrasting Peletier’s 1541 *Art poétique d’Horace* with his 1555 *Art poétique de Jacques Peletier*, an onomastic tussle over the ownership of *artes poeticae* [xxx]. ‘Cannot we,’ asks William Webbe, ‘as well as the Latines did, alter the cannon of the rule according to the quality of our worde, and where our wordes and theirs wyll agréé, there to iumpe with them, where they will not agréé, there to establish a rule of our owne to be directed by?’⁶ Whose rules are they anyway?

So another animus informing this volume lies in determining how writers sought to construct vernacular equivalents for ancient precepts and phenomena (hence Peletier’s ‘*bienséance*’ [xxx]) and to deracinate quotable rules or isolated pronouncements from classical poetics and inventively adapt them to evolving practices and changing tastes. Neo-Aristotelian regulations ‘allowed for innovative alteration’.⁷ Classical *artes poeticae* were susceptible to *ad hoc* redeployments: Peletier recalibrated Horace’s theories on comedy for a contemporary French milieu [Rayfield, xxx]; Aristotle’s *Poetics* was strained into compatibility with Horace’s *Ars Poetica* to make Horace’s dicta about sympathetic mimicry sound – through another kind of sympathetic mimicry – more like Aristotle’s [Hall, xxx]; generic hybridity was recuperated as the meeting point between classical tradition and individual early modern talent [Kachuck, xxx]; and Marinella selectively garnered and reapplied Aristotelian precepts from the *Poetics* and *Rhetoric* to subsume transcendent prose within epic’s parameters [Brazeau, xxx]. Poetics in the period 1500–1650 is, these chapters show, plastic – actively being shaped and given new form, bear-like.

Fourthly, this volume makes a crucial intervention in the reception of classical poetics by asking *how far did classical rules and theory hinge on minutiae?* Early modern *artes poeticae* often rest on what appear to be throw-away or incidental adverbs, adjectives, and particles. Badius’ use of ‘ita’ and ‘ut’ (‘in such a way’) or ‘satis fecerint si’ (‘will have done enough if’) furnishes non-committal gestures rather than precise measures [Hetherington, xxx]; Peletier’s ‘with some caution’ qualifies rather than clarifies [Rayfield, xxx]; Hoby’s ambiguous, parenthetical aside ‘(in his minde)’ opens up rather than closes off enquiry [Hall, xxx]; the only fifth-foot spondee in Horace’s hexameter poetry (‘facit occidenti’) may be a rare unredacted error or a mark of luminous singularity integral to his critical agenda [Kachuck, xxx]; what λόγοις ψιλοῖς meant hinges, for Piccolomini, on Aristotle’s omission of the modifying word ‘μονον’ [Brazeau, xxx]. How much, in short, depends on hair’s-breadth distinctions between seemingly proximate terms – on the editorial crux over ‘conspicitur sus’ and ‘conspicit ursus’, or the eye-play on ‘uersus’ and ‘ursus’ [Kachuck, xxx]?

⁵ Marino 1966: 366.

⁶ Webbe 1586: G3v.

⁷ Javitch 1999: 65.

The authors, commentators, and editors surveyed in these chapters compel scrutiny for the very reason that we find them defining poetics in real time, on the hoof, in provisional and incomplete ways, rather than recovering a fully-formed, pre-existent, consensual *ars poetica* inherited from antiquity. In proposing explanatory analogies, early modern writers are drawn to terms and metaphors that refuse to sit still: ‘rule’ (the straight rod of the *κavών* or *regula*) vacillates between physical measure and abstract precept [Hetherington, xxx]; Erasmus’ wrestling holds suddenly become threads out of error’s labyrinth [Hetherington, xxx]; resonantly Vitruvian terms (‘modularis’, ‘mensura’) in Villerías’ *Guadalupe* glance indeterminately at musical modulation, prosody, and structural measurement [Feile Tomes, xxx]; Horace’s poet morphs into a bear and then a leech, in an analogy itself modulating from simile (‘velut’) to metaphor [Kachuck, xxx]. These verbal recalibrations are symptomatic of a broader phenomenon, one brought to the fore when these chapters contemplate what happens at the outer edge of categories – categories of the familiar, known, and already-codified. Hall traces how rules originally relating to actors are re-tailored to playwrights; Brazeau shows how Graeco-Latin culture spills into the vernacular as ancient poetics bucks up against the emergent forms of *novella* and *romanzo*; and Feile Tomes charts how, in a simultaneously westward and plurilingual *translatio*, the European inheritance of Aristotle, Cicero, and Horace extends into an Ibero-American *plus ultra*, a realm ostensibly beyond ‘the bounds of the possible’ [xxx].

