

Chapter 2

GEORGE CAVENDISH'S HISTORIOGRAPHICAL MOMENT

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IT IS A truism to observe that moments of revolution, reformation, and transformation prompt reflection and experimentation in art. Nevertheless, surveying the literary outputs of the Cavendishes shows us how these reflections and experiments speak in a diachronic kind of way—both about and across time—from what researchers normally see. To follow on from Lisa Hopkins's point that a general lack of conventional poetic technique typifies the Cavendish family canon, focusing on three centuries of a single family's outputs rather than a collection of accomplished or thematically connected texts allows us to see a very different kind of evolving literary culture that could either move with or push against contemporary trends. The most famous literary Cavendish—Margaret, whose works are examined in Chapters 10 and 11 in this volume—used poetry to consider scientific questions: in this volume, Lisa Walters argues that Margaret “escapes” from the seventeenth-century push towards what Robert Hooke called a “plainness” of scientific language. Margaret instead uses poetry and language to explore the philosophic and scientific, and we can see how she worked consciously against developing trends in natural philosophy to test how best to work through these most difficult questions about the nature of the world. In a similar manner, we can see George Cavendish, ancestor of Margaret's husband, weighing the relative capabilities of poetry and prose to illuminate the past, testing his own sense of verisimilitude and poetic style against changing contemporary ideas about how to write about the past.

As George sat in comfortable retirement in rural Suffolk in the 1550s, it must have seemed to him—as to many of his contemporaries—that there were important lessons to be taken from a turbulent past and applied to an uncertain present. Having served as gentleman usher to Thomas Cardinal Wolsey (ca. 1470–1530) for at least the final eight years of Wolsey's life, George was an eyewitness to and participant in elements of some of the most important political and religious events of the early Henrician period. He was personally acquainted with many of the famous and infamous personages involved in Henry VIII's divorce, from Katherine of Aragon and Anne Boleyn to Mark Smeaton; he was in service to Cardinal Wolsey when Martin Luther's books began to make their impact felt in England, and he witnessed Wolsey's early monastic dissolutions; and his second marriage (probably in the early 1520s) was to Margery Kempe, niece by marriage to Sir Thomas More.¹ George was well placed to observe the gaps between the public perceptions of these important figures and their more private personalities.

¹ George Cavendish, *The Life and Death of Cardinal Wolsey*, ed. Richard S. Sylvester (Oxford: Early English Text Society, 1959), xx.

Born into a Suffolk-based family of minor courtiers (previously mercers and drapers), George Cavendish in some ways typified the civil and courtly servants who rose from the developing Tudor bureaucracy to establish new aristocratic families in the seventeenth century.² George's younger brother William—the founder of the aristocratic Cavendish dynasty—would go on to become MP for Thirsk, deputy chancellor of the exchequer, and second husband of Bess of Hardwick; however, George removed himself from public service following the death of Wolsey in November 1530 and retired to the family holdings in Suffolk.³

It was in this retirement that Cavendish would write two important texts, marking the beginning of the Cavendish family's known literary outputs. As an amateur author like his descendant William (considered by Matthew Steggle in [Chapter 5](#)), George's two main works were not intended for a wide commercial circulation; unlike William, George was not known as a patron or to have been particularly interested in wider literary or historiographical influence. These two texts have largely been restricted to modern readerships from the eighteenth century onwards, and the more influential of the two has been *The Life and Death of Cardinal Wolsey* (1554). Once assumed to have been the work of younger brother William, the *Life* is a lengthy prose biography of Wolsey written from the perspective of his gentleman usher. It has often been mined by historians interested in the development of the Henrician bureaucracy and court, as George provided extensive detail about Wolsey's day-to-day interactions, estate, and conduct (much of which he witnessed himself; for the rest, it appears he relied on accounts from Edward Hall's *Union of the Two Noble and Illustrate Houses of Lancastre and Yorke* and from remembered conversations with Wolsey himself).⁴ The *Life* would become influential in the mid-Tudor period, circulating widely in manuscript and forming the basis for anecdotes in texts by Stow, Speed, and Holinshed.⁵ The second text by George was a collection of poems, later titled the *Metrical Visions* by their nineteenth-century editor Samuel W. Singer.⁶ These poems are presented as *de casibus* tragedies in the tradition of Boccaccio and Lydgate, wherein the spirits of notable court figures from the 1520s speak to the sleeping author about fortune, vice, and the tribulations of court life. The bucolic dream vision of George places the *Visions* in the long line of dream literature stretching from Virgil and Boccaccio to Chaucer, Sannazaro, Lydgate, Skelton, and Sidney.

² Cavendish, *Life and Death*, xvii.

