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Review of Matthew Woodcock, *Thomas Churchyard: Pen, Sword, and Ego*

1,597 words

Many scholars of Elizabethan literature have come across Thomas Churchyard and his works at some point. This is partly because of his relatively long life: born around 1529, he lived until 1604 and served five different monarchs, from Henry VIII to James I. But it is also because of his persistent literary productiveness over that long lifespan, and the wide range of genres in which he wrote: dream-vision, disputation, complaint, elegy, translation, military works, royal entertainments, travel writing, and more. Indeed Matthew Woodcock's book, the first full-length biography of Churchyard, lists in its Bibliography nearly fifty published works by its subject. If less specialised readers are unfamiliar with Churchyard, this may be for a reason that he ruefully acknowledged: he was not exactly in the premier league of Elizabethan poets. In 'Churchyardes dreame' he confessed (in his idiosyncratic spelling):

No gift of pen, the gods me sent
But sutch as in, wided world I fownd
And digged up, in stony grownd
Whear I do tomble, up but stoens.

Yet as this extract perhaps illustrates, his writing has a certain rugged charm, and conveys a distinctive voice and personality. He is also notable as an exemplar of the new commercial model of authorship which emerged in the sixteenth century, as the print shops and playhouses enabled non-elite writers to live by the pen, or at least to attempt to do so. It was a precarious way of making a living, but Churchyard unflaggingly put in the necessary hard graft, targeting potential patrons with dedications, gifting books strategically, and using prefaces to advertise further works to come. He even turned his own name into an alliterative

textual brand: *Churchyardes Chippes* of 1575, a miscellany, was followed by *Churchyardes Choise*, *Churchyardes Chance*, and his *Charge*, *Challenge*, *Charitie*, and *Cherishing*.

Churchyard also insistently inserted versions of himself into his works. Borrowing a phrase from the Spenserian scholar Richard McCabe, Woodcock calls Churchyard's writings 'autoreferential, rather than autobiographical', since they draw on his identity, personality, and life experiences without necessarily being entirely consistent or bound by strict factual accuracy. One of his most prominent self-constructions is as a soldier-author, turning to literary use his extensive military service in France, Scotland, Ireland, and the Netherlands. His first patron, Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, modelled the role of what Woodcock calls 'the writing, fighting man', and Churchyard became part of a 'golden generation' of Elizabethan soldier-authors that included Sir Humphrey Gilbert, George Gascoigne, and Barnaby Rich. His purpose was often to make retrospective sense of battle experiences that at the time were chaotic and bewildering, but he also sought to commemorate the heroism of his comrades, to draw attention to the neglect suffered by veterans, and to convey to civilian readers the full horrors of war. Recounting a sea battle with French galleys in the Firth of Forth, he describes how cannon-shot made legs and arms fly about, while 'The Siege of Leeth', in Woodcock's words, 'shows war as it is experienced at the end of a pike'.

Churchyard was no less keen on the use of words as weapons. Woodcock finds that his 'dominant character' is 'Churchyard the complainant or petitioner', adopted right from his first publication, *Davy Dycars Dreame* (1551). Emulating Langland and Skelton, he sets out the social and economic grievances of the common man (in this case a 'dyker', a ditcher or labourer) in a broadside poem which provoked a print controversy comprising sixteen further works by various authors. A few years later Churchyard composed a different kind of complaint, 'Shore's Wife', one of the first-person verse tragedies narrating a fall from high fortune that made up the multi-authored *Mirror for Magistrates*. Mistress Shore became the

mistress of Edward IV, then after his death was persecuted by Richard III. Churchyard represents her sympathetically as having used her influence over Edward to help deserving petitioners, but then finding herself unsupported by former friends in her downfall. Surrey and George Cavendish had previously written female-voiced complaints, but Woodcock finds that Churchyard's take on the genre is once again autoreferential, speaking indirectly of his own frustrations as an unrewarded servant of the crown and an insecure figure on the margins of the court. His poem anticipates by decades Samuel Daniel's *Complaint of Rosamond* (1592), often seen as a starting-point for the genre of female complaint in English; and Churchyard was similarly ahead of his time in composing 'A Letter in Maie' (1580), an epistolary poem praising the Hertfordshire estate of Henry Knollys and the hospitality of its owner, and again preceding by decades the country-house poems by Aemilia Lanier and Ben Jonson that are usually seen as inaugurating this genre.