At the core of *artes poeticae* 1500–1650, then, is a boundary-testing that thrives on exploratory daring: when the commonplace attenuates into the singular (even the sublime?) [Tregear]; when poet shades into madman [Hall, Kachuck]; when poetics seeks, futilely, to go beyond its own limits in ascertaining ‘a poetry beyond rules’ [Tregear, xxx]. So, fifthly, these chapters variously contemplate *what happens at the limits of definition, when rules and critical vocabularies fall short?* Such moments are often sublimated into misty-eyed vagueness – Gascoigne’s ‘*aliquid salis*’ and unquantifiable value-judgements about what is ‘good and fine’ [Hetherington, xxx]; Estienne’s swooning at the ‘grace’ of Terence’s *Andria* [Rayfield, xxx]; Montaigne’s neologistic reaching for ‘inscience’ [Tregear, xxx], or Polonius’ self-consuming taxonomy of ‘poem unlimited’ [Hall, xxx]. Crucially, several essays address how this interest in the unclassifiable, the undefinable that cedes to wonder, parallels renewed engagement with a rhetoric of sublimity, emanating directly or ambiently from pseudo-Longinus’ *Περὶ ὕψους* (*On the Sublime*), newly available in Robortello’s 1554 edition. Certain effects (or rather, certain uncertain effects) compel attention because they resist definition, reveal the breaking-point of critical lexicons, and flout rather than conform to rules. Montaigne yields to ‘tropes of the poetic sublime’ [Tregear, xxx]; the *furor* of Hamlet’s Hecuba exposes the slippery divide between sublime and ridiculous [Hall, xxx]; Horace’s mad poet adopts a sublime pose (‘*sublimis*’) [Kachuck, xxx]. No sooner does sublimity present its lofty visage than it prompts scepticism: in codifying the sublime as a commonplace standard, do anthologies like *Englands Parnassus* nullify the very qualities that distinguish sublime beauty as singular in the first place, leaving beholders ‘confounded in election’ [Tregear, xxx]?

Repeatedly, this volume’s chapters scrutinise moments of tension between, in Polonius’ words, ‘the law of writ and the liberty’ (*Hamlet*, II.ii.402) – points of friction between the *regolisti* (Bruno’s rule-makers) and something that we might call licence, discretion (*iudicium*), perhaps *ingenium*, or even poetic personality. Musophilus’ (or Daniel’s?) ‘loose, yet measured course’, the signature of a ‘rule-less poetic integrity’ [Hetherington, xxx], arouses a vexing suspicion that, in the period’s *artes poeticae*, poetic *ingenium* or *ingegno* – some distinguishing trait of wit, skill, or craft – is simply the name we give to that quality of inventiveness that defeats explanation by existing rules. This sanction for a kind of flex in how received rules might be applied or transgressed, that ‘prudence and discretion’ which is the poet’s ‘unseparable companion’ in William Scott’s *Model of Poesy* (1599), has its roots in Aristotelian

poetics.⁸ The ‘elasticity of Aristotle’s rules,’ Javitch contends, ‘continued to be appreciated and exploited’ in sixteenth-century Italy.⁹ Aristotle’s apparently deontic prescription regarding what ‘should be aimed at’ (‘δεῖ στοχάζεσθαι’) [Hetherington, xxx] allows for some contingency. Modifying the initial impression of a rigid, unyielding decree, the verb ‘στοχάζεσθαι’ (whence, latterly, *stochasticity*, the very embodiment of an uncertainty principle) encompasses not just the toxological sense of ‘aiming at’ a predetermined target but also, more conjecturally, ‘guessing at’ or ‘feeling one’s way towards’ an intuited goal or mean. However interpreted, Aristotle’s suggestive ‘στοχάζεσθαι’ commutes the dirigiste severity of ‘δεῖ’: at the very least it implies different degrees of conformity with an ideal model, and transforms rules from strictures to guidelines. In recapitulating and recalibrating Aristotelian theory and terminology, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century *artes poeticae* think through not just what their rules might be but ‘what rules themselves might be’ [Hetherington, xxx].

Finally, the essays presented here, beyond identifying and theorising the central cruces characterising early modern *artes poeticae*, invitingly open up further avenues of study. Two of the most pressing are these. First, *is there a poetics of reading?* If rules – however ambient, invisible, or unconscious – are Daedalian guidelines for composition, does sixteenth- and seventeenth-century poetics furnish a similar (the same?) set of rules to enable reading and interpretation? Does it envisage ‘an as-yet imagined future’ [Hetherington, xxx] for readers too, for whom there theoretically exist, the epigraphs above suggest, a range of measures (of varying utility) for judging literary achievement? Secondly, *how does early modern poetics draw instrumentally on other disciplines?* Hall demonstrates how ‘visualisation’ (*phantasia*) bridges literary and painterly traditions of sympathetic mimicry [xxx], and Hetherington traces poetics’ debts to architecture, geometry, and law, especially jurisprudential ‘thinking about equity’ [xxx]. Gauging such disciplinary imbrications reveals how early modern poetics teased out its dilemmas by borrowing terminology and epistemes from other fields. One such analogy has been touched on already, the Lesbian square glanced at by Hetherington [xxx.n] and grumpily rejected by Erasmus in the epigraph above. The Lesbian square, the lead rule used by architects from Lesbos adaptable to uneven curves, emblematised a flexible measure that could accommodate irregularity. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* (V.10, 1137b), Aristotle invokes it approvingly (Erasmus’ misrepresentation notwithstanding) as a metaphor for the flexibility required in ἐπιείκεια (equity). For Aristotle, the general rule is ‘defective’ precisely *because* of ‘its generality’ (‘ἐλλείπει διὰ τὸ καθόλου’).¹⁰