³ Cavendish, *Life and Death*, xxii; Sybil M. Jack, "Cavendish, William (1508–1557)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

⁴ Cavendish, *Life and Death*, xxx–xxxii.

⁵ Cavendish, *Life and Death*, xi.

⁶ As A. S. G. Edwards notes, one of the few extant manuscript copies (London, British Library, MS Dugdale 28) calls them "diuers Elegieciall Poems on sundry persons" (fol. 219r), which is a bit of a mouthful in comparison. George Cavendish, *The Metrical Visions*, ed. A. S. G. Edwards (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1980), 17.

While the *Life* has been utilized by historians for generations and circulated in manuscript during the sixteenth century, the *Metrical Visions* have been subjected to less scrutiny, though they act as an important—even essential—aspect of George's historiographical thinking and literary importance. Neither has been very important to modern Tudor scholarship, however: the *Life* generally has been picked over for historical details, while the *Visions* have long lingered on the “periphery” (even the extreme periphery) of the canon.⁷ This is surprising for several reasons. First, George Cavendish was a literary and historiographical innovator. The *Life* is one of the earliest secular biographies in English, and the *Visions* represent our earliest examples of first-person *de casibus* poems in English, predating the first edition of the influential poetic collection *A Mirror for Magistrates* by nearly a decade. Crucially, these were not accidental innovations: while dating of the *Visions*-poems is uncertain, George appears to have begun writing them prior to 1554 before breaking off to write the *Life* in direct response to the perceived deficiencies of historians such as Edward Hall and Polydore Vergil.⁸ Upon finishing the *Life* in 1554, George returned to his *Visions*, which were completed sometime around 1558. George was not motivated exclusively by the impulse to defend his old master (though undoubtedly he sought to clear up matters “inventyd ... to bring ... honest names into infamie”); instead, he experimented with poetic and prose forms to work out how best to correct the “blasphemous trompe” of the “rude commonalty” that had come to the fore in representing the coalescing sense(s) of a narrativized English past constructed by authors like Hall and Vergil.⁹ George opened the *Life* with a direct statement that his purpose in writing was to combat rumour and reveal truth. In this, he tied into concerns about how best to represent the past voiced previously by the polemicist John Bale and later by Abraham Fleming, the editor of the 1587 edition of Holinshed's *Chronicles*.¹⁰ We can conclude that George was thinking actively and critically about how to use genre and form to alter senses and contemporary applications of the past.

Despite these experiments, George had limited influence as either a literary or a historiographical figure. There is no evidence to suggest that George was known by his contemporaries as a reader or writer of much significance; the popularity of the *Life* among writers like John Stow can be attributed to George's eye for detail rather than a clearly articulated methodological or stylistic appreciation. The *Visions* circulated to a far lesser degree than the *Life*, if they were circulated at all: only three manuscript copies are known to exist, one of which is George's holograph fair copy and another of which is

⁷ P. L. Wiley, “Renaissance Exploitation of Cavendish's ‘Life of Wolsey,’” *Studies in Philology* 43 (1946): 121–46; Harriet Archer, “‘Those chronicles whiche other men had’: ‘Paralipsis’ and Blenerhasset's ‘Seconde Part of the Mirror for Magistrates’ (1578),” in *A Mirror for Magistrates in Context: Literature, History, and Politics*, ed. Harriet Archer and Andrew Hadfield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 147–63, 148.

⁸ Edwards dates the earliest poems to 1552. For more, see Cavendish, *Metrical Visions*, 7–9.

⁹ Cavendish, *Life and Death*, 4. The holograph manuscript Sylvester follows is London, British Library, MS Egerton 2402.

¹⁰ Gavin Schwartz-Leeper, *From Princes to Pages: The Literary Lives of Cardinal Wolsey, Tudor England's “Other King”* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 180–82.

fragmentary.¹¹ This limited readership might have been the choice of the author or the result of his irregular metre and relative social isolation. In the mid-twentieth century, Paul Wiley traced the limited contemporary or subsequent references to George's works, and future work might provide grounds to argue for a more diffuse influence. This argument is never easy to make, and Richard Wood's essay in this volume (Chapter 6: "William Cavendish and Elizabethan Nostalgia") highlights the difficulty of the task. William (Earl of Newcastle) was George's descendant, at least as likely as any seventeenth-century writer to have access to manuscript copies of the *Life* or *Metrical Visions*. William was himself concerned with history-writing and the Tudor—specifically, Elizabethan—court and as interested in the problems of historical representation and contemporary application of the past as was his ancestor (see Chapter 6), but there is no definite evidence that he ever read George's writings.

