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# REVIEWS

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George T. Wright. *Hearing the Measures: Shakespearean and Other Inflections. Selected Essays by George T. Wright*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001. 327p.

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George T. Wright is Regents' Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Minnesota. *Hearing the Measures* reflects his lifetime of dedication and scholarly practice in literary analysis of poetic effects achieved through language. As he puts it in the preface, "Given the interest of the subject and the writer's attitude toward it, what is it in the language, in the English, that gives expressive force to this poem, this play, this line, this speech, this stanza?" (xi).

Wright groups his 13 essays into three sections: "Trope, Tense, Measure" (which includes essays on hendiadys and *Hamlet*, the "lyric tense," and "measure" in *Measure for Measure*), "Lines of the Poets" (with essays on the lines and stanzas of Wyatt, Donne, Yeats, and Lowell, plus an "exchange" with X.J. Kennedy and the "Troubles of a Professional Meter Reader," a title that demonstrates Wright's delightful sense of irony and ambiguity), and "Oral or Literate, Silent or Sounded" (which concludes the book with essays on Jacobean theatrical blank verse, Shakespeare's stage language, and the "Silent Speech" in Shakespeare's *Sonnets*).

The essays, written over more than 25 years, offer many interesting and, at times, astonishing insights, though as is perhaps inevitable one may offer a quibble or two here or there: for instance, 1) "the kinds of discourse to be found in his [Shakespeare's] plays still seem bewilderingly various, *beyond the wisdom and reach of any single commentator*" (11; italics mine)—a statement I find unnecessarily gloomy; 2) his interpretation of the Duke's "This *wide and universal* theatre" (13; italics his) in *As You Like It*, which to me melds the concrete ("wide") with the abstract ("universal"), a combining of both (both modify "theatre," which is simultaneously "wide and universal," as the Duke says) rather than "this theatre, wide as the universe," or "this wide theatre of the universe," suggesting adjective-noun modification, as Wright says; 3) "in poetry ... we often do not know at all when the events are supposed to have taken or to be taking place" (49), which I believe largely irrelevant to the expression of the feeling; and 4), in reference to *Measure for Measure*, "In this world, *protected* by the continued but

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invisible presence of the Duke” (81; italics mine), it might more readily be argued that the Duke’s presence *imperils* the characters, since it is his machinations that create Claudio’s and Isabella’s difficulties with the law and authorities.

Wright does metrical analysis exceptionally well, particularly of Wyatt’s “rough” verse, to which he assigns the “dual basis of English iambic verse: that the metrical line and the natural rhythm of the language engage each other in a continuing struggle” as Wyatt’s “expressiveness and formality” (103), not as Wyatt’s “weakness” in versification. Wyatt’s lines are regular decasyllabics, not botched and patched meter. In the essay “Donne’s Sculptured Stanzas,” Wright reveals Donne’s technique of “combining iambic pentameter with shorter and longer iambic lines to form strophic units” (123)—his poems are, after all, “*Songs and Sonets*” (italics mine), and songs bear variation better than formal marching iambs in “dangerous decasyllabic,” as he puts it nicely (123).

In “Yeats’ Expressive Style,” Wright does what few critics today seem willing to do: he divorces philosophy from poetry long enough to take apart “Crazy Jane on God,” noting that criticism has “subordinated poetry to philosophy; it has ceased to be connected to poetry at all, or at least with that chief characteristic of poets, their amazing command of language” (134). Poets find “exactly the right words, rhythms, and phrases” to write “memorably” (135), and any analysis of poetry ought to include its structure and meaning, as derived from its internal workings, and not merely from the poem’s “place” in some other context. It is nice to hear that again, even if it does hearken back to (what now seems like) the “golden age” of the New Critics. Unfortunately, in such an approach, many today find too little to content themselves with, refusing to see in such simple and obvious analytics qualification for “intellectual discourse.” I believe it ought to inform any analysis of literature, and often stand alone, but then that’s what I was raised to believe. So, too, I would guess was Wright.

The essays yield good fruit, even if all of Wright’s suppositions will not reinforce some people’s expectations. They reflect a lifetime of close attention to some important notions about the study of language in literature. ✱