This *Afterword* began with Erasmus’ uneasy musings about the absence or loosening of what should be immutable, unyielding rules for measuring texts. Where the ‘unmarked rule’ is inadequate because, in failing to make distinctions, it implies a lack of judgement, Erasmus seems no less dissatisfied with the Lesbian rule (in its pliability no longer a rule at all) since it inverts the normal priorities of critical measurement. Abstract theory – inherently superior for Erasmus because timeless, absolute, unfaltering, invariable – is erroneously stretched to fit local particulars, in the process requiring spectacular contortions of judgement. The ‘*Lesbians* rule’ was no less imperfect for Sir Thomas Smith who maintained, later in the century, that a true ‘rule is alway to be understoode to be straight’, and all works ‘to be conformed’ to and ‘iudged’ by it: ‘the Artificer’ judges ‘the straightnesse of euerie mans worke’, whoever ‘goeth néerest to the straightnesse’ being ‘reckoned to make his worke perfectest’.¹¹

Changing attitudes to this Lesbian rule offer a convenient barometer of how poetics in the period 1500–1650 evolve as a discipline, propelled by contestation and revision. Erasmian

⁸ Scott 2013: 30.

⁹ Javitch 1999: 64.

¹⁰ Aristotle 1968: 316–17.

¹¹ Smith 1583: B1rv.

stringency slowly yields, and by the turn of the seventeenth century Daniel's *ottava rima* epistle to Sir Thomas Egerton has begun to recuperate 'that Lesbian square' as a pattern of equity, since it 'Plies to the worke, not forc'th the worke to it'.¹² More than simply a mind-bending image of rule-bending, the Lesbian square – the square that's not a square but a curve – starts being summoned as a standard for judging literary achievement: for Brathwaite, 'these *Comedians* ... speake for themselves ... Or may be properly referred to the *Lesbian rule of Menander*', arguing that moderation, not stringent adherence to a line, is 'that *Lesbian rule* which directs the *Modell*, and makes it truly accomplishd'.¹³ And in 1650, this volume's end-point, Robert Heath, a wonderfully odd one-man case-study of classical reception who composed Latin and Greek panegyric verse, translated the *Aeneid* in its entirety in the mid-1640s, and produced a Herrickian collection of love lyrics, occasional elegies, and Martialesque epigrams (*Clarastella*), addressed the readers of his 'Epigrams' with the following concession:

Though the title *Epigram* seems to carrie a sting in the taylor: yet the harmless Bee wil not wound, unless you first provoke it. Indeed an *Epigram* should be *aculeatum in caudâ*, where the whole force of the argument παρά προσδοκίαν should be syllogistically summed up in the conclusion. This Lesbian rule, I have endeavoured to keep, where perhaps I conclude sometimes with gall enough, but no spleen.¹⁴

Loosely endeavouring to keep an inherently loose rule, Heath draws on classical authority to sanction his literary practice, invoking, beyond the Lesbian rule, the figure of *paraprosdokian* – the unexpected final twist (or sting in the tail, *aculeatum in caudâ*) that forces readerly reconsideration of what has come before. Like the Lesbian rule, *paraprosdokian* connotes a lithe, malleable principle of licensed irregularity, one all the more lithe for being defined inconsistently by ancient commentators, for whom it encompassed both situational reversals and verbal, rhetorical twists. The figure is celebrated in Homer by, *inter alia*, Plutarch ('εὖ δὲ καὶ ὁ ποιητὴς οἶόν ἐστι τὸ παρὰ προσδοκίαν ἐδίδαξεν', in *Περὶ εὐθυμίας*, 475a) and Demetrius, singling out the *Odyssey*'s witty use of unexpected phrasing ('Ἔστι δὲ τις καὶ ἡ παρὰ [τὴν] προσδοκίαν χάρις', in *Περὶ ἑρμηνείας*, 152). Such metaphors, terminology, and analogies inherited from antiquity are inherently pliable, and available for reinterpretation and reapplication throughout the period 1500–1650: the Lesbian rule is itself a Lesbian rule, the principle of *paraprosdokian* itself subject to unexpected twists. It is in artfully bending the literary and theoretical inheritance of antiquity, these chapters have shown, that early modern *artes poeticae* press most keenly for closer attention, compelling us into further criticism, perhaps even taking us 'beyond the bounds of criticism' [Tregear, xxx], into a Polonian realm of poetics unlimited.

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¹² Daniel 1603: C3r.

¹³ Brathwaite 1630: 2B2r, 2S1r.

¹⁴ Heath 1650: E5v.

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