George was not uneducated, however, and both the *Life* and *Visions* indicate substantial influences in his poetic and historiographic thinking. As George himself indicated, the *Life* was written as a direct response to historians like Edward Hall, and it absorbed many of the methodological concerns with the reliability of evidence and specificity of detail that typify the Tudor humanist histories; indeed, as we will see, many of the anecdotes in the *Life* were drawn from Hall's *Vnion* despite George's antipathy towards its anti-Wolsey stance. On the poetic side, in addition to the clear Lydgatian framework of the *Visions*, Mike Pincombe finds echoes of Virgil's *Eclogues* (we might be more specific and highlight Eclogue IV), William Neville's *Castle of Pleasure* (1530), and Guillaume Alexis's *Argument Betwixt Man and Woman* (1525).¹² A. S. G. Edwards notes that John Skelton began his *Garland of Laurel* (1523) with a similar dream vision, which Cavendish may have encountered during his time with Wolsey.¹³ There are also limited connections between other poems by Skelton, the anonymous satire *Godly Quene Hester* (ca. 1529), and the *Metrical Visions*.¹⁴

It is difficult to tell if George was influenced directly by non-English writers; while the *Visions* have clear echoes of Virgil's *Eclogues*, Boethius's *De consolazione philosophiae*, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, and Sannazaro's *Arcadia*, it is far from certain that George could read Italian (or, indeed, whether his Latin or Greek were particularly developed). His education was fairly standard for a young man of his social rank, having left Cambridge without taking a degree.¹⁵ His position in Wolsey's service was not a political one, so while he may have been expected to negotiate administrative issues of a personal nature

¹¹ Cavendish, *Metrical Visions*, 4. The copies are: MS Egerton 2402, fols. 94–151 (in holograph); London, British Library, MS Additional 14,410, fols. 100–102; and MS Dugdale 28, fols. 228v–264.

¹² Mike Pincombe, "A Place in the Shade: George Cavendish and *De Casibus* Tragedy," in *The Oxford Handbook of Tudor Literature, 1485–1603*, ed. Mike Pincombe and Cathy Shrank (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 372–88, 380.

¹³ Cavendish, *Metrical Visions*, 151.

¹⁴ Schwartz-Leeper, *Princes to Pages*, 92–94.

¹⁵ Cavendish, *Life and Death*, xvii, following C. H. Cooper and Thompson Cooper, ed., *Athenae Cantabrigienses* (1858), 1:217.

for the Cardinal on Wolsey's limited foreign trips, it is far from certain that he had substantial language skills or conducted those negotiations directly himself. We can be reasonably sure that George had direct access to Hall's *Union*, the *Fall of Princes*, and a limited number of other early sixteenth-century texts in English (and perhaps Latin). When considering his experimentations with verse and prose history-writing, we should therefore be cautious about inferring a direct and conscious attempt to enter into a wider methodological debate. Instead, George was conducting effectively private experiments with how best to understand the past; as we will see below, in so doing he foreshadowed more articulate discussions from writers like Spenser and Sidney, as well as more public interventions from the authors of *A Mirror for Magistrates*.

The Speaking Dead: George Cavendish, Thomas Churchyard, and *Eidolopoeia*

While George's own direct influence was limited and difficult to trace beyond the specific references or anecdotal appropriations that have been identified by scholars like Paul Wiley, reading the *Life* and *Metrical Visions* alongside any of the English *de casibus* poetry of the sixteenth century shows clearly that George was a comparatively early participant in the mid- and late-Tudor debates about how *de casibus* texts could help readers to understand the past. That George broke off from his *Metrical Visions* to write the *Life* in defence of Wolsey (and in so doing provided a competing interpretation of the "true history" of the early Henrician court) provides us with an opportunity to examine how George and his contemporaries experimented with historiography, genre, and style. To illuminate how George's texts—and the understudied *Visions* specifically—tie into contemporary efforts to make sense of the recent past, this study will compare them with perhaps the most influential mid/late-Tudor *de casibus* poetic collection, *A Mirror for Magistrates*; in particular, it will focus on the contributions to the *Mirror* from Tudor soldier-poet and stalwart Thomas Churchyard (ca. 1529–1604).¹⁶ Churchyard and George shared little biographically: though both were born into mercantile families (like George, many of Churchyard's progenitors were drapers), they were separated by the substantial confessional gulf of the English Reformation. George was a moderate conservative, while Churchyard exhibited reformist sympathies.¹⁷ George served only one master that we know of—Wolsey—and rarely travelled outside England, while Churchyard saw service across Europe under five English monarchs. George's literary outputs were modest in scope, while Churchyard was one of the most prolific authors of the sixteenth century. George was a court servant with a bureaucratic background, whereas Churchyard's primary employment was as a soldier: his first war was with

¹⁶ Churchyard is the subject of a recent and authoritative biography by Matthew Woodcock, *Thomas Churchyard: Sword, Pen, and Ego* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹⁷ For George Cavendish's religious alignment, see A. S. G. Edwards, "Cavendish, George (b. 1494, d. in or before 1562?)" in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*; for Churchyard's, see Woodcock, *Thomas Churchyard*, 91.

Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, in the 1543 Anglo-Imperial campaign against the French, and he served in generations of Tudor wars on the continent.¹⁸ George retired to not-insignificant family holdings following the death of Wolsey in November 1530, whereas Churchyard established a notoriety for complaints about poverty as he sought patronage and employment at court for decades.

Yet both appear to have been fairly moderate in their religious beliefs, and, like George Cavendish's texts, Churchyard's *Mirror* contributions were written later in life as the author looked back over a tumultuous life on the edge of the Tudor court. Having lived through and participated in many of the machinations, wars, and upheavals of five monarchs, Churchyard's reflections on the past were shaped by many of the same anxieties and hopes as George's. Like the *Visions*, the *Mirror* sought to provide its readers with explorations of the lessons of the past framed through a series of eidolopoetic poems: speeches from the ghosts of notable men and women. Eidolopoeia—defined by Richard Rainolde in his 1563 *Foundacion of rhetorike* as when “a dedde manne talketh”—allows an author to exploit the didactic power of the past without necessarily committing to the public articulation of personal political or religious belief.¹⁹ However, what the *Mirror* shares with George's texts (and the *Visions* in particular) stands in contrast with what it does not: whereas George wrote alone, the *Mirror* was composed and revised by a substantial team of contributors including some of Tudor England's best-known writers, ranging from mid-Tudor satirist and novelist William Baldwin to Anthony Munday. While George's texts were circulated in limited fashion, the *Mirror* was one of the most popular and influential texts in early modern England.²⁰ Despite their differences, we will see how the *Mirror* and George's texts reveal much about each other and Tudor experiments in history-writing.

The importance and purpose of this experimentation in how to tell the stories of the past is emphasized by history-writers of every variety across the period. As an example, if we turn to the work of the mid-century printer and historian Richard Grafton, we can see a central ambiguity about the way(s) in which history-writing should appear and what the consequences of those authorial choices might be. In his verse epistle to his edition of John Hardyng's *Chronicle*, Grafton wrote that chronicles “dooe recorde and testifie” (fol. 7r) and act as a “lanterne, to the posteritee” (fol. 8r).²¹ The primary meaning

¹⁸ Woodcock, *Thomas Churchyard*, 44–45.

¹⁹ Richard Rainolde, *A booke called the Foundacion of Rhetorike* (London, 1563), fol. l. For a detailed consideration of eidolopoetics and history-writing in the early modern period, see Sherry Roush, *Speaking Spirits: Ventriloquizing the Dead in Renaissance Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015).

²⁰ Scott Lucas, “Hall's Chronicle and the ‘Mirror for Magistrates’: History and the Tragic Pattern,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Tudor Literature, 1485–1603*, ed. Mike Pincombe and Cathy Shrank (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 356–71, 362.

²¹ John Hardyng, *Chronicle of John Hardyng* (London, 1543). Copy held by Johns Hopkins University, Sheridan Libraries: DA130.H35 1543 c.1.

of these claims regards the literal events of the past and the interpretive uses of those events, as Grafton highlights:

By chronicles we knowe, thynges auncient
The succession of tymes, and menne
The state of policies, with their regiment
How long eche partie hath ruled, and when
And what wer all their procedynges then.
Chronicles make reporte of matters dooen
And passed many thousande yeres gooen.
(fol. 7r)

However, Grafton was not simply recording the past; he was showing how the past can “testifie”: speak its truth. As Tyndale translated John 3:11, “We speake that we knowe, and testify that we have sene”; engaging with the truths of the past requires not just a record but a performance of knowledge.²² For this reason it is significant that George’s *Metrical Visions* are framed as eidolopoetic laments. It is this performative and instructive rhetorical structuring that links the *Metrical Visions* most closely to *A Mirror for Magistrates*; both feature first-person laments from a range of historical figures like Richard II, Anne Boleyn, and Cardinal Wolsey, whose poems open the *Metrical Visions* and conclude the 1587 edition of the *Mirror*.