Another, rather different role adopted by Churchyard was that of court entertainer. It seems to have been as a performer rather than an author that he first became involved in royal pageants: in 1564 a mock-battle staged at court to entertain French ambassadors was opened by Churchyard as herald, dressed in crimson armour. He went on to organise and write entertainments for royal visits to Bristol in 1574 and Norwich in 1578, the latter of which aligned themselves with the growing opposition to the Queen's proposed marriage to the French Catholic Duke of Anjou, thereby helping to develop the iconography of Elizabeth as Virgin Queen that would dominate her last two decades. Churchyard took care to get his entertainments published – with his name on them of course – and to use the opportunity to present idealised versions of the events. In reality, not all the shows were performed, because of adverse weather or shifting schedules. At Norwich heavy rain forced Churchyard to abandon a pageant involving schoolboys dressed as nymphs who would 'poppe up' from a concealed pit to greet Elizabeth; but he seems to have recycled some of its ingredients for a

semi-improvised farewell show on the final day: '[I] being apparelled like a water Sprite, beganne to sounde a Timbrall [i.e. tambourine] ... I ledde the yong foolishe Phayries a daunce, which boldnesse of mine bredde no disgrace, and as I heard said, was well taken'. It seems hard to reconcile Churchyard as tough, plain-speaking warrior and pugnacious print disputant with Churchyard the water-sprite, but he was evidently happy to play the court jester when occasion required it. 1581 found him at the Scottish court on mysterious business – possibly as a turncoat supplying information to the Scottish government, possibly as a double-agent secretly serving England as he later claimed – where an observer described him as 'ane Sausie Jeaster and gud poet ... worthy of gud treatment for his myrry Jeastis and saucy snakis' (snappish remarks or jibes). Perhaps in those 'saucy snakis' we can discern how the court jester and textual combatant fit together.

Churchyard's preferred metres were fourteeners, or poulter's measure (alternating fourteen and twelve syllable lines), both of which were fashionable at the beginning of his career but had come to seem antiquated and awkward well before its end. Other features of his style included frequent alliteration; mid-line caesuras, even if not appropriate to the metre or sense; much recourse to proverbial wisdom and commonplaces; and *amplificatio*, or saying the same thing in numerous different ways. There was little or no development in his style over his long career; Woodcock finds that 'late Elizabethan Churchyard reads very much like Edwardian Churchyard'. Some technical skill is sometimes evident: one panegyric of Elizabeth consists of twenty lines which can be read as fourteeners, or which can be broken apart at their caesuras to form two separate poems, one in trimeter, the other in tetrameter. However, when Churchyard took it upon himself to versify the *Defence of Poesy* by Sir Philip Sidney – another writing, fighting man – as *A Praise of Poetrie* (1595), he reduced the sophistication and *sprezzatura* of Sidney's argument and style to a bare assertion

that the right kind of poetry can be morally improving, and can ‘alter manners and bad kind / To frame a better way’.

Churchyard knew that he was not the greatest poet of the age, and as the years passed he also acknowledged that he had outlived his time. In 1587, approaching the age of sixty but with nearly two decades of life still to go, he wrote of his physical infirmities:

... joynts ware stiffe, and bodie heavie growes,
And backe bends downe, to earth where corps must lye:
And legges be lame, and gowte creepes in the toes,
Cold crampe, and cough, makes groaning goast to crye.

But his response was – what else? – simply to keep writing: ‘When fits are past, if any rest is found, / Plye pen againe, for that shall purchase praise’. There is something both admirable and endearing about his indomitable persistence, and it’s pleasing to know that in his later years he received a royal pension, the only Elizabethan author beside Spenser to do so (though in Churchyard’s case it may have been for organising a muster of troops in Kent more than for his poetry).

Churchyard often comes across as an old curmudgeon, but he must have looked back with some satisfaction at his long and immensely prolific career. Woodcock succeeds in making us look at it afresh to learn much about writing and fighting, constructing an authorial self, and negotiating the challenges of professional authorship in the rapidly changing conditions of late sixteenth-century England. It’s hard not to like an author who describes his task, as Churchyard does, as to ‘make my pen my plow, / And proove awhile, what printed bookes will doe: / To helpe old Tom, to get a supper too.’