As Sherry Roush has argued in one of the few extended studies of eidolopoeia, for early modern writers, eidolopoeia was a crucial figure used for two purposes, both of which bring together the structural and stylistic choices of George and the *Mirror* poets.²³ First, eidolopoeia was used to establish authority for a text: the author channelled the spirit of the eyewitness, the monarch, or the demonstrative figure to provide first-person performative truth-telling, to testify that which they have seen. Crucially, the reader (or audience) must recognize the authority of the spirit being channelled: either the author must convincingly introduce the spirit so as to justify its testimony, or the reader must come to the text already knowing the spirit’s deeds, reputation, or importance. In the *Metrical Visions* and *A Mirror for Magistrates*, we find examples of both categories: in the *Visions*, George Cavendish gives Anne Boleyn the same space to speak as her alleged lover Mark Smeaton. In the *Mirror*, lesser-known gentry and nobility rub shoulders with great monarchs and prelates: all are framed as providing important lessons through authorial interventions or direct appeals to the reader.

Second, eidolopoeia was used to provoke an action or a reaction: the dead do not appear simply to ruminate, but to teach, warn, or advise. They are able to do so not just because they were important in life or were witnesses to important events but because they have been made “perfect” in death: having died, they are now able to more fully understand their own triumphs and errors in a context that extends beyond the subject

²² For more on the intersection between religious conceptions of truth and performativity in Tudor England, see Andreas Höfele, *Stake, Stage, and Scaffold: Humans and Animals in Shakespeare’s Theatre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

²³ Roush, *Speaking Spirits*, 4.

to include the reader.²⁴ This power (or perspective) is made clear in both the Wolsey-poems from the *Metrical Visions* and the *Mirror*. As the *Visions*-Wolsey finishes his tale of “warblyng dole” (line 70), he makes the moral of his story clear to the dreaming George:

Loo nowe may you se. what it is to trust
 In wordly vanytes / that voydyth with the wyng
 Ffor deathe in a moment / consumyth all to dust
 No honor. no glory. / that euer man cowlde fynd
 But tyme with hys tyme / puttythe all owt of mynd
 Ffor tyme in breafe tyme / duskyth the history
 Of them that long tyme / lyved in glory.
 (lines 218–24)²⁵

So too observes the Churchyard-Wolsey, making explicit the apocalyptic exegetical link between a classically informed circumspection regarding Fortune and humility to Matthew 25:1–13, the parable of the ten virgins:

He needs must fall, that looks not where hee goes,
 And on the stars, walkes staring goezling like:
 On sodayne oft, a blostring tempest bloes,
 Than downe great trees, are tumbled in the dike.
 Who knows the time, and howre when God will strike?
 Then looke about, and marke what steps yee take,
 Before you pace, the pilgrimage yee make.
 (lines 379–85)²⁶

The operative verb in both passages is “look”: both Wolseys warn their listeners (and by extension the reader) to play an active role in the cultivation of a good life. This, then, is the central thrust of both George’s and Churchyard’s poetic experiment: to urge the reader to reflect on notable examples from the past in light of the reader’s own mortality and imperfections. This cuts to the heart of Tudor concerns with history-writing: the didactic and authoritative appeal of *de casibus* narratives made clear *why* Tudor writers and readers felt they should learn about the past. Now we can examine *how* this process was enacted.

Learning from the Past: Tudor Historiopoetics

Beyond the use of idolopoetic framing, there is a more fundamental generic concern that links the *Visions*, the *Mirror*, and the excerpt from John Hardyng’s *Chronicle* as

²⁴ Roush, *Speaking Spirits*, 6. This idea of the dead becoming “perfect” is rooted in long-running exegetical thought running from Psalm 110 and St. Augustine to Dante and Auerbach.

²⁵ I have reproduced George’s grammar and punctuation following Edwards’s transcription. Virgules without brackets are authorial; virgules with brackets [/] are my additions to indicate line breaks.

²⁶ Quotations are from Lily B. Campbell, ed., *The Mirror for Magistrates* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938).

quoted above: all three of these texts were composed in verse. The poetics of these texts require further examination: they are markedly different texts on a structural level, but they share a common concern with how to depict the past. The use of verse (or poetry) was by no means the only—or even the dominant—method of writing history. The process of determining the appropriate method for representing the past is, in part, illuminated by Grafton's epistle to the reader added to Hardyng's *Chronicle*. The epistle is in verse—like the rest of Hardyng's text—but Grafton's "continuation" of the *Chronicle* was in prose. This switching between verse and prose reveals how the authors entered into the wider debates regarding the way in which the past could be accessed and understood through a broad Aristotelian framework. As Aristotle wrote in [chapter 9](#) of the *Poetics*, poetry and history are both instructive, but "one [history] relates actual events, the other [poetry] the kinds of things that might occur".²⁷ While history can be written using poetic structures (in an Aristotelian model), it is concerned with particulars (ἕκαστον λέγει), while poetry is concerned with universals (τὰ καθόλου). The shifting emphasis on empiricism through which the people and events of the sixteenth century are represented in the *Life*, *Visions*, and *Mirror* indicate a continuous and unclear series of experiments about whether these stories about the past can be both universal and specific: if they can communicate universal truths or teach lessons when composed in verse or prose, acting as both poetry and history.

However, Aristotle's *Poetics* has a complex critical history, as Micha Lazarus has recently demonstrated: it is difficult to tell how mid-century writers like Grafton or George Cavendish (or Churchyard) would have encountered the *Poetics*.²⁸ Would they have read it in Greek or in a Latin translation? Did they read it at all or rely on a more diffuse interpretation drawn from a broader awareness of the humanist debates around Greek philology and scholarship that ran throughout their writing careers?

Regardless of how Grafton or George Cavendish encountered Aristotle (or Aristotelian commentary), their texts demonstrate three points. First, this perceived Aristotelian binary was not rigid; poetry and prose allowed history-writers to move along a structural spectrum that ranged from direct accounts of deeds done to abstracted musings on the truths that the past can illuminate. Second, this spectrum was not well defined, and George's switching between *de casibus* poetry and biographical prose demonstrates an attempt to work out how best to "testify" regarding the people and events to which he bore witness. Third, George Cavendish may have been a participant in this debate, but he was not the only one. As we will see, George's idolopoetic *de casibus* poems foreshadowed those found in the monumental text *A Mirror for Magistrates*, the often-expanded collection of mid- and late-Tudor poems explicitly pitched as morally instructive ruminations on fate. In comparing the *Metrical Visions* with the *Mirror*—and using the Wolsey-poems found in both—we can see how history-writing in verse was practised during the second half of the sixteenth century and how these texts were concerned

²⁷ Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Stephen Halliwell (Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, 1999), 59.

²⁸ Micha Lazarus, "Aristotelian Criticism in Sixteenth-Century England," *Oxford Handbooks Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 9.

with intertwining both the “particular” and the “universal.” Indeed, George described his poetic *Visions* as a “hystory” (line 78), establishing that the poems should be read through a historiopoetic lens (rather than a strictly historical or poetic one).

Comparing the Texts

One of the reasons why *A Mirror for Magistrates* has been under-studied by modern researchers is that it is difficult to interpret. As Donald Jellerson has argued, it is difficult for readers (contemporary or modern) to draw explicit lessons from *A Mirror for Magistrates* beyond a general exhortation to live a good life in the expectation that it could end without notice and all one’s hard work will be lost to time (or, if one has led a bad life, one might not have a chance to repent and rectify past mistakes). To demonstrate this difficulty, Jellerson points out the fate of the otherwise positive Thomas Montague, Earl of Salisbury: shot in the face in his moment of triumph at the siege of Orléans, and thus demonstrating to the reader “the vncertaynty of glory” even for a worthy person.²⁹ Yet there is a broader message here that links positive figures like Montague with more mixed figures like Cardinal Wolsey. Read through an apocalyptic theology drawn from the parable of the ten virgins in Matthew 25:1–13; these stories urge readers to focus on the cultivation of their souls rather than the attainment of earthly goals.

This is not just good theology: it is also practical advice. George Cavendish opens his *Metrical Visions* with the question that plagues all students of history confronted with the complexity of interpreting the past. While falling asleep under an oak tree, George finds his mind turning to Fortune and wonders:

How some are by ffortune / exalted to Riches
And often suche / as most vnworthy be
And some oppressed / in langor and syknes /
Some waylyng lakkyng welthe / by wretched pouertie
Some in bayle and bondage / and some at libertie
With other moo gyftes / of ffortune Varyable.
Some pleasaunt / Somme mean / and some onprofitable.
(lines 8–14)

This is the question that lies at the heart of the difficulties that modern readers encounter in the *Mirror*: how do we make sense of these stories? The *Mirror* authors respond with a less-than-satisfying answer: “To what ende (quoth one) muse we so much on this matter. This Earle [Montague] is neyther the first nor the last whom Fortune hath foundered in the heyth of their prosperitie.”³⁰ The company of poets moves on to James I of Scotland

²⁹ *Mirror*, ed. Campbell, tragedy 9, line 274, 153; see also Donald Jellerson, “The Spectral Historiopoetics of the ‘Mirror for Magistrates,’” *Journal of the Northern Renaissance* 2 (2010): online: www.northernrenaissance.org/the-spectral-historiopoetics-of-the-mirror-for-magistrates.

³⁰ *Mirror*, prose 9, lines 4–5, 154.

with little further discussion. George Cavendish, however, provides a justification for his own inability to see a clearer pattern in these stories:

But after dewe serche / and better advisement
 I knewe by Reason / that oonly God above.
 Rewlithe thos thynges / as is most convenient
 The same devydyng / to man for his behove.
 Wherefore dame Reason / did me perswade and move /
 To be content / with this my small estat
 And in this matter no more to vestigate /
 (lines 15–21)

For the *Mirror* poets, the purpose of these stories is to demonstrate how both divine providence and fortune work together to punish the proud (or, if the person has lived a good life and is nevertheless cut down, that readers should take it to be a lesson on being prepared for death). For George, a true understanding of the past belongs to God alone; we can only try to live well according to previous examples and hope for the best. In this figuring, pre-Christian ideas about fate and history can fit into a Christian mythos. George frames his *Visions* as inspired by God, not by the epic Muse Calliope:

To whome therefore / for helpe shall I nowe call
 Alas Caliope my calling wyll vtterly refuse /
 Ffor morning dities / and woo of fortunes falle
 Caliope dyd neuer. / in hir dyties vse.
 Wherefore to hir I might my self abuse
 Also the musis that on Parnasus syng
 Suche warblyng dole / did neuer tempor stryng
 Nowe to that lord / whos power is celestiall
 And gwydyth all thing of sadness and of blysse
 With humbe voyce. / to the I crie and call
 That thou woldest direct / my sely pen in this
 Ffor wantyng of thy helpe / no mervell though I mysse
 And by thy grace / thoughe my stele be rude
 In sentence playn / may full well conclude.
 (lines 64–77)

For George, his *Visions* are not some kind of high art requiring a poet's muse: indeed, the classical gods and goddesses are dangerous figures whose presence indicates a problematic life. The *Visions*-Wolsey and George both acknowledge "Fortune," but both author and subject are focused on a Christian theology. By contrast, the spirit of Henry VIII found in the *Visions* begs and pleads with the Hellenic Fates to be allowed to speak: "Geve me leve Attrophos / my self for to lament" (line 1273). Henry—who only acknowledges God in the final stanza—is denied the "perfection" that comes through the circumspection provided by death and God. The Henry-spirit is so unsettled that George provides an epitaph in his own voice framing Henry as comparable to a long list of historical greats, from Julius Caesar and Solomon to Cicero and Charlemagne (lines 1434–70), perhaps to mitigate against the unkind portrayal.

Tracing Influence

Influence is notoriously difficult to track, but in the course of this chapter we have seen how George Cavendish sought to employ historiopoetic structures from English and Italian authors (and through those absorbed influences from a web of classical writers), blending empirical and anecdotal historical detail with poetic ruminations on fate, humility, and vice. Though the circulation of his texts (and the *Visions* in particular) was limited, within a decade of the completion of the *Metrical Visions*, William Baldwin and his associates were composing similar eidolopoetic poems on the same theme. As the *Mirror* went through several expansions and revisions between the 1550s and the 1580s, this poetic form was applied to further historical figures from the English past; for the 1587 edition, Thomas Churchyard contributed a lengthy poem on Cardinal Wolsey to close the collection. There are two questions here that merit further consideration. First, is it significant that the Wolsey-poem closes the collection? Second, and more important, what was the subsequent influence and importance of these ongoing poetic developments?

The second question we can answer with some confidence. The influence of the *Mirror* and of Thomas Churchyard can be identified fairly clearly in the works of the most well-known late-Tudor authors. Churchyard himself was well known (if not necessarily universally respected) in Elizabethan and Stuart literary circles, and upon his death tributes appeared from authors like Drayton, Spenser, and Nashe.³¹ George's influence is less clear: while there are substantial generic connections between the *Visions* and the *Mirror*, it is uncertain whether these features are the result of a direct connection between these texts or if both texts were simply following similar developmental pathways from earlier works like *The Fall of Princes*. A. S. G. Edwards has proposed the possibility of a connection between George and some of the earlier *Mirror* poets but argues that firm evidence is lacking.³² That George intended to circulate the poems is itself unclear. In the final poem in the *Visions*, George urges his book to "crepe forthe ... / vnder the proteccion [...] Of suche as haue / bothe learning and eloquence" (lines 2384–85). Despite this, there is no evidence to suggest George took an active role in circulating these poems: as noted in this chapter, very few sixteenth-century copies have survived, making it unlikely that the author put much effort into developing a wide readership. We can conclude that George's texts (and the *Visions* in particular) were important but not influential; they demonstrate innovative features embraced and disseminated widely by later authors, though George's claim to fame may only be that he got there first. Churchyard was influential but perhaps less important (in terms of *de casibus* literary innovation, at least); his wider canon influenced authors and publishers from Drayton to Shakespeare.

It is in Shakespeare's works that we can see how George's texts and Churchyard's works represent divergent authorial pathways joining each other. In Shakespeare and

³¹ Woodcock, *Thomas Churchyard*, 264–65.

³² Cavendish, *Metrical Visions*, 12–13.

Fletcher's *Henry VIII*, Woodcock finds links between Cardinal Morton from *Churchyards Challenge* (1593) and Cardinal Wolsey: Morton laments "Had I served God, as well in every sort, / As I did serve, my king and maister still: / My scope had not, this season beene so short."³³ In *Henry VIII*, Wolsey provides a similar sentiment: "Had I but served my God with half the zeal / I served my King, he would not in mine age / Have left me naked to mine enemies" (3.2.455–57).³⁴ This connection seems plausible, but if we look in George's *Life*, we find Wolsey's deathbed lament: "But if I had served god as dyligently as I haue don the kyng he wold not haue geuyn me ouer in my gray heares."³⁵ While it is possible that Shakespeare and Fletcher might have had access to the *Life*, it is more likely that they used one of the major printed histories of the period. Through John Stow (who annotated a copy of the *Life*), similar versions appeared in multiple texts, including Stow's own often-reprinted *Chronicles of England*.³⁶

Well, wel, Maister *Kingstone* quoth the Cardinall, I see the matter howe it is framed: but if I hadde served God as dyligently as I haue done the King, he woulde not haue gyuen me ouer in my grey haire.³⁷

We can therefore surmise that both Churchyard and Shakespeare (and/or Fletcher) had access to one of Stow's histories or a text that quoted Stow: thus through Stow we can trace a trajectory from George to Churchyard and Shakespeare. It is entirely possible that either Churchyard or Shakespeare (or both) had access to the *Life*, but given the comparative availability of Stow's texts, that route seems most likely. This is not to suggest that Churchyard (or Shakespeare) read the *Visions*, but it does indicate a more nebulous interaction between these texts indicative of how George's and Churchyard's conceptions of historiopoetics moved through time.

As for the first question: why does Wolsey close the 1587 *Mirror*? This is an unexpected end for a collection of poems that features very few sixteenth-century figures and no other churchmen. I have argued elsewhere that Wolsey came to represent more than just himself by the end of the sixteenth century.³⁸ Unlike other topical political or religious figures who found themselves satirized during their lifetimes (including fellow churchmen like Stephen Gardiner or Edmund Bonner, or bureaucrats like Thomas Cromwell or William Cecil), characterizations of Wolsey were found to be useful when discussing a range of social, political, economic, and religious issues throughout the sixteenth century. This utility continued far beyond Wolsey's direct political or religious relevance: Wolsey came to typify excess, vanity, and a lack of circumspection for a range of sixteenth-century writers and readers. In George's Wolsey-poem, the deceased Cardinal urges the listener to learn from his mistakes, which "As in a mirror / ye may behold in /

³³ Thomas Churchyard, *Churchyards Challenge* (London, 1593).

³⁴ William Shakespeare, *King Henry VIII*, ed. Gordon McMullan (London: Arden, 2000).

³⁵ Cavendish, *Life and Death*, 178–79.

³⁶ Stow's manuscript copy of the *Life* is now held in London, Lambeth Palace Library, MS 197, fols. 264r–313v.

³⁷ John Stow, *The Chronicles of England* (London, 1580), 977.

³⁸ See Schwartz-Leeper, *Princes to Pages*.

. me" (line 170). As all good *de casibus* poems should, Wolsey's story illustrates the good advice to be found in the parable of the ten virgins: prepare for the end and do not trust in Fortune. By contrast, these Wolsey-spirits fear forgetfulness, both for their own sake as well as for that of the reader they hope to instruct. As we have seen, the lessons of history only become clear when the reader acknowledges the authority of the dead: this can be done through the skill of the historian-poet or through the weight of a broader cultural memory. Yet the writers and their channelled spirits are only too aware that they are fighting a losing battle, and cynicism about the role of the historian concludes Churchyard's Wolsey-poem (and thus the 1587 edition of the *Mirror*):

But what of that? The best is wee are gone,
And worse of all, when wee our tales haue tolde,
Our open plagues, will warning bee to none,
Men are by hap, and courage made so bolde:
They thinke all is, theyr owne, they haue in hold.
Well, let them say, and thinke what thing they please,
This weltring world, both flowes and ebs like seas.
(lines 484–90)

The job of the historian-poet is to mitigate against this ebb and flow to the benefit of those in the present and future and to memorialize those in the past so that the reader may learn from them: good and bad alike.

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